

Land Acknowledgements

George-Anne Lerner

Student Number

General Arts and Sciences, Georgian College

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Amanda Quibell

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The remains of thousands of murdered Indigenous children are being discovered on the grounds of former Residential Schools. In 2015, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission called for the Canadian government to recognize the tragic history of residential schools and the ongoing problems faced by Indigenous people. One response to this call to action is the land acknowledgement. Announcements that name the territories, communities, and treaties are now heard at the beginning of many events and gatherings. Even though these statements are made to show respect and to raise awareness about Indigenous communities, mistakes are sometimes made, and the reading of a script can seem like an empty gesture. Indigenous scholars and leaders are asking that institutions go beyond just reading a land acknowledgement; they hope for a stronger focus on taking action. Land acknowledgements are intended to show respect towards Indigenous communities and their land rights, but these announcements can feel like empty words to the people they are meant to honour; to truly show respect, land acknowledgements need to take action beyond reciting a script.

Land acknowledgements show respect for Indigenous communities, and they are becoming standard. Colleges, Universities, school boards, governments and other institutions across Canada now make public acknowledgements of Indigenous peoples, lands, and treaties. Many public gatherings, events, and even email signatures include a land acknowledgement (Friesen, 2019). For example, as Maga (2019) reports, the City of Toronto's statement reads: "We acknowledge that we are gathered on the traditional territory of the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishinaabeg, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee and the Wendat peoples, now home to many diverse First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples" (para. 1). Land

acknowledgements are intended to increase awareness of Indigenous presence and land rights, and to improve the experience of Indigenous students and communities. They are done in an effort to honour the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's final report (Wilkes et al, 2019), which calls for significant changes in order to reconcile Canada's unjust treatment of Indigenous people.

While land acknowledgements are becoming more common, some concerns are being raised; they are sometimes flawed and even disrespectful. Friesen (2019) shows that land acknowledgements are criticized as empty gestures as First Nations names are often mispronounced, and incorrect nations are named. Anishinaabe scholar Hayden King regrets helping Ryerson write its land acknowledgement; he fears that these acknowledgements actually prevent learning about Indigenous people and treaty relationships (Friesen, 2019). King points out that the current style of land acknowledgement can sound "detached, shallow and give a false sense of progressive accomplishment" (Maga, 2019, para. 2). They may "cause harm to the people they're supposed to celebrate" (Maga, 2019, para. 3). Blenkinsop & Fettes (2019) state that the problem with these acknowledgements is that "they stop with a notion of land as something one lives on, rather than continuing on into an understanding of land as something we are part of" (p. 1036). The acknowledgements lack meaning because they do not demand any action from the speakers or listeners. Indigenous leaders argue that these land acknowledgements do not acknowledge the privileges that settlers have due to the legacy of colonialism, or recognize the trauma that continues as a result of colonialist societal structures, which actually can harm the same people these acknowledgements are meant to respect.

In order to ensure that land acknowledgements help rather than harm, Indigenous scholars demand a change to the current approach. Land acknowledgements “have a vital function when done correctly” (Maga, 2019, para. 7), but must do more than naming Indigenous territories, languages, and treaties. These land acknowledgements should not express the colonial way of viewing land as a resource or commodity, a thing that is owned. Instead, they should emphasize an Indigenous way of understanding. Blenkinsop & Fettes (2019) explain that the Land is more than an object; it is a teacher, offering a dialogue:

The land is there, outside our windows, under our feet, all around us, thinking, feeling, conversing and offering its teachings. When we start to really listen, to the land and to the people whose identities and traditions are fundamentally shaped through long dialogue with the land, transformation follows (p. 1043).

Scripts should not be simply read without any reflection. Instead, an effort should be made to include Indigenous ways of thinking and people should expand on them to include personal information. People delivering land acknowledgements should speak about “their own connections to the land and communities they are attempting to honour” (Friesen, 2019, para. 20). A speaker who expands on their own family history will give deeper insights and connections, which leads to a more meaningful acknowledgement. Additionally, speakers should acknowledge both the impact of colonialism and express an intention to disrupt the current injustices that are part of society.

As land acknowledgements become more routine across institutions, Indigenous leaders ask that these statements be approached with respect. Land acknowledgements must go beyond a scripted list of Indigenous communities and treaties. For reconciliation to begin, land

acknowledgements must become part of a conversation that calls attention to our responsibilities as caretakers of the land, and sets intentions for action in ending the systematic harms on Indigenous peoples.

References

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