

# As Indigenous land acknowledgments become the norm, critics question whether the gesture has lost its meaning

By Joe Friesen

“Take a moment to connect with the land,” the posters said. “No matter what part of Mother Earth our family originates from, we all have a relationship to the land. Let’s build a healthy relationship together.”

But the problem was that the posters, billed as an Indigenous land acknowledgment for Toronto’s Pride celebration, didn’t actually mention the First Nations whose land was being acknowledged. The omission prompted a wave of criticism and an apology from Pride Toronto.

Offering a land acknowledgment has become a symbol of reconciliation and almost standard protocol for public gatherings across Canada, particularly at universities. But recently, they’ve also been criticized as an empty gesture, prompting some to ask whether they should change.

Politicians in Richmond Hill, Ont., recently rejected an initiative to open council meetings with a land acknowledgment, voting instead to train staff on Indigenous issues. Alberta’s new United Conservative government seems to have curtailed the practice. And Indigenous scholars are asking whether the statements have become little more than lip service, like a box to be ticked on a protocol checklist.

At one of Canada’s largest academic conferences this month, scholars discussed how to make land acknowledgments more meaningful.

“It has to go beyond just a tokenized gesture,” said Sheila Cote-Meek, a First Nations scholar and York university executive who led the workshop at the Congress of Humanities and Social Sciences held this year at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver.

“As you embed a process, it can become just another everyday thing you do that’s not as meaningful as it could have been.”

Dr. Cote-Meek said she first saw a land acknowledgment in a university setting around 2010, but they became widespread after the report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in 2015.

Over time, Dr. Cote-Meek said she could sense the significance of the acknowledgment diminishing. She has heard of the names of First Nations being mispronounced or the wrong nations cited, errors that come across as being disrespectful. But she welcomes a debate about the practice because she says she believes land acknowledgments are worth preserving.

“The idea that it’s become a [merely] symbolic gesture is giving people an excuse not to do it. And any excuse not to acknowledge Indigenous people, some people will take it,” Dr. Cote-Meek said.

Among the first to foresee the rise of the current skepticism was Métis writer Chelsea Vowel, who wrote in 2016 that land acknowledgments may have begun as a “radical pushback” but would almost inevitably end up as an exercise in box-ticking.

As land acknowledgments became entrenched, an infrastructure developed to make them more accessible and widespread. Some departments include them in course outlines. A recent academic job ad included a land acknowledgment, and some university staff

append them to their e-mail signatures. The Canadian Association of University Teachers created a database that now includes more than 100 statements used at different Canadian postsecondary institutions.

Many of them are just one sentence. Some are 150 words or more. One posted to the website of the English Department at the University of Winnipeg runs nearly 900 words.

But there has been pushback. Hayden King, an Anishinaabe scholar, said earlier this year that he regrets his role in writing the land acknowledgment at Ryerson University. He told CBC that the scripted statements don’t ask enough of the non-Indigenous people who are their primary targets. They provide an “alibi” for not learning about Indigenous people and the treaty relationships that govern the land.

In Richmond Hill, a deputy mayor asked whether city council was heading too far down a road of political correctness, since council wasn’t also making statements acknowledging immigrant communities. In Alberta, where former premier Rachel Notley routinely began events with a land acknowledgment, Premier Jason Kenney has done so less frequently. (The government says the decision is left to individual ministers.)

Several scholars have called for acknowledgments to be rethought. Instead of reciting a script, they encourage people to speak frankly about their own connection to the communities and places they intend to honour, and building actual relationships.

Penny Bryden, president of the Canadian Historical Association, said she heard a few such acknowledgments at the Congress this month, some of which became quite emotional.

“People offered something that was considerably more personal, about how they situated themselves within this particular territory ... Not just reading a statement, but actually thinking about where you, as a scholar, position yourself within Indigenous land,” Dr. Bryden said.

Some historians also arranged a tour of Sto:lo territory during the conference to engage more closely with the Indigenous people whose land they were visiting.

Canadian Philosophical Association president Daniel Weinstock said he’s in favour of continuing to offer land acknowledgments. The practice has limitations, but should be considered a first step in addressing the moral and political implications of colonialism, he said.

Adele Perry, professor of history at the University of Manitoba, said the land acknowledgments, even if they can be criticized as ritualistic or empty, are engagements with history. The backlash, as with Alberta’s decision to curtail their use, indicates they have some cumulative effect, Dr. Perry said.

“They remind us that the past isn’t over, and that it makes demands on us,” Dr. Perry said.

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