

# Hollow Promises: The Complexities of Land Acknowledgments

by [Torie George](#)

In May 2021, the American Indian Anthropologist Association (AIA) requested that the American Anthropological Association (AAA) pause all Native American land acknowledgments and associated welcoming rituals. According to Michael Lambert, Valerie Lambert, and Elisa Sobo, three anthropologists directly involved in the request, land acknowledgments are “earnest statements acknowledging that activities are taking place, or institutions, businesses, and even homes are built, on land previously owned by Indigenous people” (Sobo et al.). Land acknowledgments are performed in various ways, such as inclusion on email signings or syllabi, to recognize land once inhabited by Native groups. While these practices are ostensibly done out of goodwill, the AIA aims to determine if they are genuinely beneficial. The pausing of land acknowledgments comes from a place of reflection; the AIA is requesting the establishment of a task force to investigate the complex relationship between the AAA and Native American and Alaskan Native groups to improve the practice of land acknowledgment (Lambert et al.).

This request surprised many non-Native American scholars who view land acknowledgments as a public good. Lambert, Lambert, and Sobo admit in their article “Rethinking Land Acknowledgements” that these acknowledgments can “start real conversations regarding how non-Indigenous peoples can support Indigenous sovereignty and advocate for land reparations and return” (Lambert et al.). From this perspective, land acknowledgments can be the starting point for addressing and recognizing the dark history of the dispossession and displacement of Native American and Alaskan Native groups, and suggest actions like reparations or return of land. In addition to facilitating awareness of this history, land acknowledgments can also aid in recognizing the many tribes that the US federal government has not formally acknowledged. In the article “Native Land Acknowledgements Are Not the Same as Land,” Wallace Cleaves and Charles Speduva write about the “245 Tribes that are still awaiting recognition by the federal government,” including their own Tongva Tribe. Cleaves and Speduva argue that acknowledging the tribal land of federally non-recognized tribes puts pressure on “local, state, and federal governments to include us in discussions about the land for which we are the true stewards.” Land

acknowledgments, in theory, act as a call to action and can help grow support for Native American communities, which could lead to changes like federal recognition.

But how successful have land acknowledgments been in facilitating these momentous calls for action and aid? Lambert, Lambert, and Sobo argue that land acknowledgments alone are not necessarily beneficial to Native communities. Part of the issue, they claim, is that “too often, land acknowledgments are little more than highly performative, feel-good empty gestures, signaling ideological conformity to ‘a naïve, left-wing, paint-by-numbers approach’ to social justice” (Lambert et al.). These scholars contend that land acknowledgments are mere boxes on a checklist to signal that the acknowledger is aligned with ‘helping’ Native people. This gesture disguises itself as inclusive and helpful when in reality, it offers little or no further direction to aid Native tribes.

The debate over land acknowledgments cannot be considered without examining the practice’s historical context in Native cultures, with particular regard for the cultural role of ancestral or tribal land. In “The Canadian Encyclopedia,” Pikwàkanagàn First Nation member Lynn Gehl writes, “What we do on the land, and our relationship with it, is who we are.” Thus, land acknowledgments as a practice are not modern conventions; this practice of “honoring and remembering this relationship has always been an Indigenous tradition” (Gehl). Understanding the importance of land in Native cultures is crucial to understanding the mainstream version of land acknowledgments and how they have changed over time. From a more intimate, ceremonial recognition of the importance of land in Native culture, land acknowledgments have changed into a standardized speech that recognizes the presence of Native tribes who lived or currently live on the land, but nothing more.

Rather than honoring a relationship with the land, recognition statements can now seem to seek political ends. In her book *Settler Colonialism and (Re)conciliation* Penelope Edmonds describes mainstream land acknowledgments as instruments of reconciliation: “political compacts between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples to address the legacy of violent pasts, stabilize the present, and imagine new national futures” (1). Canada’s 2015 release of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission report aimed to publicize the abuse and repression suffered by Canada’s Native population in the residential school system and thus hopefully “lay the foundation for lasting reconciliation across Canada” (Moran). Though the practice of land acknowledgment lines up with the Commission’s goals, however, it is not mentioned among the report’s ninety-four calls to action. Nevertheless, after the report’s release, land acknowledgement became mainstream in Canada’s public sphere, “with the government beginning to systematically acknowledge the existence of First Nations people, in an effort to right past wrongs” (Cleaves and Speduva).

And yet structurally, the practice doesn't point the way to change. Recognition of Native presence and history of land may pass as an acceptable solution because the act does not require any explicit change or work from settlers or their inheritors. If settler nations were to address this dispossession and work toward restitution directly, this would not only force them to confront their guilt but also challenge the institutions that allowed these injustices to take place and perpetuate them to this day. Mishuana Goeman, Professor of Indigenous Studies at the University at Buffalo, argues that land acknowledgements must involve "appropriate self-reflection." While she believes in acknowledgements as a valuable first step, she also reminds us that "An institutionalizing of an acknowledgment cannot repair [...] years of exploitation, theft, genocide and erasure" (Goeman 39). The institutionalization of land acknowledgments does little or nothing to change the institution. Without a plan for substantive action that addresses systemic issues and current realities that Indigenous people face, such reconciliation efforts miss the mark, boiled down to a gesture of goodwill that is purely symbolic.

Land acknowledgments can be classed as performative activism, author Graeme Wood argues in an essay from *The Atlantic*, claiming the practice is superficial: "The acknowledgment relieves the speaker and the audience of the responsibility to think about Indigenous peoples, at least until the next public event." With no general direction or call to action, Wood explains that land acknowledgments recognize a debt but offer no form of payment. By merely acknowledging that the land used to belong to tribal nations, these statements push forward a "what was once yours is now ours" mentality (Sobo et al.). Kevin Gover, a citizen of the Pawnee Nation of Oklahoma, also comments on these hollow routine performances. He says, "If I hear a land acknowledgment, part of what I'm hearing is, 'There used to be Indians here. But now they're gone. Isn't that a shame?'" (Gover qtd. in Veltman). Acknowledgments that only identify past Native presence on land are forms of performative activism that are meant to showcase alliance with Native people. Yet in reality, they mainly serve to reinforce the idea that the struggles of Native peoples over their land are a thing of the past.

In fact, these symbolic gestures can cause actual harm. In an interview on Native history, Michael Lambert, one of the AIA scholars who requested the pause of land acknowledgments, told author Harmeet Kaur that land acknowledgments can "suggest Indigenous peoples – and by extension, issues of land dispossession – are a relic of the past, when Native communities are living many of these realities today" (qtd. in Kaur). These wounds run deep, and communities are still suffering from the losses and effects of the brutal past. When land acknowledgments portray dispossession as part of the past, not the present, they negate the feelings and lived realities of Native tribes who have yet to receive true reconciliation. This past-tense framing can be damaging to current efforts of reparations or land-back movements.

Viewing the past, present, and future as separate makes it easier to forget and move on from instances of trauma. But these times are intertwined and affect each other all the time. As Mark Gibney and others write in the essay “The Age of Apology: Facing up to the Past,” settler nations’ expressions of regret for historical wrongdoings with no acknowledgement of their role in the present sidestep responsibility for injustices today. They describe how failing to understand the intricate connections between past and present encourages “superficiality in the self-understanding of societies and institutions, prevents the necessary rectification of past injustices, and facilitates further unethical conduct in the future” (136). This failure can manifest as memorializing sanitized or simplified versions of history that ignore its lasting impact on marginalized communities. Contemporary society, specifically settler nations, must be proactive and willing to confront uncomfortable narratives instead of ignoring or downplaying the past in favor of the more convenient, but unreal.

Native peoples face issues of housing, generational poverty, lack of adequate healthcare, racism, and erasure; “in other words, real colonialism,” as American Studies professor Nick Estes puts it (qtd. in Wood). The forgive-and-forget mentalities exacerbated by hollow acknowledgments, political reconciliation agendas are vain attempts of redress by settler states. These efforts are “a counterfeit version of respect” designed not to benefit Native peoples, but to alleviate settlers’ guilt (Wood). Addressing this continual colonialism would require a fundamental change to the status quo that settler states have benefitted from for centuries, one that has been built on the foundation of violence, genocide, and dispossession. As Sobo, Lambert, and Lambert – all advocates of the pause in land acknowledgements – write, “If an acknowledgment is discomfiting and triggers uncomfortable conversations versus self-congratulation, it is likely on the right track.” Perhaps a focus on making the discourse of land acknowledgement disquieting rather than comforting is a step forward.

The AIA’s request to pause all land acknowledgments should allow for some needed reflection on this practice. Settler nations’ history of dispossession and violence toward Native groups continues to systemically impact them through generational poverty, homelessness, and erasure. Acknowledgments that disregard the intricate connections between past and present risk a future in which an apology for the history of colonialism and dispossession is put forth as a solution, instead of a small first step. The confrontation must lead to substantive action, something which may come more readily when land acknowledgement is seen as the provocation it is.

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