

Jonathan Roswell

York University

High School Essay Contest

24 October 2022

The Inefficacy of Land Acknowledgements

Indigenous land acknowledgements in Canada are verbal or written phrases recognizing the ancestral holders of traditional lands and territories. After the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada issued its Final Report in 2015, land acknowledgements were adopted as customary rituals by Canadians throughout the nation—delivered at the beginning of social events and even emerging in email signatures (Gehl, 2022). Many high-schoolers like myself have become accustomed to these acknowledgements, now recited every day alongside oaths of citizenship and morning prayers. The problem is we have become *too* accustomed to them. Quickly land acknowledgements have become treated in the same manner as their counterpart incantations; recited monotonously every morning, becoming reflexive. It does a disservice to allow land acknowledgments to become lip-service, but in many ways they have already transformed into empty gestures and versions of prayer.

Many people regard land acknowledgments as progressive because of their position in the framework of change. According to this rhetoric, land acknowledgements initiate the cycle of change by prompting people to recognize the problem and acknowledge Native tribes rather than ignore them. From a place of acknowledgment, it is possible to reflect upon the issue; from reflection, it is then possible to contemplate solutions and finally, approach action. Through this theory, land acknowledgments have the faculty to spur social change. Unfortunately, they seldom succeed in actually achieving reform. This failure occurs for two major reasons: the transformation of land acknowledgements into excuses and misinformation within the acknowledgements. Both of these flaws lead to inaction, perpetuating cycles of nonintervention specifically in Native affairs that could profit from the support of non-Natives.

According to the framework of change, land acknowledgments are the first step in reforming social institutions for Natives in Canada. As a stage in the cycle of change, establishments across the

nation have begun to perform the acknowledgements, performances that allow them to insert themselves within the scheme for reform. The problem is by performing the acknowledgements, establishments appear to be part of the progressive revolution against Anti-Native injustices, even if they remain indefinitely on the first step. Institutions across Canada have quickly leveraged land acknowledgements as a means of performative activism, using it as a symbol and promise of progression—but nothing more. They recite the land acknowledgement as though a prayer, then resort to laziness and apathy, following up with no real action. Land acknowledgements must be altered to where they are not used as easy excuses. It does not matter if you are within the framework of change if you are stuck on the first step with no intention of moving forward. This is especially important in the unique case of Natives, who have had countless treaties enacted with the promise of providing positive change for their circumstances, but who have seldom seen these treaties properly fulfilled. It is very possible with land acknowledgments that, like the unfulfilled treaties, the cycle of change will not exceed the first step and will be used in name only—to save face. As Graeme Wood in his article “Land Acknowledgments Are Just Moral Exhibitionism” puts it, a major issue with land acknowledgements is that they are seen as an “easy way” to restore respectful relationships with Native tribes. They are seen as an easy way to resolve an issue that requires time, effort, and sincere thought in order to be addressed (Wood, 2021). Land acknowledgements—which are the theoretical first steps in the cycle of change—are in actuality being used as *one-step*, easy solutions to a complex and sophisticated problem. Their potential to be triggers of change is being neglected, and they are instead being used as mediums of performative activism; as excuses to do nothing more.

Other issues with land acknowledgements reside in the wording of the acknowledgments themselves. The phrasing of the acknowledgements is not only inaccessible to listeners but is also misleading, inaccurately representing the history of Native tribes in Canada. The efficacy of land acknowledgements are determined by the context in which they are delivered: how well they educate audiences, inform listeners. But who are the Wendat people, the Mississaugas of the Credit? What does it mean to reside on *unceded* lands? Land acknowledgements use phraseology that is inaccessible to a wide range of listeners, a flaw that can discourage people from engaging with them. Land acknowledgements need to provide better context, because it is hard for those listening—elementary school students, high-

schoolers, employees—to cultivate curiosity and desire to reflect upon acknowledgements if they are being presented in such alien, esoteric ways. Land acknowledgments are also problematic because they employ misleading language that inaccurately represents Native history. Most commonly this issue occurs when acknowledgements delineate Native tribes as “custodians” or “stewards” of a land. Michael Lambert, Anthropology professor at the University of North Carolina, stresses how these titles inaccurately represent the relationships between Native tribes and their land: “tribal nations were sovereign over those lands [...] they weren’t just caretakers” (Kaur, 2021). He also discusses implications that arise when acknowledgements suggest issues of land dispossession from Natives is something of the past, although the problem persists today. Finally, various land acknowledgements fail to account for the complexities of Natives’ claims for land, and declare with too much certainty what land belongs to which tribes. They produce an oversimplification of Native history.

Land acknowledgements offer inaccurate narratives for the experiences of Natives and will continue to foster cultures of confusion and misinformation if remained unchanged. In some capacity they have potential to be productive, but this requires that they are rethought and reworked. Land acknowledgements should provide context, accurate facts, and most importantly offer a call to action for non-Natives—so that rather than cutting short at the first step in the cycle of change, they propel good, positive reform to public policy in Canada. Land acknowledgements need to demand accountability and set a binding commitment for Canadians to work towards meaningful change and the restoration of land and relationships with Natives.

Works Cited

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