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Place is everything: remembering responsibilities between and beyond land acknowledgments

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ABSTRACT

Land acknowledgment statements in higher education have become pervasive performative gestures that serve to relieve settler guilt and manage public memory. This article details the distribution of stolen Indigenous lands to universities, and identifies problematics of university land acknowledgments. I offer the concept of “impoverished memory” to discuss the insufficient, duplicative means by which universities acknowledge land, and “felt memory” to Indigenize critical memory politics of land, peoples, and nonhumans. To fight against the machines of colonialism within universities and beyond, I offer specific scyborgian anti- and decolonial actions that are specific to place and for Indigenous futures.

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Land acknowledgments are official statements that recognize Indigenous peoples as the stewards of ancestral and contemporary lands. Suspiciously similar land acknowledgments have been widely adopted in recent years by higher education institutions, framed as a means to combat entrenched colonialism in our universities. While they may be a necessary first step, and a protocol of respect when done responsibly, university land acknowledgments are often a performance of solidarity, or as Graeme Wood suggests “moral exhibitionism”¹ intended to admit and sanitize historical injustices, while hedging continued injustices. These acknowledgments are typically read at the start of university business meetings, conference talks, graduations, and other events, but they are insufficient in activating Indigenous land restitution, Land Back initiatives, or ‘decolonizing’ the university.² Many pioneer statues, Indian mascots and other visual monuments and artifacts of settler colonialism have been systematically toppled across the country following the momentum created by years of Native activism and the Black Lives Matter movement. However, universities remain neoliberal monuments of settler colonialism, built on Indigenous homelands and embroiled in politics of land grabbing of 11 million acres from over 200 Tribal Nations.

This article contextualizes land acknowledgment statements in higher education and suggests a set of interventions to live more responsibly on Indigenous homelands. I first discuss the distribution of stolen Indigenous lands to universities, then I assess the tensions, hypocrisies, and mistakes in land acknowledgments based on my reading of 30

statements from universities across the United States. This discussion is grounded in Native thought and la paperson's conception of the scyborg, which helps us reformulate the relationship between land, memory, and communication. While universities are products and machines of settler colonialism, important activist work on the part of Indigenous peoples, professors, students, and allied community members continue to intervene, rewire, and remake universities to serve some anticolonial imperatives that need to be revisited and remembered.³ I offer the concept of "impoverished memory" to convey the insufficient means by which many higher education campuses acknowledge the land upon which they stand. I conclude by contending that land acknowledgments need to grow some teeth and be prepared to bite (often the hand that feeds them).

What gets lost in conversations about land acknowledgments that lack specificity and memory of place is the sacredness and sovereignty of land central to most Indigenous worldviews. Our institution's statements must include context-specific de- and anticolonial action, a receding of settler power, and a shift to solidarity with Indigenous peoples, environments, and nonhumans that open more radical Indigenous futures. As la paperson suggests, "how land becomes property not only was but is still the great colonizing trick that paves the way for capitalist accumulation."⁴ This was, and remains, the colonial trick in the stroke of a pen.

Land grabbing and Morrill Act

By the late 1850s, Indian wars across the nation ended with most Indigenous peoples killed or removed from their homelands, forced onto often poor-quality reservation lands, and assimilated into American culture. On 2 July 1862, the Morrill Act was signed into law by President Abraham Lincoln.⁵ The act allocated lands to raise funds for universities across the United States. In the rush to build the American empire, universities were created to educate the public in industries that aligned with colonial practices such as industrialized agriculture. Sandy Grande states that to frame land as property is a rhetorical device or settler grammar, reducing land to a material entity that needs to be surveyed, mapped, quantified, worked, constructed upon and "improved."⁶ Indeed, the Morrill Act functioned to make stolen Native land "productive," to designate it as "blank and empty" (*terra nullius*), and to model a production focused treatment of land for settlers and settler institutions. This was accomplished behind the façade of education. The universities constructed on this land and the profits made from land built a sturdy foundation for the neoliberal institutions that govern our lives.

Thorough exposés have been published detailing the politics of these stolen lands, mapping the specific parcels of land grabbed through the Morrill Act, and connecting those stolen parcels to the current financial portfolios of the universities.⁷ While 52 universities initially benefited from the endowments, at least 16 continue to significantly profit off of the Morrill Act.⁸ These universities profit from surface rights royalties and resource colonialism, which extracts wealth from Indigenous lands. For example, North Dakota State University raised \$2,874,800 and Utah State University raised \$943,843 in mineral royalties in 2019.⁹ Washington State University raised \$4,250,000 in surface royalties on a remaining 71,147 acres that same year.¹⁰ While the primary goal of Indigenous peoples is typically not capitalism, the possibilities of financial and holistic wellbeing for Tribal Nations if they still had that land must be recognized.

All 16 universities that are still actively profiting have published land acknowledgment statements. Five of those universities acknowledge that they are land grant universities, and two, Kansas State University and Washington State University, explicitly mention the Morrill Act. In these cases, the unconcealed irony of acknowledging and remembering Tribal ownership of land while continuing to profit from it, with no recourse to reparation or reparation, only highlights land acknowledgment hypocrisy.

Formulaic land acknowledgments as “Impoverished memory”

Formulaic institutional land acknowledgments can be seen as discursive acts of dispossession. Indigenous peoples have long engaged in protocols to meaningfully acknowledge their lands and the efforts and stewardship of Indigenous peoples on lands they visit, live on, move to, and otherwise engage in relationally.¹¹ This protocol has existed for millennia prior to their recent appropriation and highlights the notion that as Indigenous peoples, we “are those who have creation stories, not colonization stories, about how we/they came to be in a particular place ...”¹² As a citizen of the Coquille Nation, I was taught to treat the land and all beings from salmon to lamprey, camas to cedar, as cousins or kin. I was taught to take from the land only what is needed, to always leave some for the rest, and to reject the colonial human/nonhuman/land splits. Land is not an abstracted commodity to us; land and place is everything. Land acknowledgments express memory differently in Indigenous and university contexts and provide a comparison of what I offer as felt memory¹³ and impoverished memory.

This is an excerpt of an acknowledgment of land in/as body by Quill Christie-Peters, an Anishinaabe visual artist as she reflects on her land in Northwestern Ontario:

Body, the whispers of ancestors tending to a lodge, the smell of rain on the mossy bog the ability to feel loved and held, the smile of my grandmother as she holds my child, the chuckle of my father as he paints futures with me, all that we are, all that we will be – forever flickering. Sovereign in our complexity, we are everything they can never reach.¹⁴

What makes a statement like this robust and impactful is that it enlivens, embodies, fortifies, and Indigenous memory of land, peoples, and nonhumans. Her connection to land is a remembrance expressive of felt theory and affect, what Dian Million (Tanana Athabascan) describes as “truth in the emotional content ... colonialism [but also sovereignty] as it is *felt* by those who experience it.”¹⁵ It rhetorically projects Indigenous futures while honoring the past to assert inherent sovereignty, meaning the powers vested in her body, her family connections, her nation, and the specific land. This is an acknowledgment one can feel.

Select universities in Canada have made strides in centering this type of felt memory. For example, a Hoop Dance Gathering place was built at Mohawk College referencing Indigenous material culture and spatial organization, and Humber College consulted with Ojibwe Anishinaabe Elders to build a physical land acknowledgment of cultural markers on campus.¹⁶

In contrast to these, my reading of 30 university land acknowledgment statements in the United States, particularly from Predominantly White Institutions, and two additional statements in Canada, reveals a dull formulaic script resembling this:

We recognize/acknowledge the Indigenous lands on which _____ University is situated. The area now known as _____ city has been caretaken/stewarded by _____ nations (or tribes)¹⁷ and is now home to many Indigenous peoples.

These thin statements communicate an impoverished memory of lands, Indigenous life-ways, and specific histories of settler colonialism. Impoverished memory expresses as lack; a lack of historically accurate details driven by “collective amnesia,”¹⁸ and a lack of capacity to adequately encode and decode powerful events, all in the service of settler interests. Impoverished memory is different than erasure or overlook; it is “memory work” that fails to truly acknowledge the historical trauma of genocide, how forcible removal was required for that land to come into their possession, and how that feels for Indigenous peoples now. It lacks the affectual tools to respect Indigenous longing for abundant futures and connections to their lands.

There are other ways this impoverished memory may manifest on a campus. As Voth (Métis) and Loyer (Cree and Métis) argue, land acknowledgments from the University of Calgary and Mount Royal University incorrectly suggest that Calgary is Métis territory, and that Métis people need to instead engage an “ethic of reciprocal visiting” on the land which those universities stand on.¹⁹ Other institutions include phrases that designate Indigenous peoples to anthropological “prehistories.” More commonly, issues of tone and, frankly, plagiarism abound. Considering the effort that universities take to condemn plagiarism in all its forms, land acknowledgment statements produced by universities are offputtingly similar. The creation of the statement becomes an act of band-wagoning rather than altruism; giving into pressure to adhere to a level of political correctness that they believe will result in student satisfaction and enrollment. In this way, university land acknowledgments end up emerging from boiler plates and serve as a settler-move-to-innocence – the phenomenon of reproducing white privilege under the guise of anti-racism.²⁰ The issues compound when those orally stating the acknowledgment mispronounce the names of Tribal Nations or place additional labor on Indigenous peoples who might not feel connected to the statement to deliver it.

Stating these critiques is not to dismiss the work of Indigenous peoples who may have served on land acknowledgment committees or to undermine some of the felt memory elements of select statements. For example, a section of UW Madison’s land acknowledgment reads, “Decades of ethnic cleansing followed when both the federal and state government repeatedly, but unsuccessfully, sought to forcibly remove the Ho-Chunk from University of Wisconsin Madison.”²¹ With consultation and collaboration, the university captured some truth of ethnic cleansing and underscored continued Indigenous presence. The group that produced UCLA’s land acknowledgment statement powerfully acknowledge Tongva resurgence and Mishuana Goeman (Hawk Clan member from Tonawanda Band of Seneca) brought attention to a “method of creating anti-colonial networks through the form of land introductions.”²²

Mixed feelings among Indigenous students, faculty, and community members inevitably arise when non-Indigenous peoples fail to acknowledge land properly. For example, I worked on a land acknowledgment for the University of Utah for the 2020 United States Vice Presidential Debate. The process was positive because I was able to connect with brilliant Indigenous scholars across campus to actualize a plan of commitment to Indigenous students. However, legal restrictions on the University resulted in hedged

language, and less consultation with the Shoshone, Paiute, Goshute, and Ute Tribes than committee members pushed to prioritize. Universities valuing expedience over diplomacy often limit deep collaboration and difficult conversations with Tribal Nations; this is a common feature of the superficial nature of land acknowledgment statements. After a leading university official proclaimed that “our pioneer forbearers built the university on blank and empty land” less than one year later, our efforts were undermined. I appreciate that I was later apologized to by that official and that my critical scholarship was supported. Too often, the work of passionate Indigenous scholars and genuine allies is co-opted in what has been termed a “ritualized regime of political performance.”²³

Interventions

As scholars committed to critical/cultural public memory work, the powerful questions we can ask to help our institutions confront settler colonialism include: “What does anti- and de-colonization mean to the Indigenous peoples who call the lands on which educational institutions stand, their ancestral homelands?” And, “How do we create, support, and amplify productive spaces and possibilities for anticolonial dialogue and memory work with respect to Indigenous land and on campus and beyond?”

In grappling with these questions, justice is not a one size fits all solution. Although settler colonialism often seeks to render and remember the Indigenous world as a singular entity or wound that one Band-Aid can uniformly cover, what exists are textured and differentiated realities. The strategies and impacts of settler colonialism and the experiences of Indigenous peoples are multifarious. For example, what happened with colonization and now neocolonialism on the West Coast is not the same as what happened on the East Coast.²⁴ What happened in Oregon is not the same as happened in California. What happened on Kalapuyan territory is not exactly the same as happened on KōKwel lands. What is happening at public land grab institutions is not the same as is happening at some private universities, for example, built on or near lands where Native peoples were forcefully relocated in missions with the goal of evangelization. Thus, anti- and decolonization do not look the same in every context, and, instead, the dynamics of truth-telling, historical correction, reparation, and repatriation must be understood and enacted with specificity to the Indigenous places, spaces, and peoples.²⁵

In my experience, there is value in both fighting against the manifestations of colonialism and from within machines of colonialism to retool their structures for subversive purposes. For this, I find la paperson’s theorizing of the scyborg as helpful to Indigenous peoples and allies who find themselves at odds with the universities they are a part of and who reject the impoverished memory politics that sanitize histories of colonialism.²⁶ A scyborg is someone who recognizes that the university is an assemblage of machines rather than simply a monolith and, as such, picks up the scraps of colonial technologies within the machine to dismantle the oppressive structures. A scyborg professor uses the land acknowledgment to open the floodgates of support for Indigenous students and faculty, to remove burdens and financial barriers, and, yes, to explicitly demand the return of lands to Indigenous peoples. la paperson asks us to, “Attach a pacemaker to the heart of those machines you hate; make it pump for your decolonizing enterprise; let it tick its own countdown. Ask how, and how otherwise, of the colonizing machines. Even when they are dangerous.”²⁷

The work of scyborgs has created some kinks in the machine, with notable momentum since 2020. Scyborgs have been successful in demands for the repatriation of thousands of Indigenous ancestors, including skeletal remains and belongings/artifacts imprisoned on campuses, though more must be done.²⁸ Scyborgs have removed many physical symbols of colonialism and cultural appropriation to protect the mental health of Indigenous students.²⁹ Scyborgs have created classes based on land-based pedagogy to “reconnect Indigenous peoples to land and the social relations, knowledges, and languages that arise from the land,”³⁰ and built programs based on “red pedagogy” to center socioeconomic and political contexts of Indigenous pedagogy and prevent it from being absorbed limitedly into a nebulous body of critical theory.³¹ While pedagogy is limited, and is increasingly policed and disciplined, it remains a small space of possibility for anticolonial dialogue within higher education contexts. And, notably, scyborgs have successfully pushed for ‘free’ tuition for Native students enrolled in federally recognized Tribes. Trust, however, that the mental cost of enduring assimilative politics at universities is high for Native students, and that Native students from Tribal Nations that are not federally recognized are hurt by a comparative lack of funding. While I don’t want to imply that land acknowledgments caused the progress that has been made, the Indigenous scholars who push tirelessly on land acknowledgments and other efforts behind the scenes provide a powerful force that has caused some transformation and highlighted the need for more anti- and decolonial work against impoverished memory.

Final thoughts

Put into context, university land acknowledgments ultimately work in service of public memory of settler colonialism. They can reinforce a troubling practice of acknowledgment as an end to itself. In practice, land acknowledgments frame and manage settler colonial memory in a palatable manner and uphold the myth of the university as a morally responsive place. As Linda Martin Alcoff suggests, “contemporary racialized society is in a constant state of myth maintenance due to a desire to perceive its actions (a continued history of violent colonization and imperialism) as moral, or at least excusable.”³² In turn, land acknowledgments in higher education have, overwhelmingly, become nominal gestures that serve to relieve settler guilt.

To rewire the university, fortify impoverished memory, and allow land acknowledgments to grow the teeth needed to bite back, I frequently return to the words of Eva Mackey who reminds us that “how we decolonize is not pre-scripted.”³³ Nevertheless, here are some decent places to start: donate your time and your money to support Indigenous organizations, advocate and participate in land return, sign petitions and show up to protests, mentor Indigenous students, demand wraparound services. Stop celebrating the pioneer spirit. Stop commemorating settler origin stories, and correct fraught historical memory. Engage in non-appropriative research with Indigenous communities. Transform communication studies and other critical cultural interdisciplinary programs, rather than tuck in tokenized pedagogy here and there. Support healthy ecosystems where you live. Bolster Indigenous economies. Work to expose Indigenous erasure. Hire Indigenous faculty and staff and pay them higher salaries. Celebrate as Indigenous futures continue to take shape. In short, more than strokes of a pen we need to actually *do*

the endless work of anti-colonialism and make it specific to and for the place in question because that is what it means to *do* a land acknowledgment.

Notes

1. Graeme Wood, 'Land Acknowledgments' Are Just Moral Exhibitionism. *The Atlantic*, November 28, 2021. <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/11/against-land-acknowledgements-native-american/620820/>.
2. NDN Collective. "LANDBACK Updates: From Launch to Looking Forward," October 28, 2020. <https://ndncollective.org/landback-updates-from-launch-to-looking-forward/>. The movement demands the dismantling and defunding of white supremacist structures, return of public land to Indigenous peoples, and change to a policy of Free and Prior Informed Consent.
3. la pperson, *A Third University Is Possible* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).
4. Ibid.
5. Lincoln sanctioned a mass execution of Dakota Sioux warriors and has a fraught history with Indigenous peoples. See David Martínez. "Remembering the Thirty-Eight: Abraham Lincoln, the Dakota, and the US war on barbarism." *Wicazo Sa Review* 28, no. 2 (2013): 5–29.
6. Dolores Calderon, "Uncovering Settler Grammars in Curriculum," *Educational Studies* 50, no. 4 (July 4, (2014): 313–38.
7. Robert Lee and Tristan Ahtone, "Land-Grab Universities." *High Country News*, March 30, 2020. <https://www.hcn.org/issues/52.4/indigenous-affairs-education-land-grab-universities>.
8. These universities are University of Arizona, the University of California system, Colorado State University, University of Minnesota, University of Missouri, Montana State University, North Dakota State University, University of Nebraska, New Mexico State University, South Dakota State University, Utah State University, Washington State University, University of Wisconsin, University of Wyoming.
9. Robert Lee and Tristan Ahtone, "Land-Grab Universities." *High Country News*, March 30, 2020. <https://www.hcn.org/issues/52.4/indigenous-affairs-education-land-grab-universities>.
10. Ibid.
11. Mishuana Goeman, "Beyond the Grammar of Settler Landscapes and Apologies." *Western Humanities Review* (January 1, 2020): 31.
12. Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, "Decolonization is Not a Metaphor," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education and Society* 1, no. 1 (2012): 1–40.
13. Felt memory is inspired by felt theory. See: Dian Million. "Felt theory: An Indigenous feminist approach to affect and history." *Wicazo Sa Review* 24, no. 2 (2009): 53–76.
14. Christie-Peters, Quill. "Body: An Acknowledgment." *Canadian Art*, December 3, 2020. <https://canadianart.ca/features/body-an-acknowledgment/>.
15. Dian Million. "Felt theory: An Indigenous Feminist Approach to Affect and History." *Wicazo Sa Review* 24, no. 2 (2009): 58.
16. Brook McIlroy, "Hoop Dance Indigenous Gathering Place at Mohawk College." Accessed February 17, 2023. <https://brookmcilroy.com/projects/hoop-dance-indigenous-gathering-place-at-mohawk-college-2/>.
17. Universities typically lowercase the words Nations, Tribes, and Indigenous, though they should be capitalized to express respect.
18. Carole Pateman, Charles Wade Mills, and Charles Wright Mills. *Contract and Domination*. (Polity, 2007), 29.
19. Daniel Voth and Jessie Loyer. "Why Calgary Isn't Métis Territory: Jigging Towards an Ethic of Reciprocal Visiting," in *Visions of the Heart*, eds. (Oxford UK: Oxford University Press, 2019), 107.

20. Lee Mawhinne, "Giving up the Ghost, Disrupting the (Re)Production of White Privilege in Anti-Racist Pedagogy and Organizational Change." (Master's Thesis, University of Toronto, 1998).
21. Doug Erickson, The Ho-Chunk's Ancestral Home. *On Wisconsin*. <https://onwisconsin.uwalumni.com/the-ho-chunks-ancestral-home/#:~:text=Decades%20of%20ethnic%20cleansing%20followed,future%20of%20collaboration%20and%20innovation.>
22. Mishuana Goeman, "Beyond the Grammar of Settler Landscapes and Apologies." *Western Humanities Review* 31 (January 1, 2020): 31.
23. Amna Khalid and Jeffery Aaron Snyder, "How to Fix Diversity and Equity." *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 27, 2021. <https://www.chronicle.com/article/how-to-fix-diversity-and-equity>.
24. We must listen to Indigenous peoples and work to bring specificity to our institutions' reckoning with these questions. While one Indigenous Nation may fully demand the return of their land from a given university, as is the case with the Pokanotek Nation and their protests at Brown University, another may know too well the trauma of land displacement and not want to cause that pain to families but rather petition the return of only public lands.
25. For example, one Nation may want the university near their land to cover fees for all of their Tribally enrolled students in perpetuity and create capacity-building and the funding of Tribal projects, as is the case with the KōKwel Nation. Another might view restorative justice as having the university pay the Nation an "honor tax," a voluntary tax practice that has gained notoriety after residents in Northern California wanted to pledge funds to the Wiyot Nation. Coast Salish Tribal Nations want a physical space, a Coast Salish longhouse, to be created on the Western Washington University campus for students to gather and engage in their cultural practices, requesting \$4.9 million in Washington's 2021–2023 capital budget. See Western Washington University. "Coastal Salish Style Longhouse," 2023. <https://www.wvu.edu/tribal-relations/longhouse> (accessed October 12, 2022).
26. la paperson. *A Third University Is Possible* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).
27. Ibid.
28. Although UC Berkeley has made repatriation commitments to adhere to Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, an audit by the state found that it had close to 10,000 remains in 2022 and the repatriation process is moving slowly. Native UC Professors have powerfully pushed for a moratorium on research and teaching of these ancestors. See also: Jenna Kunze. Slow Repatriation Efforts Plague UC Berkeley. *Native News Online*, November 14, 2022. <https://nativenewsonline.net/sovereignty/slow-repatriation-efforts-plague-uc-berkeley>. By the end of 2022, University of Alabama made 78% available for repatriation to Tribes. As of February 2023, it still has not made the remains of 2,900 ancestors and almost 4,000 belongings (funerary objects) available to Tribes. See: Maven Navarro. *The Crimson White*, February 15, 2023. <https://thecrimsonwhite.com/108004/news/ua-yet-to-return-thousands-of-native-american-remains/>.
29. See: Cmaadmin (EDU), "Protestors Tear Down Controversial Statues at U of Oregon." *Diverse Issues in College Education*, June 15, 2020. <https://www.diverseeducation.com/demographics/native-americans/article/15107095/protestors-tear-down-controversial-pioneer-statues-at-u-of-oregon>.
30. Matthew Wildcat, Mande McDonald, Stephanie Irlbacher-Fox, and Glen Coulthard, "Learning from the Land: Indigenous Land Based Pedagogy and Decolonization." *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 3, no. 3 (2014). <https://jps.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/des/article/view/22248>.
31. Sandy Grande, *Red Pedagogy: Native American Social and Political Thought* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015).
32. Gardner Seawright, "Settler Traditions of Place: Making Explicit the Epistemological Legacy of White Supremacy and Settler Colonialism for Place-Based Education." *Educational Studies* 50, no. 6 (2014): 554–72. Seawright summarizes Linda Martin Alcoff's argument.
33. Eva Mackey, *Unsettled Expectations: Uncertainty, Land and Settler Decolonization* (Halifax: Fernwood Publishing, 2016).

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