

# Acknowledging

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*I/we wish to acknowledge this land on which the University of Toronto operates. For thousands of years it has been the traditional land of the Huron-Wendat, the Seneca, and most recently, the Mississaugas of the Credit River. Today, this meeting place is still the home to many Indigenous people from across Turtle Island and we are grateful to have the opportunity to work on this land.*

At the University of Toronto (U of T), and at many other institutions in Canada, we increasingly offer Indigenous land acknowledgements at the beginning of each formal event. Orientation events, each conference, the formal installation of new university officials. Public schools in Toronto still sing the national anthem, but it is preceded by a land acknowledgement. These acknowledgements are one of the outcomes of a fraught series of apologies for various forms of colonial violence over Indigenous people (see McElhinny, 2016a, b). I want to think, here, about acknowledgements and about citations which can be another form of problematic acknowledgement, as Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui notes (2012:101). Failure to cite, and to acknowledge, is a problem, but certain forms of acknowledgement are a problem too (Critical Ethnic Studies Citation Practices Challenge Tumblr, McElhinny et al, 2003).

Rivera Cusicanqui notes that “[I]deas run, like rivers, from the south to the north and are transformed into tributaries in major waves of thought... ideas leave the country converted into raw material, which become regurgitated and jumbled in the final product” (2012:104). She means by this that ideas, people, are extracted from the South, and transformed into products that, yet again, benefit the North. The metaphor does not entirely work for this place, and that is one way we need to acknowledge the land. Here, in Toronto, the rivers mostly run from north to south. So we’re thinking, too, about how to better acknowledge this, a question which is in part about how to better centre Indigenous understandings. Who and what is one supposed to cite? Who or what is not cited? When can a form of citation be a form of honoring?

The land acknowledgement, approved in June 2016 by our University’s Governing Council, and its Indigenous Council of Elders, arises, in part, because of a national conversation on Truth and Reconciliation. From the mid-19th century to late into the 20th century, the Canadian government and various churches seized

tens of thousands of Indigenous children for schooling in residential schools, well away from their families. The principle of these schools was that the child could only be saved by “killing” the Indian (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2013), i.e. extirpating all traces of Indigenous identity, including language, spirituality, appearance, practices, connection to family and connection to the land. Children in these schools experienced a range of other forms of violence as well, including physical and sexual violence, and nutritional experiments. Many ran away; many died. As survivors began to launch legal cases against perpetrators of the violence, and began to win those cases, the Government began a proceeding to offer financial restitution to all eligible survivors, with the condition that no further legal action ensued. The prime minister of Canada, Stephen Harper, somewhat reluctantly offered a nationally televised apology in 2008, which was followed by a five-year Truth and Reconciliation process, widely noted as the first in a “northern” or “Western” democracy during which survivors and others could share their stories (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015a). This led to the development of 94 calls to action, for redress, on-going education, and interventions into related and on-going dynamics, issued in January 2016 (2015b). The development of a land acknowledgement was one early response by the U of T. Many institutions have struck their own TRC committees, to respond as appropriate to the calls for action in their settings. U of T subsequently issued a report in January 2017, and the Faculty of Arts and Science issued a related report in January 2018.

The apology to residential school survivors was requested by some, but remains controversial. Similarly, questions are raised more broadly about the Truth and Reconciliation process. There have been a number of apologies for state harms to immigrant, racialized and Indigenous groups in Canada (Henderson & Wakeham, 2013; James, 2008; McElhinny, 2016a, b). Apologies might be understood as attempts to include marginalized groups more fully in the multicultural nation, as in the Bolivian case that Rivera Cusicanqui describes (Kymlicka is a key influence here too), but it is controversial for Indigenous nations, who are precisely challenging attempts to include them, and asserting their own sovereignty. Multiculturalism and reconciliation are, both, forms that “conditional inclusion” (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2012:100) takes in Canada, the way that “subaltern imaginaries and identities [are forged] into the role of ornaments through which the anonymous masses play out the theatricality of their own identity” (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2012:100). The apologies to Indigenous people in Canada (apologies to Indigenous groups in Australia work in a similar way) try to pre-emptively declare colonialism as over, or as something that happened in the past, and are contested, precisely, for attempting to make such claims. Australian scholar Patrick Wolfe has noted that settler colonialism is “a structure not an event” (2006:388), by which he means that settler colonialism is not something that happened only

at the moment of contact between European settler nations and indigenous people, but is a series of on-going policies and practices (in Canada, these include land appropriation, continuing large-scale removals of children from their families by child welfare agencies, legislation restricting who can be recognized as Indigenous, the imposition of Indian Act governance, extremely high numbers of missing and murdered Indigenous women, environmental racism in the form of poor water quality and contamination of lands and water by resource extraction) which continue to perpetuate settler colonialism. Indigenous scholars and activists and their allies note that any form of redress which attempts to incorporate First Nations is a form of containment, rather than an act of decolonization; some argue, instead, for focussing on indigenous resurgence rather than reconciliation, recognition and redress (cf. Alfred, 2009; Coulthard, 2011; Henderson & Wakeham, 2013; Llewellyn, 2011; Mathur et al., 2011; Million, 2013; Simpson, 2008, 2011, 2017).

Land acknowledgements, too, are a form of recognition of harm, settler colonial harm, but a limited one. There is no part of the U of T land acknowledgement that is not controversial (see Blight & King, 2016 on what acknowledgements don't do). It is often delivered in disrespectful ways: read stiffly or rapidly from a page, read with the names of Indigenous nations mispronounced. More substantively, however, we can list at list six concerns about content. First, "thousands of years" – suggests that Indigenous people are, also, immigrants to this place – just earlier ones, arriving after the glaciers retreated northward. If so then the discourses of multiculturalism that are critiqued by Rivera Cusicaqui (2012:97, 99) apply – Indigenous people become just another immigrant group, conditionally included, with distinctive claims to sovereignty, and the need for nation-to-nation discussions neutralized (Thobani, 2007). Many prefer "time immemorial." Second, the phrase "traditional land" seems to place Indigenous people in the past, obscuring presents, erasing futures (compare Recollet, 2015 on Indigenous futurities). Third, which Indigenous peoples should be acknowledged here? Some would add the Neutral and the Petun. Fourth, how should those listed here be referred to? Some would say we should say Wendat only (arguing that "Huron" is a colonial modifier). Fifth, the Mississaugas of the Credit are recognized as the signatories of the most recent treaty (the Toronto Purchase Treaty), though what "signing" means is always contested, and remains so here (see Freeman, 2010; Mississaugas of New Credit, 2018). The treaties that exist in this place, between the Haudenosaunee and the Mississaugas (the Dish with One Spoon Covenant), on how to share this place, that predate the colonial treaties, are also not acknowledged here. And, finally, but in some ways foremost, the focus here is on land, which has often more readily lent itself to possessive capitalist discourses – but what about the water, which many more concede is a commons? The Mississaugas of New Credit currently have two

water claims – one arguing that they never ceded the land under the rivers and the lakes, the wetlands, and another about how the “boundaries” of their treaty, and that of a treaty with adjacent Mississaugas people (the Williams treaty) should be understood around the Rouge River (Mississaugas of New Credit, 2018).

Rivera Cusicanqui writes that “[t]here can be no discourse of decolonization, no theory of decolonization, without a decolonizing practice” (100). The land acknowledgements mark a new form of discursive recognition, one that does not simply treat Indigenous people as another ethnic group to be recognized as part of the multicultural mosaic, but it is a circumscribed and contained one. These on-going contests about and around treaties suggest the limits of certain kinds of discursive performances. There are further critiques of these performances. When I invited an Indigenous collaborator to the university a year or so ago, she asked, carefully and pointedly, if the university has divested from investment fossil fuels, the extraction of which are poisoning Indigenous land. It has not (though see on-going work on this issue by the student-run group Leap Forward U of T). There are disagreements about whether and how a proposed front campus greening project, Landmark, should mark Indigenous presence. While we are now staging many more events at the university with Indigenous guests, there is a risk of creating a new generation of “experts” who ventriloquize Indigenous thought; we need to continue to think through ways to transform the university in substantive ways so to be deserving of Indigenous students, faculty, and staff. This work is not, cannot be, simply a fascination with cultural practice, or the inclusion of ceremonial openings, without political transformation. This is what I understand Rivera Cusicanqui to mean when she writes, “[t]he possibility of a profound cultural reform in our society depends on the decolonization of our gestures and acts and the language with which we name the world” (2012:105–6).

Robin Kimmerer, an Indigenous (Potawatomi) biologist writes about the best way to braid sweetgrass; this is also a good metaphor for what it means to be a decolonial ally. Sweetgrass is a sacred plant in these territories, burnt to purify thoughts:

In braiding sweetgrass – so that it is smooth, glossy and worthy of the gift – a certain amount of tension is needed.... Of course you can do it yourself – by tying one end to a chair, or by holding it in your teeth and braiding backward away from yourself – but the sweetest way is to have someone else hold the end so that you pull gently against each other, all the while leaning in, head to head, chatting and laughing, watching each other’s hands, one holding steady while the other shifts the slim bundles over one another, each in its turn. Linked by sweetgrass there is reciprocity between you, linked by sweetgrass, the holder as vital as the braid. (2013:ix)

So, alliance, requires some tension. But it also requires coming to terms with greed. So many people interested in work that is called, variously, in Canada decolonial, indigenizing, reconciliation begin with wanting to pick the sweetgrass. They believe they are entitled to knowledge, to things. They pick the sweetgrass and then walk away with it. They do not work with those who planted and tended the sweetgrass. They pull it up by its roots, leaving nothing behind. The hunger for Indigenous knowledge is yet another form of colonial extraction. This can happen when this work is seen as only cultural (see also Silvera Cusicanqui, 2012: 98). These people want to learn to smudge, to buy sweetgrass at a friendship centre or pow-wow, and to look for “traditional ecological knowledge” absent Indigenous forms of social life and political governance. Instant gratification, perhaps. But it takes a while to plant, grow, and braid a relationship in a good way. That means asking not how to incorporate Indigenous thought into settler projects, frameworks, governance, but where and when and how to support Indigenous governance in a good way. There are rich, growing, and emergent bodies of work that describe what Indigenous governance might look like (Arsenault et al., 2018; Askew et al, 2017; Bédard, 2008; Borrows, 1997; Craft, 2013; Danard, 2013, 2016; Indigenous Circle of Experts, 2018; McGregor, 2008, 2014, 2015; Native Youth Sexual Health Network, 2017).

Anishinaabe legal scholar John Borrows argues that this means “(re)placing knowledge”, changing the ways that governance frameworks normally understand knowledge and resources to focus more fully on place. Borrows argues that the “rich stories, ceremonies and traditions within First Nations... contain the law in First Nations communities as they represent the accumulated wisdom and experience of First Nations conflict resolution. Some of these narratives pre-date the common law, have enjoyed their effectiveness for millennia, and yet to be overruled or extinguished out of existence” (1997: 454). The traditional forms of knowledge and teachings are, critically, best accessed in the language in which they were originally offered. Chuutsqua Layla Rorick, a Hesquiaht writer and language immersion teacher, notes that “[k]ey to the resurgence of ancestral Indigenous knowledge systems, through decolonizing educational approaches, is recovering and re-strengthening connections to our languages, our relationships with our ancestral homeland, and our spirituality” (2019: 225). These forms of governance support the resurgence of Indigenous people, restore Indigenous languages, and simultaneously re-centre the land, water, plants, animals, and what they can teach us about new forms of sovereignty and robust new ways to think about well-being. They ask us what it means to fully take on Sylvia Wynter’s injunction, as a decolonial Jamaican artist, activist, academic, that to decolonize means to change the way we need to think about what place, time, and personhood are.

I needed to learn more about braiding sweetgrass. So, a few weeks ago, when Kimmerer was giving a talk, at a conference that was kind of, sort of, nearby, I drive two hours to see her. I go up to Kimmerer, after her talk. I'm wearing a jean jacket and some buttons. Gifts. Badges of honour, maybe. One is a gift from an Indigenous grandmother, a strong water warrior, who has been leading a struggle against a natural gas company in Mi'kmaq territory. I picked her up at the airport, drove her to a water gathering, drove through a late spring snowstorm last year. We slid around, a bit, got stuck once, but made it through. The button said *water is life*, in the Mi'kmaq language. I give it to Kimmerer. It hurts to give it away. I'm too proud of it. Gratitude: Kimmerer's words on this, inspired by the Haudenosaunee Thanksgiving Address, are memorable too: "while expressing gratitude seems innocent enough, it is a revolutionary idea. In a consumer society, contentment is a radical proposition. Recognizing abundance rather than scarcity undermines an economy that thrives by creating unmet desires. Gratitude cultivates an ethic of fullness, but the economy needs emptiness... Gratitude doesn't send you out shopping to find satisfaction; it comes as a gift rather than a commodity, subverting the foundations of the whole economy. That's good medicine for land and people alike" (2013:111). Part of the work of this moment is not thinking only of ourselves, developing attachment to things. Learning to give, give away, give to others. But when I share these thoughts with some African American water activists in Detroit they are angry, critical. Especially, of these words, coming from me. From me, a White woman, of Irish-Slavic descent, a professor from Toronto, this seems like a recommendation for quiescence, passivity, in the face of economic inequities that have already taken so much. Just as the call for certain kinds of coexistence, reciprocity, reconciliation, are premature in Bolivia and in Canada without, also, redistribution (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2012:106). This, too, I acknowledge.

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