

What is the significance of acknowledging the Indigenous land we stand on?

It's a tradition that has dated back centuries for Indigenous people, but for many non-Indigenous Canadians, officially recognizing the territory or lands we stand on is a fairly new concept that is a small but essential step towards reconciliation.

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'What we see as buildings, these are all places that have been prayed for,' says one urban Cree woman

[Ramna Shahzad](#) - CBC News Posted: Jul 15, 2017 5:00 AM ET | Last Updated: July 17, 2017



The NAIG opening ceremony on Sunday and subsequent events will honour and acknowledge the Indigenous lands the games are taking place on. (Malone Mullin/CBC). During the opening ceremony for the North American Indigenous Games (NAIG) on Sunday evening, organizers will honour and acknowledge the Aboriginal homelands on which the games are taking place.

It's a tradition that has dated back centuries for Indigenous people, but for many non-Indigenous Canadians, officially recognizing the territory or lands we stand on is a fairly new concept.

However, it's one that many Indigenous people say marks a small but essential step toward reconciliation.

"We honour and thank the Huron-Wendat Nation, Metis Nation of Ontario, Mississaugas of the New Credit First Nation, Mississaugas of Scugog Island First Nation and Six Nations of the Grand River as our community partners and traditional inhabitants of the lands of the City of Toronto, Region of Hamilton, Durham Region and surrounding areas," reads the acknowledgement, which is published on the official NAIG website.

What is a territorial or land acknowledgement?

A territorial or land acknowledgement is an act of reconciliation that involves making a statement recognizing the traditional territory of the Indigenous people who called the land home before the arrival of settlers, and in many cases still do call it home.

For example, at the beginning of the city of Toronto's city council meeting, the speaker acknowledges the meeting space as "the traditional territory of the Mississaugas of New Credit First Nation, the Haudenosaunee, the Huron-Wendat and home to many diverse Indigenous peoples."

The acknowledgement is increasingly being used at other civic events; the city says.

Karyn Recollet is an urban Cree woman and an associate professor at the University of Toronto's Women and Gender Studies Institute.

She says it is important to see the territorial acknowledgement as an activation of Indigenous culture.

"To think about land activation and land acknowledgement is to remember that there are these rich Indigenous governances that still exist, that are ongoing and that will go into the future," she said.



'Acknowledging relationships to space and place is an ancient Indigenous practice that flows into the future,' says Karyn Recollet is an urban-Cree woman. (Karyn Recollet)

What is its purpose?

"Its purpose is to recognize that we, as settlers and as people who are not part of First Nations or Indigenous groups, are here on their land," said Alison Norman, a research adviser in the Ontario Ministry of Indigenous Relations and Reconciliation and a researcher at Trent University.

Norman says land acknowledgements have become increasingly common in non-Indigenous spaces in the last few years, especially since the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) on residential schools released its 94 calls to action in 2015.

"Many organizations, libraries, governments and school boards are all thinking about what we need to do to respond to the TRC," she said. "It's about thinking about what happened in the past and what changes can be made going forward in order to further the reconciliation process."



A lot of people are unaware of Canada's actual history and this gets people talking and conversations starting, says Craig Waboose, who belongs to the Eabametoong First Nation in northern Ontario. (Craig Waboose)

Craig Waboose, who belongs to the Eabametoong First Nation in northern Ontario, is working with Toronto city councilor Mary-Margaret McMahon to help "Indigenize" city hall and implement the TRC calls to action.

"A lot of people are unaware of Canada's actual history and this gets people talking and conversations starting," he said. "Personally, I feel like I can have a conversation about who I am, where I'm from and what I'm doing in the city."

How long have territorial acknowledgements existed?

Territorial acknowledgements have existed for hundreds of years as part of many Indigenous cultures.

"When we talk about the newness of territorial acknowledgements, these aren't new. Acknowledging relationships to space and place is an ancient Indigenous practice that flows into the future," said Recollet.

"What we see as concrete, what we see as the CN tower, as buildings, these are all places that have been prayed for, that have been gathering places for ceremonies and I think it is important to remember that."

How is it determined who is acknowledged?

The city of Toronto's acknowledgement was decided on by the Aboriginal Affairs Advisory Committee in 2013-14 and finalized in March 2014.

The city consulted with all three of the communities recognized in the acknowledgement — the Mississaugas of the New Credit First Nation, the Haudenosaunee (Six Nations or Iroquois Confederacy) and the Huron-Wendat.

"It's complicated history, which makes it difficult and important to get it right," said Norman, who also acted as a researcher for the TRC. "In Toronto we've had many Indigenous people who have lived here, called this territory home and passed through here."

For those organizing a community event or wanting to get the acknowledgement right, Norman recommends looking at what bigger organizations, universities and governments, that have consulted heavily with an Indigenous advisory panel, have done.

What does the acknowledgement mean to Indigenous people and communities?

"It reminds us we are accountable to these relationships and to remind us every day, for example in school systems, of the accountability that everybody has to listen to the

concerns of the community and how we can align to our [Indigenous] community," said Recollet.

"It shows that people are willing to hear you out as an Indigenous person, and they recognize that your culture and your past really means a lot," said Waboose.

What does the acknowledgement mean to non-Indigenous communities?

"It certainly isn't enough, but it is a necessary first step," said Norman. "It needs to be the beginning of a learning process."

Norman said for people who want to take steps to reconciliation, the acknowledgement should lead to more questions about who the people listed in the acknowledgement are and how their land came to be possessed by settlers.

"It also needs to be personal," she said. "We have to ask, 'How am I benefitting by living on this land that is a traditional territory of Indigenous people?'"

Beyond territorial acknowledgments

Posted on September 23, 2016 by âpihtawikosisân

Earlier this year, the Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT) released a [Territorial Acknowledgment Guide](#).^[1] The territorial acknowledgements found in this guide vary from fairly short:

University of British Columbia, Okanagan (Kelowna, BC) – We [I] would like to begin by acknowledging that the land on which we gather is the unceded territory of the Syilx (Okanagan) Peoples.

To much more detailed:

Osgoode Hall Law School (Toronto, ON) – We [I] would like to begin by acknowledging that the land on which we gather is the traditional territory of the Haudenosaunee, the Métis, and most recently, the territory of the Mississaugas of the New Credit First Nation. **[I have to interject here...Toronto is NOT within the traditional territory of the Métis.]** The territory was the subject of the Dish With One Spoon Wampum Belt Covenant, an agreement between the Iroquois Confederacy and the Ojibwe and allied nations to peaceably share and care for the resources around the Great Lakes.

This territory is also covered by the Upper Canada Treaties.

Today, the meeting place of Toronto (from the Haudenosaunee word Tkaronto) is still the home to many Indigenous people from across Turtle Island and we are grateful to have the opportunity to work/present in this territory.

As stated on their website:

“The purpose of the guide is to encourage all academic staff association representatives and members to acknowledge the First Peoples on whose traditional territories we live and work” says CAUT president, James Compton. “Acknowledging territory shows recognition of and respect for Aboriginal Peoples, which is key to reconciliation.”^[2]

I want to unpack that statement in a moment. Territorial acknowledgements have become fairly common in urban, progressive spaces in Canada. I am not certain when the first territorial acknowledgment was included in an event, but I have been hearing them now for over 15 years, so they are somewhat established this side of the medicine line.

When I think about territorial acknowledgments, a few things come to mind that I'd like to explore. First, what is the purpose of these acknowledgments? Both what those making the territorial acknowledgments say they intend, as well as what Indigenous peoples think may be the purpose. Second, what can we learn about the way these acknowledgments are delivered? Are there best practices? Third, in what spaces do these acknowledgements happen and more importantly, where are they not found? Finally, what can exist beyond territorial acknowledgements?

Purpose

“Acknowledging territory shows recognition of and respect for Aboriginal Peoples, which is key to reconciliation.” – CAUT

“A territorial acknowledgment is important as part of our churches living into right relations with Indigenous peoples. For churches that ran residential schools, it is part of living out our apologies for that reality and its ongoing legacy. It is a statement of respect and a statement that provokes further thought and reflection. It is a way to counteract the ideologies operating in the Doctrine of Discovery by naming that the land was not empty when Europeans first arrived on Turtle Island. It can be an opportunity to acknowledge the spirituality of Indigenous peoples that was not respected by churches and was used to justify colonialism, including the residential schools.” – [KAIROS\[3\]](#)

“When working on or within the **traditional territory** of a **First Nation** there is **protocol** to follow. It can be customary between one First Nation and another to acknowledge the host First Nation Peoples and their traditional territory at the outset of any meeting...it follows then, that if you want to [work] with a First Nation, one of the best ways is to show respect to the Nation by following traditional territory protocol.”[\[4\]](#)

In the first two quotes, it is clear that the intended purpose of territorial acknowledgments is recognition as a form of reconciliation. Kairos goes a bit deeper in the intention to also acknowledge the violent relationships between churches who ran residential schools, and Indigenous peoples, so what is being “recognized” is not merely Indigenous presence.

Nonetheless it seems to me that when territorial acknowledgments first began, they were fairly powerful statements of presence, somewhat shocking, perhaps even unwelcome in settler spaces. They provoked discomfort and centered Indigenous priority on these lands.

The third quote by Bob Joseph suggests that territorial acknowledgments can also be a way of honouring traditional Indigenous protocol. I disagree that these acknowledgements can accomplish such a thing, as such statements of thanks to hosts barely even scratch the surface of such traditional protocols. In fact, I think it is dangerous to even suggest that territorial acknowledgments alone satisfy protocol in any way unless concrete actions accompany the words spoken. I will return to this when I discuss moving beyond acknowledgments.

Another purpose of territorial acknowledgements, related to emphasizing continuous Indigenous presence, is the way in which many spaces feel unsafe for Indigenous peoples. For example, at the University of McGill, asking for territorial acknowledgment was part of a wider attempt by student groups to “[create] a more welcoming environment for Indigenous students. The proposal called for McGill to publicly acknowledge on its website and in email signatures that McGill is built on traditionally Kanien’kehá:ka land.”^[5] I personally experienced McGill as an incredibly alienating and invisibilizing environment, and that institution certainly has a lot of work to do in terms of acknowledging Indigenous presence (and Indigenous students) compared to other some universities. As a newer practice in such environments, territorial acknowledgments continue to have the power to disrupt and discomfit settler colonialism.

It should also be emphasized that these territorial acknowledgments flow from the work of Indigenous peoples themselves, who are resisting invisibilization. When they are crafted, they are usually done so in consultation with local Indigenous peoples.

However, it is also interesting to geographically track the criticisms of territorial acknowledgements, as a way of tracing their lineage. The strongest Indigenous critiques of these acknowledgments tend to come from the west coast, suggesting they have been happening there the longest, whereas in places like Montreal, territorial acknowledgments are still being introduced and are legitimately “cutting edge” in that political milieu. That’s not to say that strong Indigenous critique cannot exist absent of a tradition of territorial acknowledgments! We are almost certainly importing the practice into the United States, and it will not necessarily be welcomed there by Indigenous peoples for reasons unrelated to the rendering of such statements meaningless through repetition.

I believe territorial acknowledgments can have numerous purposes, and in fact can be repurposed, so merely examining the stated intentions of these invocations is insufficient. What may start out as radical push-back against the denial of Indigenous priority and continued presence, may end up repurposed as “box-ticking” inclusion without commitment to any sort of real change. In fact, I believe this is the inevitable progression, a situation of familiarity breeding contempt (or at least apathy).

Practice

The way in which territorial acknowledgments are delivered must matter. Are they formulaic recitations that barely penetrate the consciousness of the speaker and those listening? Are they something that must be ‘gotten through’ before the meeting or speech can begin? Can we escape dilution through repetition?

“...at a conference: a speaker acknowledged that we were on the traditional territory of the Musqueam peoples – and that was it. Yes, there was an acknowledgement, and yes, that is better than no acknowledgment at all. However, the speaker failed to situate themselves – by that I mean, they did not locate themselves as a guest who is actively working against colonialism. In failing to do so, the speaker revealed their complacency in ongoing settler colonialism.”

“Oftentimes, when non-Indigenous organizers make a territory acknowledgment, it is done hastily

(*we acknowledge that we are gathered on unceded coastal salish territory*), and then discarded (*now on with the show!*).”[\[6\]](#)

What do territorial acknowledgments mean for people who have heard them ad nauseam? (I mean, how carefully do frequent flyers listen to safety presentations during their flight?).

On the other hand, rituals and repetition are not necessarily bad things. Establishing a practice of acknowledgment can be part of wider attempts to address settler colonialism and build better relationships with Indigenous peoples. The Toronto District School Board (TDSB) has just begun announcing a daily territorial acknowledgment across all 588 schools (ironically delivered after students are asked to stand for O Canada).[\[7\]](#) As a TDSB vice-principal puts it “the important thing is we don’t just read the acknowledgment and check it off on a list, and say, ‘OK, we’re doing our job... what our next step is, is working with students and staff to make sure we understand what it really means, and help support that learning.” (It’d be great if the TDSB could deal with its anti-Blackness at the same time.).

Khelsilem offers some suggestions for territorial acknowledgement practice that take us beyond merely “do it”. His first suggestion addresses an issue that often bothers me; the widespread misunderstanding that the bulk of land was legally given over to the Canadian state through treaty. For acknowledgments that identify territories as “unceded”:

“Unceded” is language to use with the Crown/Settler State. There is a misconception that BC is mostly *unceded* due to a lack of treaties – which implies those in areas with treaties are what? Ceded territories? Elevate Indigenous polity...Use the brief moment of acknowledgement to elevate Indigenous society, governance, and jurisdiction.”[\[8\]](#)

Khelsilem also brings up the importance of being aware of the fact territorial acknowledgments are not always cut and dry, particularly when there are competing Indigenous claims to a specific area.

“In Vancouver, for example, many are told that “Vancouver is Musqueam territory!!!! The Squamish only moved in here in the 1850’s”. That’s one perspective. And by going with and elevating that single perspective, you’re inserting yourself into the process that the local Indigenous communities are going through to address historical grievances (mostly caused by the imposition of colonial boundaries and dispossession).”[\[9\]](#)

Simply because there is a standardized guide available should not mean that people do not have to continue to ask questions and work on these acknowledgements. In fact, as Jennifer Matsunaga puts it, “I worry about the work that has been done *for us*, here. I take issue with the institutional standardization and expectation of these acknowledgments. It is important for people to do their own searching and learning.”[\[10\]](#) Merely mouthing the names of local Indigenous nations does not automatically confer understanding. Best practices must evolve over time through deeper engagement with the purpose and impact of territorial acknowledgments.

Spaces

I have been talking about territorial acknowledgements as though they are ubiquitous, when in fact they are very limited to specific kinds of spaces. Again, more common in western Canada than in the east or north, territorial acknowledgments tend to happen in urban institutional and activist settings (an interesting juxtaposition). They also tend to be limited to those institutions and groups with leftist politics.

It is interesting to note where territorial acknowledgments are absent; namely rural spaces. Rural counties throughout Canada, where there is arguably the most tangible Indigenous presence, do not tend to open council meetings or publish notices acknowledging the traditional territories on which they reside. Within the boundaries of these counties, you will generally find more than one First Nation, but because of Constitutional division of powers, First Nations are ‘holes’ in county governance.

Yet these would be the spaces in which territorial acknowledgments have the potential to be the most powerful; the settler rural/First Nations divide is huge and plays out in deeply problematic (and all too often violent) ways. Private property ownership in rural counties is settler colonialism writ large yet overshadowed by the overwhelming pull of

large urban centres. Relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in rural and remote areas tend to be strained, when not entirely non-existent. The issue of “whose territory are we farming/ranching/cottaging” on becomes much more uncomfortable and immediate than “on whose territory is this shwank hotel, where we are having our union AGA”. That level of removal from the land allows territorial acknowledgments to occur in a more theoretical way.

Rural Canada personifies ‘the two solitudes’ of Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in a way that is difficult to understand from urban settings. These two solitudes exist on lands that supply the bulk of resources extracted to support the urban south, meaning they also experience the effects of resource extraction in ways urban residents do not. When gravel aggregate is strip mined, when fracking exploration is undertaken, when large scale pig feedlots are proposed, rural Indigenous and non-Indigenous people are living with the direct consequences including clouds of silica dust, damage to aquifers, smell, noise, run-off, and increased presence of shift workers unaffiliated with local communities (and the violence that brings). Rather than being a situation that unifies Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples however, each community is accustomed to working in isolation from the other.

The decision by counties to allow such developments only rarely takes into account local First Nations, and only when legislation demands it (i.e. when development occurs adjacent to a reserve). What I am trying to get at here is that ignoring First Nations presence in rural areas is normalized, deeply ingrained, and central to rural settler governance. Urban centres take up relatively little physical space in this country; it is easy to even unconsciously justify that space and the density of the population compared to say, owning 160 acres of land on which one family lives. I do not think that territorial acknowledgement in these areas could exist as merely theoretical frameworks as they can in more urban settings because ANY acknowledgment implicates the land in an inescapable way.

This brings me back to the question of...why are people acknowledging territory in the first place? When mostly urban institutions and circles are making these acknowledgments, who are they thinking of? Urban Indigenous populations? Rural and remote First Nations, Métis, and Inuit communities? Is there a feeling of reaching out to or desiring partnerships with these communities? What of the non-Indigenous communities also found in rural and remote spaces? Are they implicated in urban-based

territorial acknowledgments, or are they as ignored by their urban counterparts as they in turn ignore local Indigenous communities?

I have a lot more to say on this, but for now, I want to note that I think rural/Indigenous alliances have the potential to be the most transformative relationships in this country, even as they remain the least likely to occur.

Into the beyond

If we think of territorial acknowledgments as sites of potential disruption, they can be transformative acts that to some extent undo Indigenous erasure. I believe this is true as long as these acknowledgments discomfit both those speaking and hearing the words. The fact of Indigenous presence should force non-Indigenous peoples to confront their own place on these lands. I would like to see territorial acknowledgments happening in spaces where they are currently absent, particularly in rural and remote areas and within the governance structures of settlers.

However as we are already seeing, territorial acknowledgments can become stripped of their disruptive power through repetition. The purpose cannot merely be to inform an ignorant public that Indigenous peoples exist, and that Canada has a history of colonialism.

I wanted to come back to Bob Joseph's suggestion that territorial acknowledgements are a part of Indigenous protocol. I think if we understand that to be true, at least to some extent, then we must also understand that the protocols he invokes are much deeper than verbal acknowledgments. This can perhaps guide us into the 'beyond'; the space beyond acknowledgment. Stopping at territorial acknowledgments is unacceptable.

Often, territorial acknowledgments characterize non-Indigenous peoples as 'guests'. Are guests only those people who are invited? Or they anyone who finds themselves within the physical territory of their hosts? Why guests and not invaders? To what extent was permission actually sought to be in these territories, and conduct the affairs that Indigenous nations are thanked for 'hosting'? What if an Indigenous person stood up and revoked that assumed permission?

I think we need to start imagining a constellation of relationships that must be entered into beyond territorial acknowledgments. Great, that's awesome you know you're on (for example) Treaty 6 territory. That's great you acknowledge that perhaps the Indigenous view of that treaty, that the land was not surrendered, is correct. Perhaps you understand the tension of your presence as illegitimate, but don't know how to deal with it beyond naming it. Maybe now it is time to start learning about your obligations as a guest in this territory. What are the Indigenous protocols involved in being a guest, what are your responsibilities? What responsibilities do your hosts have towards you, and are you making space for those responsibilities to be exercised? To what extent are your events benefiting your hosts?

I'm not saying Indigenous people want to be at your AGA, or your university lecture, or your Dean's meeting (maybe they do though). What I am saying is that all Indigenous nations have specific expectations of guests, and of hosts, and so far, non-Indigenous peoples have not been very good at finding out what those are. I think this needs to be the next step. It requires having actual conversations with Indigenous communities, saying things like "we want to be better guests, how do we do that according to your laws and hey by the way, what ARE your laws" and being prepared to hear the answers, even those that are uncomfortable like "give us the land back". I mean damn...maybe your huge ass union needs to fork over some of the land its executives have squirreled away on their massive salaries as a gesture of good guesting. That could be a real thing that could happen.

Moving beyond territorial acknowledgments means asking hard questions about what needs to be done once we're 'aware of Indigenous presence'. It requires that we remain uncomfortable, and it means making concrete, disruptive change. How can you be in good relationship with Indigenous peoples, with non-human beings, with the land and water? No ideas? Well, it's a good thing Indigenous peoples are still here, because our legal orders address all of those questions. So why aren't you asking us?

[1] "CAUT – Acknowledging Traditional Territory – List—Territorial-Acknowledgement-by-Province.pdf."

[2] "Territorial Acknowledgment Guide."

[3] "Territorial Acknowledgment as an Act of Reconciliation."

[4] Joseph, "First Nation Protocol on Traditional Territory."

[5] "Decolonize McGill | The McGill Daily."

[6] K, “An Introduction to Settler Colonialism at UBC.”

[7] “Why Toronto Public Schools Now Pay ‘Very Necessary’ Daily Tribute to Indigenous Territories.”

[8] “Khelsilem’s Tips for Acknowledging Territory 1.0.”

[9] Ibid.

[10] Matsunaga, “Thinking Outloud about the Guide to Acknowledging Traditional Territory.”

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