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Rethinking the Practice and Performance of Indigenous Land  
Acknowledgement

Dylan Robinson, Kanonhsyonne Janice C. Hill, Armand Garnet Ruffo, Selena  
Couture, Lisa Cooke Ravensbergen



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# Rethinking the Practice and Performance of Indigenous Land Acknowledgement

What follows is an edited transcription of a plenary presentation at the Canadian Association for Theatre Research that took place on 30 May 2018 at the Isabel Bader Centre for the Performing Arts concert hall in the city now called Kingston, in the province now known as Ontario. Presenters were asked to consider land acknowledgement from their various perspectives. The questions posed to the panellists (and to those of you reading this now) included: Does the acknowledgement of Indigenous lands and waterways elide the acknowledgement of other forms of structural and epistemic violence within the specific contexts we work in as academics and artists? How might acknowledgement be aligned with a politics of recognition that is a continuation of settler colonial logics rather than a break from them? What must occur for acts of acknowledgement to transform into actions that effect Indigenous sovereignty? How might acknowledgement be ‘actioned’ differently by settler Canadians, ‘arrivants,’ immigrants, displaced peoples, and visitors? How can standardized forms of acknowledgement give way to context-specific and site-specific forms of redress?

## Dylan Robinson

I'd like to acknowledge that we are on stolen land.  
I'd like to acknowledge that we are on borrowed land.  
I'd like to acknowledge that we are on overdue land.  
I'd like to acknowledge that we are on pickpocketed land.

\* \* \*

I'd like to acknowledge academic colonialism.  
I'd like to acknowledge activist colonialism.  
I'd like to acknowledge that we are on bureaucratic land.  
I'd like to acknowledge poetic colonialism.  
I'd like to acknowledge drinking a glass of water ten minutes ago and not having to boil the water first.  
I'd like to acknowledge the ice on the inside of the walls when I lived in  
Labrador in the 1970s as part of the military occupation of Innu/Inuit/Indian land.  
I'd like to acknowledge not having mould in my son's room.

—Clint Burnham, excerpt from *No Poems on Stolen Native Land* (2010)

To acknowledge something is often to name that which has been previously ignored. To acknowledge—affirm, declare,

assert—Indigenous territories and lands that we are guests upon (and often as uninvited guests) is to begin to name specific histories of colonization and continued non-Indigenous occupation of Indigenous lands. In this naming, a lot hinges on the language we use to describe how we occupy the lands we live and work upon. The way we name our positionality—as guests, uninvited, visitors, settlers, invaders, arrivants—speaks to how we understand the terms of occupation, and relationships to Indigenous peoples. A lot depends upon these specific word choices, but also upon our phrasing, the tone of our voices, and the time we take as we speak about how we occupy space, and whose space we occupy. A lot depends on how the specifics are named, and how these specifics express why we are naming these things in the first place. Much also depends on how we acknowledge our hosts, whether they be Haudenosaunee, Anishinaabe, Stó:lō, Wuikinuxv, xwelmxw. I'd like to acknowledge what happens when you stumble over our nations, our names—when Indigenous language falls carelessly out of the mouth, shatters upon the ground—is heard as a certain kind of acknowledgement too.<sup>1</sup>

There are innumerable things we might acknowledge, as the excerpts from Clint Burnham's poem demonstrate. One of the most important forms of acknowledgement is that which is addressed to the Indigenous peoples upon whose lands we gather, an address that often puts into question the relationship between the speaker and addressee. But land acknowledgement is certainly not the only thing that needs acknowledging. The exceptional moment—the conference, the event, the first time a class meets—these are not the only places where acknowledgement might take place. To move beyond the mere spectacle of acknowledgement as a public performance of contrition, we must take into account acknowledgement's site and context specificity. As xwelmxw, I understand our protocol (a word we often use instead of 'acknowledgement'), and that of neighbours across the coast, as always relational. It changes depending on who is in the room,

what those specific relationships are historically, and in the present moment, what is going on in the ever-changing natural world and the other-than-human relationships there. I know this too from the Kanien'kehá:ka people whose land I am now a visitor upon—"the words that come before all else" give thanks in the specific instance of our gathering: the time, the place, the land, the waters, the skies. To read and repeat prescriptive acknowledgement without variance runs counter to the foundational values of acknowledgement.

How, then, might we become more specific about our acknowledgements, particularly in the academic and artistic contexts in which we work? What might happen, for example, if we were to start department or annual association meetings with a form and language of acknowledgement that is specific to that space, and specific to the work done by those people around the table? What would it mean to 'decolonize the department meeting' in both form and content? What would result from starting such meetings with an honest acknowledgement of how much decolonizing work our departments or associations have done over the past month or past year? Some? Any? Not enough? What would happen if we oriented such meetings within the colonial histories of our disciplines or art form, and used such a reorientation as the impetus to undertake substantive decolonizing action?<sup>2</sup> Do you know the colonial history of the discipline or art form you work within?<sup>3</sup> Do the ways in which your discipline perpetuates heteronormative/settler colonial/anti-BPOC (Black, People of colour) values impact your daily life? Do you feel these norms viscerally, in the pit of your stomach, as your heart races, as your breath is knocked out of you?

What happens when we formally acknowledge in a department meeting the lack of decolonized core curricula? I name 'core curricula'—the core history, the theory, the artistic practices—in

particular, since it serves as a 'ground' for the discussions we want to build on with our students. If we think of our curricula as the 'the ground,' we might then also consider core curricula as the educational equivalent of land.<sup>4</sup> It might then follow that in order for decolonization not to merely be a metaphor (Tuck and Yang), curriculum might need to be one of the things 'given back,' where curriculum is the ground that we provide through the courses, the texts, and the performances we teach. Substantive forms of redress that Indigenous people call for are not reducible to the singularity of 'the land,' but include other foundations, other ground.

*It might then follow that in order for decolonization not to merely be a metaphor (Tuck and Yang), curriculum might need to be one of the things 'given back'*

What foundations are you (perhaps inadvertently) reinforcing? What ground are you occupying, and inviting others—your students, your colleagues—to occupy? Foundations are equally reinforced by refusals to refuse. You might, to yourself and others, acknowledge that you need to give over these foundations, this ground. Perhaps you need to give them over *entirely*, and then work to rebuild. To give these over, entirely, does not mean you will no longer teach what you love to teach or what has value—Brecht, Shakespeare, Stravinsky, The Beatles—but instead that you might practise forms of 'settler refusal' for the perpetuation of settler colonial structures that demand a 'fitting in' of non-Western,



Audiences listen to *Citation*, an audio walk created by Lisa Cooke Ravensbergen and presented as part of the Festival of Live Digital Art (foldA), Kingston, Ontario, June 2018.

Photo by Naseem Loloie

Indigenous, and BPOC work into pre-existing, era-based progressions, into the canon. What it means is not increasing ‘other’ content, but a refusal to place other content within a structure that ‘settles’ Indigenous knowledge and cultural practices.

More broadly, what I am proposing, paradoxically, is that we decolonize acknowledgement—or more exactly what acknowledgement has become—in its formalization, bureaucratization, and rote presentation, by considering how acknowledgement’s form has a place within our lives and work that is always in relationship with the specificity and context of its use. I’d like to close with a poetic offering that I hope speaks in such a way to acknowledge the specifics of this place I find myself in, as a visitor, as a xwelmexw living in Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabe lands.

### Structure for acknowledgement

*I am sitting in a room. Limestone walls surround.  
Limestone lines  
inside and outside of the structure I sit within  
This building, this house, this room,  
is one of many  
I am living in a city—“often called the Limestone City”—says the  
City of Kingston  
I am spending my days in limestone buildings  
I sit inside many “of the many charming limestone buildings,”  
says the city,  
“many of which help tell the story of Canada”  
These charming limestone walls—this charming city—built from  
quarries  
Quarried from the lands of Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabe people  
Built from the lands of the Haudenosaunee, the Anishinaabe  
Structured by colonial design  
to allay anxieties of impermanence  
I am sitting in a limestone room that hums  
with the subfrequency of colonial quarry and cut—  
this audible-inaudible sound—resonates my body  
My body—xwelmexw body, swiyeqe & yes xwelitem starving per-  
son’s body—  
in this room, these buildings, that resonate the story of Canada  
I am listening in a limestone building, trying not to feel the story  
of Canada  
resonate through my body  
shiver through  
I am trying instead to hear the seepage of water through stone  
I am trying to hear the labour of quarry, cut and chisel  
I am trying to hear if these walls are also still the land  
I am trying not to hear these walls declare their immovability,  
declare their charming structure, their necessary structure,  
I am trying to hear their structure burn down  
while the shelter for our work remains*

### Notes

- 1 This is not to say that learners of Indigenous languages should not practise speaking them in public settings. Indeed, it is essential to approach the public use of Indigenous nations, communities, and individuals’ names with commitment, as well as the practice and care of a language learner.

- 2 These are rhetorical questions; they are also invitations for action.
- 3 See Tamara Levitz.
- 4 Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang note, “Though the details are not fixed or agreed upon, in our view, decolonization in the settler colonial context must involve the repatriation of land simultaneous to the recognition of how land and relations to land have always already been differently understood and enacted; that is, all of the land, and not just symbolically” (8).

### Work Cited

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### About the Author

Dylan Robinson is a scholar of Stó:lō descent who holds the Canada Research Chair in Indigenous Arts at Queen’s University, located on the traditional lands of the Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabe peoples. His forthcoming book *Hungry Listening* focuses on Indigenous and settler practices of listening.

### Kanonhsyonne Janice C. Hill

Kentsiohkwa sewatahonsiyost kahnikariwesa. te tsitawanonw-  
erahton Ne Shonkwayatihson. Ne wahi rosa:anyon. Ne kati Ne  
Ohen:ton Karihwaterhkwen. Enkawenno hetston.

Onen sewatahonsiyohst kentyohkwa, ne:’e kati ohenton kari-  
hwaterhkwen enkatewennonkohte. (*The business will come to pass*)

Akwekon enska entitewahwe’nonni ne onkwa’nikonhra  
tahnnon teyethinonhweraton ne akwekon yonkhi yenawases tsi  
ohwentsya:te. (*all the things on the Earth*)

Akwekon enska entitewahwe’nonni ne onkwa’nikonhra  
tahnnon teyethinonhweraton ne akwekon yonkhi yenawases tsi  
tkaronhya:te. (*all the things in the Sky/Heavens*)

Tahnnon onen kati akwekon tetshitewanonhweraton ne  
Shonkwayatihson. (*The Creator*)

Tho ni yoh ton hak ne sewa’nikon:ra. (*That is all*)

Today we give greetings and thanks that all the things on the Earth and in the Heavens continue to fulfill their responsibilities and therefore make it possible for us to exist as human beings. We acknowledge and give thanks to the Creator of all things and the energy of Creation that this is so.

*’She:kon Sewakwe:kon, Wa’tkwanonhwerá:ton. Kanonhsyonne yonkiatas. Karahkwine Catherine Brant kénha yontátyats ne Ak-enistenha tahnnon Lennox Hill kénha ronwá:yats ne Rakeniha. Wakenyahton Kanyen’kehá:ka niwakwenhontsyoten. Kenhtè:ke nitewakenon, Kenhtè:ke kenekare.*

Kanonhsyonne “She is Making a House” is what they call me. My traditional name, given to me by a Turtle clan mother in consultation with my sisters. My deceased mother is Catherine Brant, and my deceased father is Lennox Hill. I am Turtle clan of the Mohawk Nation. I am from Kenhtè:ke, and that is where I live.

In a more formal introduction, I would continue on to tell you about my family, my children, and who my grandparents are and so on. For today, I will say that both of my parents and all of my grandparents at least six generations back are Kanyen’kehá:ka. I can trace my ancestry back to 1784 when my people, ‘the Mohawks of Fort Hunter’ from the Mohawk Valley in Upper New York State, arrived at our resettlement at the Bay of Quinte, Ontario.

This was a direct result of the American Revolution and the signing of the Treaty of Paris in 1783, which prompted our forcible removal from our native homelands. It is customary and respectful that before I address a group I place myself in relation to who I am within my family, clan, and Nation. It is important that I position myself so that you know where I am speaking from, what informs me, and where I am in relation to you and this land we stand on today.

Kenhtè:ke are relational people. Our original instructions as given to us by the Creator include our relationship and our responsibility to the land, the cosmos, and everything in between. These instructions embrace our oral traditions passed down by our ancestors and include our Ohén:ton Karihwatéhkwén, our Creation Story, and our cycle of ceremonies. All the teachings we received from the Creator revolve around our duty and responsibility to respect and live in harmony with everything that has been provided for our use in the natural world here on Mother Earth. To borrow the words of Callie Jane Hill in her Master of Education thesis: “These original instructions are my worldview, my epistemology” (2).

It was historically customary that when someone was approaching our settlement, they would light a fire to indicate they wished to enter. Someone from the community would be sent to determine who it was, and what their business was. If it was acceptable, they would be invited in and escorted to the village, where they would be offered food and drink, prior to being asked what their business was. They would be invited to rest from their travels and ‘brush off the dust of the road.’

To my knowledge, we no longer light fires, but depending on our relationships and our business with each other, there are still protocols in place for coming into our communities and for welcoming, especially within the traditional community, which always includes formal words, food, and at times gifting.

This past weekend marked the 235th anniversary of the landing of the Mohawks on the Bay of Quinte. This is an event which we mark annually with a re-enactment, sharing of our history,

food, story, and religious celebrations. Many of the Mohawks who landed at what is now Tyendinaga or Kenhtè:ke had long been Christianized but also practised longhouse ceremonies, albeit underground. Our history tells of the ‘friendly Mississaugas’ who greeted us as we arrived and that we shared food, gifts, traditional songs, and dancing to mark the event. Throughout this event, we speak to the fact that our original homelands are located along the Mohawk River in what is now New York State but that we came to the Bay of Quinte because it was known hunting grounds.<sup>5</sup> Evidence of early longhouses exist at Amherstview and within the City of Kingston with the Amherstview remains dated at around the year 1100.

We also know that following our settlement on what became known as the ‘Mohawk Tract’ the Mississaugas moved to Grape Island and then on to the communities of Alderville, Hiawatha, and Scugog Island.

This exemplifies one of the challenges in any form of land acknowledgement for this area and elsewhere. I know from my involvement with the longhouse and the reinstatement of remains that have been disturbed that there is archaeological proof of many nations of Indigenous people on this land. The Mississauga, the Mohawk, the Wyandot, to name a few. Each have and state historical claim to the land. As with the whole of Turtle Island, our peoples roamed, hunted, settled, warred, and made treaty with each other at various times in history and at various locations.

Some colleagues at sister universities have now taken up the practice of ‘land affirmation’ as opposed to acknowledgement and also acknowledge the treaty holders separately from the perhaps historical landholders. The numbered treaties are creations



Pieces of red cloth were tied to mark the route for *Citation*, an audio walk created by Lisa Cooke Ravensbergen, June 2018.  
Photo by Naseem Loloie

which happened after contact and with the influence of colonizers, whereas other agreements, such as wampums, may have been negotiated between Indigenous nations, such as the ‘Dish with One Spoon.’ The Dish with One Spoon covenant between the Haudenosaunee and the Anishinaabe refers to the stewardship of shared territories and hunting grounds (‘the dish’) and the collective responsibility to ensure there was always enough game and fish for all. The use of a spoon ensures there are no sharp utensils and therefore no fear of harm between the parties to the covenant. It applies to the Great Lakes region and is still acknowledged as relevant.

It is important to pay respect to ancestral and traditional territories and local Indigenous communities: “By doing so, we honour the Indigenous ancestors or stewards of the land and speak to our personal or social relationship with the land” (“Territorial Acknowledgement”). I believe this is the crux of this issue—the importance of doing more than acknowledging, as this could be construed as merely paying lip service while transformation into action would speak to true acts of reconciliation.

In conversation with Dr. Kim Anderson a few months ago, speaking about reconciliation and about what that actually means, she reiterated that reconciliation is about Land, Language, and Kinship. These are the things we are talking about when we are acknowledging the traditional stewards of the land; we are acknowledging their long, lifelong, since time immemorial relationship to the land. Our languages which rise out of our land and our relationship with it and our relationships or kinship with the land, with all living things, and with each other. Everything is about the land. I have thought long and hard about that conversation with Kim and what exactly it means for reconciliation to be about Land, Language, and Kinship.

To be meaningful and respectful, a territorial acknowledgement needs to be intentional, and not something done by rote, to check a box. This is a time to give thanks, consider our individual and collective role in the stewardship of Mother Earth and in building relationships between Indigenous people and communities and the rest of the country.

*I would encourage all of you to consider the land you sit on.  
How did you come to reside there?  
What is your relationship to that particular place on Turtle Island?  
Do you know who the original inhabitants of that place are?  
Do you have a relationship with them?  
Do you have a relationship with the land and all of Creation where you are?  
If not, perhaps it is time to consider these things. Nyawen.*

## Note

<sup>1</sup> Landing brochure, 2015.

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## About the Author

Kanonhsyonne Janice C. Hill is a Turtle Clan mother and the Associate Vice-Principal (Indigenous Initiatives and Reconciliation) at Queen’s University. She is Mohawk and was raised in Tyendinaga Mohawk Territory. She has spent her life working for the revitalization of the Mohawk language, culture, and traditions, as well as the spirituality of her ancestors.

## Armand Garnet Ruffo

### *Acknowledging the im/possible*

Auniin. It is an honour to be here. I would like to begin this talk by noting that I am a citizen of the Ojibwe nation and that my great-great-grandfather Sakquakgick, from the Pogamasing region of northern Ontario, was a signatory to the Robinson-Huron Treaty. I myself was born and raised in the railroad and logging town of Chapleau, northern Ontario, where the now infamous St. John’s Residential School stood. In the late 1970s, I moved to Ottawa to continue my education and work for Indigenous political organizations. In those days, the last thing on the Canadian government’s agenda, and on the mind of Canadians in general, was the acknowledgement of Indigenous territory. In fact, it was quite the opposite. Government sought not only to do away with Indigenous land rights but essentially to wipe out some 400 years of historical record (“The White Paper”). As for Canadians, in general, they were oblivious to it, as they were to residential schools at the height of their operations. Today, because of the flurry of land acknowledgements, one might think that the situation has entirely changed, but has it?

Let’s consider a few things. When I was asked to be on this panel, my first thoughts about the acknowledgements went to the tradition of Indigenous protocols. Suffice to say that Indigenous people have always been aware of the demarcation of territory for millennia. Accordingly, First Nations had an elaborate system to deal with intrusions, which could be as simple as offering gifts as payment or as elaborate as intermarriage between peoples. Likewise, in this day and age, the first thing that Indigenous people will ask upon greeting a visitor to their territory is where do you come from and who are your people. If relationships are to be built, then gifts of one sort or another are expected, which in turn are reciprocated. This form of land acknowledgement is fundamentally tied to people and nationhood.

Today, however, something very different is going on, a phenomenon fundamentally rooted in settler Canadians grappling with their colonial past. In his article “Canada’s Impossible Acknowledgment,” published a year ago in *The New Yorker*, journalist Stephen Marche remarks that the whole phenomenon of land acknowledgement has become “a kind of accidental pledge of allegiance for Canada.” He confirms this observation by pointing

out that he hears versions of “the same little speech” of acknowledgement everywhere across the country, from gala events to hockey games—noting that both “the Winnipeg Jets and the Edmonton Oilers began acknowledging traditional lands in their announcements before all home games last season.” The gravitas of this “little speech,” or rather these little speeches, is abundantly clear when one considers the manner in which they are being conceived. Marche observes that there is no formal acknowledgement among the citizenry. It is all happening ad hoc. What has emerged is spontaneous and persistent; it has taken on a life of its own. Canadians are coming up with their own way of doing it, writing their own, looking for templates, even asking Indigenous people for advice. It is a gesture not mandated by any level of government, and there is no consensus as to how it should be done.

While this may appear a heartwarming gesture of goodwill that ostensibly gives the country hope for reconciliation, Marche raises a red flag that, I think, needs to be considered from an Indigenous perspective. He uses the term ‘purifying language’ to shift the discussion from this apparently seismic shift of goodwill toward the stark reality and consequences of Canada’s ongoing colonial agenda. He ironically points out:

A major constituency of the progressive left, particularly in academia, have set themselves busily to work out ever more elaborate refinements to the new etiquette. [The implication here is that the political right has no use for Indigenous peoples, let alone land acknowledgement.] Purifying language,

to the new left, is purifying ourselves. The idea behind the Canadian acknowledgment is that if we repeat the truth often enough, publicly enough, to children who are young enough, it will lead us to reconciliation.

To make his point, he foregrounds the inconsistencies between perception and reality by referencing the hunger strike by the Indigenous community of Muskrat Falls in Labrador to protest the construction of a hydroelectric dam on their traditional territories. Marche astutely connects the dots between the rising mercury levels in the water and the disruption of the food supply and ultimately the cultural practices that rely on ‘country food.’ To highlight the fact that this current situation is not at all new, he cites the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) report of 2015, a report available to every Canadian across the country to read, and arrives at what might best be described as the Canadian condition. The TRC “described Canadian colonization as a conquest with two major thrusts: the starvation of indigenous groups, and the attempt to erase indigenous languages and religious practices. In Muskrat Falls, it was happening all over again—disrupting food and culture. . . . In Canada, hypocrisy is a uniquely potent force. Saying sorry and not meaning it is what we are best at” (Marche). It is not overstatement to say that this perpetual state of schizophrenia is as much a part of the Canadian psyche as is the love of maple syrup, which I might add not only originates with Indigenous peoples but was part and parcel of an Indigenous economy, a fact that appears lost on newcomers. Not only was it taken (read,



*Citation*, an audio walk created by Lisa Cooke Ravensbergen, concluded at the base of a monumental statue of Sir John A. Macdonald, perpetrator of cultural genocide against Indigenous peoples.

Photo by Naseem Loloie

stolen) and commodified, sold as true Canadian product, but it was done at the expense of Indigenous peoples. Canadian (and Quebecois) producers get rich; Indigenous peoples stay poor.

Needless to say, Indigenous peoples have been subject to this hypocrisy since the arrival of the first Europeans and the first land settlements. For example, it is common knowledge among Canadian historians that the British Crown acquired the 250,880 acres that include present-day Toronto from the Mississaugas, in 1787, for two thousand gun flints, two dozen brass kettles, ten dozen mirrors, two dozen laced hats, a bale of flannel, and ninety-six gallons of rum. Knowing that it was not all above board, so to speak, the British government revisited the treaty in 1805 and officially purchased the land for an additional ten shillings. Common sense dictates that nobody in their right mind would sell nearly 300,000 acres for ten shillings. So why, or better yet how, did it happen? Historians (and Canadians in general) know that very few Indigenous people spoke English at the time, let alone understood contractual law. Note that the original settlement contained “ninety-six gallons of rum.” Could intoxication have possibly been a strategy on the part of the British? Jump forward fifty years or so to other treaties, and we see that little changed except the tactics. Booze, of course, was still present, but as the TRC concludes, it was the tactic of starvation that really sealed the deals. “But that is ancient history,” contemporary Canadians will say anxiously, and “what does that have to do with me?”

This then brings us back to the TRC’s recommendations. The foundation of those ninety-four recommendations is a nation-to-nation relationship between First Nations and Canada. This begs the question: What relationship do the land acknowledgements have to these questionable land settlements and to First Nations’ self-determination and sovereignty? Moreover, what do they mean in concrete terms? If they simply mean Canadians are sorry and the status quo remains the same—that First Nations still cannot have control over their territories, as in the case of Muskrat Falls, or to put it another way, the maple syrup flows while clean water for Indigenous peoples does not—then they are of no value to Indigenous peoples. That the Trudeau government has recently purchased the Trans Mountain Pipeline to steamroll the project through Indigenous lands in British Columbia despite solid objections by those who will be most affected, points directly to this dilemma and Marche’s observation: “We say, over and over, that we want desperately to atone for a crime while we’re still in the middle of committing it.” History unfolds while we are in the midst of it.

All this is to say that although the intentions of these acknowledgements are laudable, there is nevertheless an underlying colonial state of mind propelling them, inextricably tied to the historical record. The result is a deep-seated anxiety residing in denial and excuse. History has happened somewhere else. “We’re over it, so get over it,” Canadians are fond of saying. And, yet, Canadians know in their hearts and minds it is not over (and maybe

will never be over), especially when we consider the impact of residential schools in light of the horrendous rates of Indigenous child welfare and incarceration. If these land acknowledgements are supposed to function as gestures of atonement by settlers for the wrongs committed in the past, atonement for a history of oppression, then, to put it bluntly, action speaks louder than words. What I am talking about here has implications that go back to British claims to North America and the founding of Canada itself. It further raises the question of individual responsibility, because atonement, while it can be collective, functions at a very individual level. This, in turn, is bound up to how one wants to live one’s life, a question residing at the level of ethics, because it addresses both history and the current state of affairs that Indigenous people now find themselves mired in.

Marche concludes his article by referencing the manner in which the acknowledgements stress the passivity of language and imply an inherent inaction of the speaker. “[T]he more often I hear acknowledgments, the more I hate how they’re written—the passive constructions. . . . They sound like microwave warranties, not the desire for atonement.” He goes on to say that Canadians need to write their own personal acknowledgements and looks to the American Pledge of Allegiance as a model with its “aura of near-perfect platitude.” (For Indigenous people, this is problematic in itself when one thinks of the subjugation and extermination of Native Americans in the United States.) Having considered various institutional acknowledgements, like the one at Queen’s University, I have to agree that institutions could do a better job. Queen’s, for example, says that it is “situated on traditional Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee Territory. To acknowledge this traditional territory is to recognize . . . Indigenous peoples who lived, and continue to live, upon it and whose practices and spiritualities were tied to the land and continue to develop in relationship to the territory and its other inhabitants today” (“Acknowledgement”). This is not to say that the acknowledgement is not meticulously constructed; on the contrary, its passive construction strives to be general enough to not offend anyone. Who is speaking and for what purpose exactly is never specified. Nobody really has to take responsibility.

Although Marche suggests that perhaps every Canadian needs to write her own personal acknowledgement, his final conclusion is one of near hopelessness: “Maybe we all need a personal rendering of atonement we impossibly dream of attaining.” For an Indigenous reader, this statement is something that does not come as a surprise. How can Canadians possibly dream of atonement when they know that they have benefited for generations at the expense of Indigenous peoples and are basically living on stolen land—land surely attained by subterfuge? The statement also tells us that the acknowledgements that have become so ubiquitous across the country really have nothing to do with Indigenous peoples. They are about settler Canadians talking to themselves to assuage their guilt. No, history is not over.

In his suggestion for rewriting the acknowledgement, Marche does provide one ray of hope when he says it “needs to be simpler, less legalistic, less hypocritical . . . more than just a guilty excuse.” It’s obvious to me that these acknowledgements will only be “more than a guilty excuse” when they become a call to action. What I am talking about is real reparations. What that will look like still



needs to be determined, although for starters it needs to begin with concrete efforts at all levels of government—those representatives of Canadian voters—who continually challenge every First Nation land claim. (Hundreds are still before the court.) In other words, Canadians need to take action if these acknowledgements are to have meaning for Indigenous peoples and not just be feel-good moments for themselves. Atonement never comes easily. In Dylan Robinson and Keavy Martin's edited collection *Arts of Engagement*, Tahlta Nation artist Peter Morin says:

Reconciliation begins with the acknowledgement of difficult political history. This is not an easy task. It requires vigilance, vigilance against the silencing of Indigenous voices. It requires self-awareness. The difficult task is finding actions to activate this space where indigenous knowledge meets settler ways of being. . . . They are bodies of knowledge that mingle and impact each other, and often their meeting requires yet another meeting. (70)

Morin rightly contends that it will be an ongoing process that will require a new conception of each individual, grounded in a new "self-awareness." What this means is that Canadians will be able to assuage guilt and thus allay their anxiety only when they embrace a new vision of the country founded upon looking at the historical record with an open and honest heart. No, the land was not vacant when their ancestors arrived, and it was not theirs for the taking.

*How can Canadians possibly dream of atonement when they know that they have benefited for generations at the expense of Indigenous peoples and are basically living on stolen land?*

As it stands, self-interest highlights the actual relationship between Canadians and Indigenous people in the country. The status quo remains. Until individual Canadians start acknowledging what has gone on and what is still going on, and start taking action, any kind of statement, no matter how personal and genuine, will remain meaningless to Indigenous people. Without action, Canadians will continue to rationalize the benefits of these acknowledgements, concluding that at least they give non-Indigenous people an idea that Indigenous people were here first. But if we think of atonement in light of reparation, then action is fundamental. How many times do we have to hear some pundit remark that Indigenous people just need to get to work and join the economy? It's a tiresome refrain when we know that for hundreds of years Indigenous peoples were effectively barred from the economy after their own economies were destroyed. Keep a people impoverished and you keep them under control. Recently, I drove through the Muskoka Lake region of Ontario. I marvelled at the shimmering blue water, and the palatial cottages that surrounded it. It occurred to me that a couple hundred years ago all this was precious Mississauga-Ojibwe territory—and it was precious to them—and yet today one would be hard-pressed to find a Mississauga resident. History tells us that wherever the land was valuable for either settlement or

economic reasons, Indigenous people were forced into treaty and moved. It also occurred to me that the residents of Muskoka know this, and either live with the guilt or have buried it deep enough that, for them, history is no longer relevant, as are Indigenous peoples. This situation epitomizes the reality of Canada, a country founded on greed and subsequently guilt or forgetting—and it is a legacy that Canadians have to either deal with or pass on to their children. Simplistic acknowledgements simply reveal "the gap between intention and action" (Marche), a point that hits home when one realizes that, in a country so wealthy, many Indigenous peoples still do not have running water and live along dusty dirt roads in communities that none of the good folks of Muskoka would ever dream of visiting, let alone acknowledging.

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## About the Author

Armand Garnet Ruffo's writing is strongly influenced by his Anishnaabe (Ojibway) heritage. He was born in Chapleau, northern Ontario, and currently lives in Kingston. He is the Queen's National Scholar in Indigenous Literatures at Queen's University, and his latest work is a libretto for the musical *Sounding Thunder: The Song of Francis Pegahmagabow*.

## Selena Couture

### *Land acknowledgements: Speaking colonial failure*

I'd like to begin by thanking Dylan very much for the honour of being included on this panel. Dylan's written and oral articulations as well as his generous mentorship at key times in the last few years have been extremely important in my development as a scholar, an instructor, and an eleventh-generation settler who is in the midst of a self-decolonizing process of reckoning with my inheritance. I am also grateful to the Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee peoples who care for these lands and waters which are known as Ka'tarohkwi, meaning a *place where there is clay* in Kanien'kéha (Brennan 12). The significance of clay as a substance taken up by human hands and formed into useful and beautiful

things makes me think about the institutions that have been built from the resources found here—and the way that they are part of shaping people, including this place of education where we have gathered today. I also think about my time living and studying here during the 1990 summer of resistance at Kanehsatà:ke and Kahnawà:ke, and how these experiences in my early adult years formed me in ways that I'm still working to understand. When Jill Carter prompted us to think about the “clay we are made from” during the “Walking Our Way Here” session on Monday night, I thought of here. Even though I am not from here, this place has shaped me. My gratitude to the keepers of these lands and waterways, and the allies who have worked with them over the years, is deep and long-standing—for their care that supported me then and for their efforts here today. In the words of my mother tongue, I am very happy to be here, in my father's language, *Je suis très heureux d'être ici*, and I also say this in the language of the Musqueam people, on whose lands I continued to learn how to decolonize my thinking after I left here. [. . .]

I'll be speaking today about some conditions under which a speech act of land acknowledgement can be part of a reckoning with colonialism, and its relation to performance and theatre studies theory. Key to theatre and performance is that it happens in a place and over time as a dynamic public exchange. Those of us who practise and study performance have specific skills and theoretical understandings that can help us engage with the implications of statements that acknowledge Indigenous territories. I'll keep my comments to three main points: the possible performativity of a land acknowledgement in relation to Sara Ahmed's work on anti-racist declarations, the significance of the situational context of a statement, and the importance of the language contained within it as ways to create discomfort and demonstrate colonial failure.

Keeping the *site* of a land acknowledgement statement in mind is essential when considering it in relation to Ahmed's concept of the “non-performative speech act” (meaning declarations that *don't* do what they say). In her discussion of anti-racist declarations of whiteness, she is clear about the politics of recognition at play and how moves to innocence and transcendence can insidiously re-centre white power. Instead, Ahmed asserts that the task is to show “how racism operates to *shape the surfaces of bodies and worlds*” (n.p., emphasis added). This is key to land acknowledgements—they should not be about performing anti-racist declarations regarding the self; instead, they need to be an intervention in the way the world has been shaped through colonial policies. Ahmed calls for an intervention in the “unequal distribution of resources and capacities” (n.p.), which is productive when trying to figure out how a land acknowledgement might *do* what it *says*. Is it intervening in the unequal distribution of resources? Or ideas that limit understandings of the capacities of Indigenous ways of knowing? I propose it is possible for one to do so, with careful attention to the relations of ‘where’ one stands when making a statement.

For example, consider the importance of the speaking of these statements in the post-secondary institutions where many of us work, study, and perform. As Cherokee literary scholar and writer Daniel Heath Justice and Linc Kesler, Oglala Lakota Director of Learning of the University of British Columbia First Nations House of Learning, explained at a panel on acknowledgements, making these statements at an educational institution is

political—as is *not* making them. While the repetition of mere words can seem dissatisfying as structural and epistemic colonial violences against Indigenous people continue, these statements act to implicate universities in Indigenous land politics. Educational settings are not neutral; they are actually central to the history of violence and exclusion of Indigenous people in Canada and have been shaped by genocidal policies. We are still emerging from the damage that the limited access to quality education that respectfully engages with Indigenous history and ways of knowing has caused. Part of this damage includes the settler, newcomer, and arrivant ignorance of Indigenous peoples, lands, histories, and languages. A territorial acknowledgement can be a pointer that indicates there is another world of knowledge and way of being that is other than the one that is currently naturalized in a colonial site. It is especially important to make this effort in places of cultural power—including Canadian theatrical places that, in relation to the last fifty years of nation-state identity building, are also implicated as sites that construct and maintain colonialism.

It is also possible to indicate the *failure* to maintain colonial power (as well as the limitations of colonial thought) when a land acknowledgement involves the speaking of Indigenous languages—including nearby place names, or words that express ways of knowing that are relevant to good relations across differences. The public use of language—again *especially* in an educational institution—demonstrates the failure of the colonial genocidal policies aimed to eradicate Indigenous epistemologies which were attacked through the Indian residential school system.<sup>1</sup> When Indigenous people speak in their languages, it is a powerful intervention expressing their survival and resistance that is a result of the collective efforts of generations.

I also extend this idea of colonial failure to my humbling experiences as a settler who has studied the *hənqəmínəm* language through an Indigenous-led language revitalization program that is a site of conciliation. As with learning any new language, it was full of frustrations and feelings of inadequacy at being unable to fully articulate myself. I then began to understand how ways of knowing and being in my mother tongue are only one way of thinking, and that, indeed, learning *hənqəmínəm* words for places, wisdom concepts, and orienting myself made me aware that the world around me was larger than I ever conceived. It also included the unsettling experience of being treated with kindness, care, and generosity by people who have suffered greatly under the colonial policies that benefit me. Every *hənqəmínəm* word I speak carries the weight of these encounters.

Finally, to put land acknowledgements in terms of critical theory cited regularly in our field, I look to formulations of ways of being that are described as being constructed through performativity and repetition and in the context of the normative. If we think about settler colonial relations of property ownership as also constructed through performative speech acts (in particular for Canadian history the Royal Proclamation of 1763), then we may

be able to find ways to deconstruct epistemologies that support extractive relationships through a spoken enunciation as well. Along the lines of Judith Butler's configuration of non-conforming performativity of gender, if a spoken land acknowledgement does not follow the "socially shared" and "historically constituted" expectation of colonial land relations, there can be anxiety and censure, yet there is also an opportunity to reclaim power through subversive performances which gesture to the contingency of the normative and the potential to transform it (Butler 528–31). When land acknowledgements disrupt expectations and create discomfort amongst those who are unaware of their comfort in a settler colonial institution, they have power to transform.<sup>2</sup>

I'll now conclude my remarks here in Ka'tarohkwi, at a university and a city named for the Crown—and returning to the metaphor of the transformation of clay by human hands—I look forward to further discussion that will shape the way that I understand these issues.

Thank you, merci bien.

## Notes

- 1 This attempt to eradicate Indigenous languages and thought has had dire consequences: the UNESCO 2016 *Atlas of World Languages in Danger* reports that all Indigenous languages currently spoken in Canada are classified in their four stages of endangerment. The speaking of any Indigenous language is therefore done in the context of this urgent struggle.
- 2 Acknowledgements that are standardized, rushed through, or otherwise awkward may still be doing some sort of work, but much depends on the audience receiving them and the place in which they are spoken. If it is an audience of settlers, arrivants, and newcomers, the uncomfortable failure can indicate that colonial self-assurance and command of place and authority are being shaken. If, however, the audience also includes Indigenous people, this type of failure to fully, meaningfully acknowledge one's relation to the land can be taken as further evidence of a lack of respect.

It's also important, as I've learned on the west coast at the University of British Columbia, to understand that something that may be seeming to lose its power to disrupt, as it is repeated in a standardized form, may actually be the result of a complex negotiation with local Indigenous leaders. The wording may have been very carefully chosen (as it is with the "unceded, ancestral and traditional territory of the Musqueam people") and enacted as a result of an agreed affiliation. Therefore, when deciding to speak an acknowledgement of land or Indigenous peoples, it is essential to find out where the standardized words have come from.

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## About the Author

Selena Couture is a settler scholar and assistant professor at the University of Alberta, where she researches Indigenous performances with a focus on land, Indigenous languages, and historiographical methods, while also working to understand colonial performative methods used in the construction of whiteness.

## Lisa Cooke Ravensbergen

Thank you for all of your words and for your honesty—I appreciate it.

I want to acknowledge my place in this room. Miigwech—Thank you to Dylan for inviting me to be a part of this table and to act as Respondent. I'm not the best person to be here; I am just a person who has been invited. In the lineage of theatre history on this land that is occupied by the colonial state of Canada, I am, kind of—I think—a third-generation theatre practitioner on Turtle Island. And my elders in theatre are all living still, or have only recently passed on. So my practice as an Indigenous theatre artist on Turtle Island is very fresh, and alive, and living.

I live on unceded Coast Salish territory in Vancouver, and when I entered the realm of Indigenous theatre there, my teachers in Vancouver were Margo Kane and Marie Clements. We used to joke about papa bear, mama bear, and baby bear. And they are very excited that baby bear was here 'cause then she could now sit on all the panels, and on all the juries and things. And some of my other early teachers were Yvette Nolan and Floyd Favel as well. These people welcomed me and guided me—very strong women in particular. And I have also been very fortunate to work alongside other leaders in Indigenous theatre across the country. So I just want to acknowledge that I understand my place, and I understand that I have a responsibility to those who have led the way, have come alongside me, and who are coming after me, including my son. So I just wanted to say *miigwech*, and I see you.

I think partly what I am hearing—and again, I don't know, I'm just hearing in this moment—but I feel we are talking about transformation. And part of that process of transformation requires intention to live in its space, and action to live in its space, while we occupy the space in between. Physically, I am between intention and action; my body is the embodiment of those two realities, of those two living spaces that I choose to occupy. As a performer and

a maker of work, I am very familiar with those [terms], and I'm sure everyone in the room is in their own way—those theatrical constructs, European settler constructs, of intention and action.

I would like to offer back words that I heard as action, and words that I heard from the four of you around intention. Because I think we are partly being called to be an embodiment of transformation in this room. You are educators, you are thinkers, you are leaders in your circles, and in the same way that I am being asked to sit in a space, in the lineage that I occupy, you are too. In that, we are all future ancestors: all of us. My child is 12, and he, because he is a theatre baby, once came with me to a panel I was sitting on for [the] Talking Sticks Festival in Vancouver. He was sitting just to the side while the panel was talking, just beyond my arm's reach, and Ronnie Dean Harris, one of the panellists, welcomed him as a young elder. And the transformation that I saw in my child's body—you know, it brings me to tears when I witnessed him step into his own space like that, which for me is about resiliency. We *all* have that responsibility—even though we might think we are just *this*, we are just *that*—we actually all occupy a lineage and the potential for transformation that is literally embodied in our breath.

In that way, I want to acknowledge what's at stake. I'm hearing all of you acknowledging what is at stake. That literally the past is at stake: in the way that we decentre it, in the way that we decolonize it, in the way that we complicitly colonize it. And also at stake is the way that we move forward, through the present as future ancestors: that we claim that path, that we are responsible for that path that we are all travelling on—even when you might fully recognize, like me in this moment, that I am not the best person to sit here, but I am being asked to do the *best* that I can in this moment.

Intentions that I heard (qualities or states of being, if we are going to use theatre jargon):

- sincerity
- humility, which also aligns with inadequacy, so operating from a state of inadequacy
- self-awareness

- relationality, person-to-person
- responsibility, with a citizen mind, being informed
- kindness, with generosity

So, there's that. Now, what may happen, which often happens in these kinds of situations, is the inevitable question, "So how do I do that?" "Can you teach me how?"

I just gave a list that has been given to us by four thinkers. It is a small list. So I offer it as a beginning, as echo, and as acknowledgement of the wisdom of those words.

Actions (I'm going to give you another list). Verbs. Actions are verbs. Verbs are a theatre practitioner, theatremaker, theatre doer, theatre thinker's anchor—they are key. So, all about action:

- naming—so when we think of land acknowledgements, these are actions we can take inside this space of asking ourselves, "How do I do it?" Like you were talking about Armand: "How do we do that?" "How do we step in and learn better?" We name: We name ourselves, we name the space, we name our ignorance, we name our inadequacies, we name our pride and our connections (and disconnections) and our People.
- dismantle
- refuse
- affirm
- holding (space, ideas, history, aspirations)
- occupy
- learn
- maintain
- receive
- subvert
- declare
- return
- plant
- intervene

I would like to acknowledge that this has come from you, so thank you. *Miigwech* Dylan, Jan, Armand, and Selena for this wisdom. And my question to the room is, to the people here and to the people who read this in *CTR*: How are you going to answer the questions that you have around land acknowledgement? And are you able to integrate any of these intentions, states of being, and actions in your own bones and blood and breath, as a way to enact the future that *you* want for your children, and their children, and their children, seven generations down the line?

*Miigwech.*

## About the Author

Lisa Cooke Ravensbergen is a tawny mix of Ojibwe/Swampy Cree and English/Irish. She is a multi-hyphenate theatre artist based in Vancouver on unceded Coast Salish territory. She is a play-maker, Jessie-nominated actor, dramaturge, writer, director, and dancer, and supplements her practice with the delights of motherhood and self-produced works.



Formerly Queen's Park, Toronto.  
Photo by Susan Blight, courtesy of the *Ogimaa Mikana Project*