



The Current

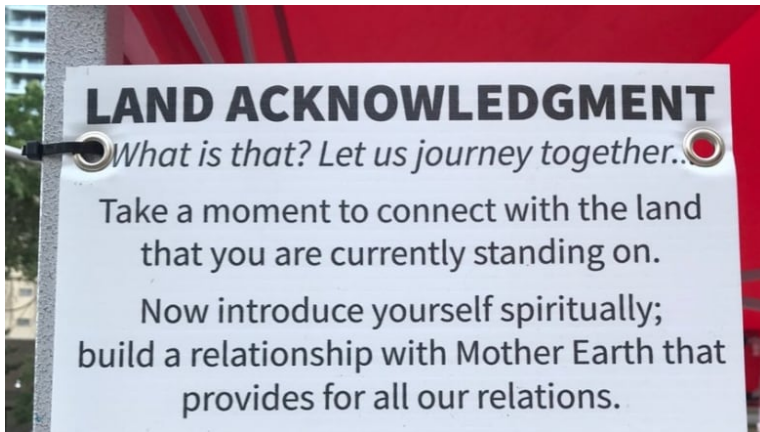
Land acknowledgements can be used to erase Indigenous people's presence, says writer



Acknowledgement at Toronto Pride failed to mention Indigenous communities

CBC Radio ·

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A land acknowledgement on a sign at Pride events in Toronto last week. (@kiwinerd/Twitter)



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A recent land acknowledgement that failed to mention Indigenous communities shows how they can become tools of "erasure," says an Anishinaabe writer and educator.

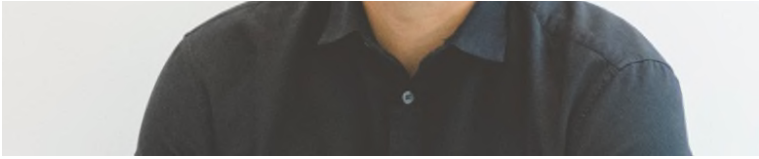
"A lot of land acknowledgements are really about validating Canadian presence or settler presence, and ... ironically in some ways obscuring Indigenous power [and] politics," said Hayden King, executive director of The Yellowhead Institute at Ryerson University.

Last week, [Pride Toronto apologized for a land acknowledgement](#) that did not refer to any Indigenous communities, or the origins of the territory on which the events took place.

King described it as "the zenith of land acknowledgements."

"This acknowledgement really just took that to the logical implication — that land acknowledgements are really used as an alibi to validate Canadian presence, and we don't really need to worry about Indigenous people anymore."





Hayden King would like to see land acknowledgements include firm commitments to actions that help Indigenous communities. (Submitted by Hayden King)

On its website, the City of Toronto states that "a territorial or land acknowledgement involves making a statement recognizing the traditional territory of the Indigenous people(s) who called the land home before the arrival of settlers, and in many cases still do call it home."

King argued that originally "they were political tools to assert Indigenous presence and remind settlers of their responsibilities."

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However, he said that they've since evolved into quick acknowledgements that organizations often make before moving on to other business.

"It's a token gesture that ultimately can become symbolic — merely symbolic — and meaningless."

King would like to see material commitments made during land acknowledgements, to move them away from being just a "very scripted gesture."

As an example, he suggested universities should include commitments to admit and recruit First Nations students and faculty.

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"I think it would encourage those officials to really ask themselves what they're doing for Indigenous education, what they're doing for the Indigenous peoples whose territory they live and work [on]," he said.



Sheila Cote-Meek said that it's important to talk to the communities who live on the land being acknowledged. (Submitted by Sheila Cote-Meek)

How to make an

acknowledgement meaningful

If you or your organization is drafting a land acknowledgement, Anishinaabe academic Sheila Cote-Meek believes there are things you can do to make it more meaningful.

"It's really important to talk to the Indigenous people of the territory that you're on," said Cote-Meek, the associate vice president at the office of academic and Indigenous programs at Laurentian University.

"I think it's part of ... building a relationship, but also being very respectful in terms of understanding how they would like to be acknowledged," she said.

“I have to sit through land acknowledgements where people mispronounce the Nations quite often.”

- *Emily Riddle*

Emily Riddle said the specific wording and language of the acknowledgements is important.

"I have to sit through land acknowledgements where people mispronounce the Nations quite often," said Riddle, a Vancouver writer and policy analyst who's originally from the Alexander First Nation in Treaty 6 territory in Alberta.

"It makes me think individually that they haven't done much work to consider whose territory they live on."

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King helped to write a territorial acknowledgement for Ryerson University in 2012, [but now regrets it](#) and said he doesn't think he'd write another.

"I have committed instead to encouraging people to write their own, to learn the history and the communities of people whose territory they're on, and to figure out what their own commitments are.

"It's not my responsibility to do that, it's not Native folks."

Click 'listen' near the top of this page to hear the full conversation.

Written by Padraig Moran, with files from CBC News. Produced by Alison Masemann, Danielle Carr and Max Paris.

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