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Commitment to Reconcile Through Words and Actions

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Do you know the history of where you are situated, set your feet, or live today? Have you reflected upon the nature of things hundreds of years ago, and given that you know the difference between living then from today, you realized the advantage of present times with all the advancement and change? Today, if we ask the First Nation communities situated in Canada after colonialism, we will hear numerous stories of trauma, abuse, loss, and resilience. To recognize the Indigenous people, their part in the history of Canada, and the land where they lived and continue to live, many institutions and universities incorporate some kind of Land Acknowledgement to show respect and appreciation. This is in response to the 94 Calls to Action by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) as the final report of their research from 2007 to 2015 regarding the Indigenous survivors and others who are affected by the Residential Schools experience (National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation, 2023). Unless we acknowledge and listen to the stories, knowledge, and values of Indigenous people, land acknowledgment can only offer shallow gestures (ritual words, rhetoric, protocol) but not deeper engagement to reconciliation (commitment, meaningful actions, responsibilities). Achieved reconciliation requires awareness, empathy, and rebuilding of trust.

Land acknowledgment or territorial acknowledgment seeks to be the starter of conversation and invitation to build a nation-to-nation relationship between Indigenous people and Canadian population. Blenkinsop and Fettes (2020) suggest that "this practice already contains the hidden seeds of transformation" because it starts the question, "'Who belongs to the land we are on?'" (p. 1036). One ought not to stop there but must continue to listen and go further into the implications of land acknowledgment (Blenkinsop & Fettes, 2020, 1036). At some point, if we go further to listen and have authentic dialogue that the land acknowledgment seeks to invite us into, then we will be in a better position to take part in reconciliation. However, performing land acknowledgment as part of a program is not enough to engage non-Indigenous people in taking part to close the gap between them and the Indigenous people. Performing and showing respect or conformity to the act of acknowledging Indigenous land does not equate to understanding Indigenous culture and values. It might be a practice for a good start of conversations, if and only if, there is allotted space and time for deeper conversations. But then, if there is no further

discussion, performing land acknowledgments may only be treated as checking the list in a program.

Suppose there are further discussions after performing land acknowledgment still, land acknowledgment, as we practice in universities, fails to be transformative by itself. Asher, Curnow, and Davis (2018) traced the accomplishments of performing land acknowledgment in a campus-based environmentalist organization for two years. Even though land acknowledgments generated deeper conversations in the meetings, what they observed led them to conclude that performing land acknowledgment is "just one small element in this larger process" of creating solidarity and is "not an adequate substitute for solidarity praxis," which is essential for reconciliation (Asher, Curnow, and Davis, 2018, p. 330). The students in the study fell short of going beyond land acknowledgment and did not address their individual and collective responsibilities in reconciliation (Asher, Curnow, and Davis, 2018, p. 330). There are many factors to how we regard this practice of land acknowledgment, and how we respond will depend on our understanding of its purpose. Thus, if there is a lack of understanding and foundational knowledge of true stories about Aboriginal people and their part in the history of Canada, then the practice becomes a rhetoric and a protocol with no high regard to its meaning and relationality. An essential part of reconciliation is recognizing the truth. Performing the land acknowledgment with less regard to the stories behind it is not helpful in reconciliation. I argue that the "seeds of transformation" lies not in performing land acknowledgment; it lies in the commitment to be informed, be educated, and be involved in this process of reconciliation (Blenkinsop & Fettes, 2020, p. 1036).

Perhaps if the institution modifies the land acknowledgments and make them more personal and meaningful, then there will be more significant difference which will tell us that we are drawing closer to reconciliation. Wilkes, et al. (2017) compiled acknowledgments in 98 Canadian universities to research the nature of treaties in relation to their role in reconciliation. They suggest that there should be two considerations in university acknowledgments of Indigenous people namely: (a) the practice of acknowledgment as "fluid and likely to change over time," and (b) should consider "meaning making and positionality" (Wilkes, et al., 2017, p. 116). If we consider these things, perhaps we can engage in land acknowledgments in more respectful and appropriate ways. To a specific extent, I sincerely agree that if we have a better understanding, or meaning making, of why it is important to acknowledge Indigenous peoples, lands, and treaties,

then we will move past beyond lip service. Performing land acknowledgement will mean more than the words we say but it will include our recognition, understanding, and sincerity. The recommendations were promising, but I must ask the question of responsibility: In doing land acknowledgment, do we recognize our responsibilities towards Indigenous people, land, and treaties? Do we think of our responsibilities in reconciliation?

We cannot deny the suffering, loss, and trauma that the First Nation communities have experienced; lives need healing. In this process of healing and reconciliation, we have a part to play. "We cannot be neutral about cultural genocide," as Ferrara noted, "nor can we rationalize it" (2015, p. 45). There is no more denying and justifying the acts of dehumanization. There is no doubt that many of us are not directly part of the terrors that happened in the past, but that is not to say we are not affected or influenced by history. It is a common misconception that reconciliation is the work of First Nation communities and the Federal Government of Canada. As the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2007) said in their report:

> Reconciliation is an ongoing individual and collective process and will require commitment from all those affected including First Nations, Inuit, Metis, former Indian Residential School students, their families, communities, religious entities, former school employees, government and the people of Canada. Reconciliation may occur between any of the above groups. (p. 1)

So, to those who identify themselves in the aforementioned identifications: we are part of the reconciliation. Throughout the paper, I use the pronoun "we," because although I am an immigrant, I now recognize myself as having the privilege and honor to be here in this land. Consciously or unconsciously, I am now part of the community, thus, part of reconciliation. Reconciliation is not only a collective commitment but equally important as to be a personal commitment. When we all come together with personal commitments to engage in collective reconciliation, a land acknowledgment will not be the means to reconcile, rather it will be one of the fruits of achieved reconciliation where we extend recognition and appreciation with respect, dignity, and empathy. But because we have not come to this point yet, many Indigenous communities demand more than the words uttered in land acknowledgments. This is why commitment to educating and rebuilding trust comes first as integral parts of intergenerational reconciliation.

Awareness, from listening and empathy, can turn into actions centered on relationship-building and supporting First Nations, Inuit, and Métis. The most fundamental thing is we educate ourselves about the retelling stories of the past to understand what has brought us here in the present reality. Land acknowledgments taking place in universities may be one part of the actions that we can take to move forward to a future with the hope of healing and solidarity. But when we look at the bigger picture of what reconciliation requires, we will see that concrete actions are needed and called for. In the "Rethinking the Practice and Performance of Indigenous Land Acknowledgement," Indigenous scholars agree that "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" (Robinson, et al., 2019, p. 27). When we hear words of commitment but do not see actions, generally speaking, our response is usually disbelief or mistrust. Looking at the progress of the desired reconciliation, there has been increasing dialogue on informing as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) continually gathers stories from Residential School's survivors and informs the rest of Canadian society to be aware of these truths in support of healing and reconciliation. There are policies and non-profit organizations that focus on Indigenous people's health, welfare, and education such as the Indigenous Community Development National Strategy (Government of Canada, 2021). In contrast, there are still many instances and situations of First People that comprise poverty, questionable control over territories, fewer opportunities, and unmet basic needs. For instance, the historical protests of Indigenous, and non-Indigenous, communities against hydro dams in Muskrat Falls, Labrador because of community and environmental threats (Robinson, et al., 2019, pp. 25-26). These kinds of instances bring land acknowledgment's meaning and value to be questioned. This is why it is necessary to move from performing land acknowledgments to concrete actions of intently considering and hearing from Indigenous communities what it means and implies to acknowledge them and the land.

In order to progress in reconciliation, we need to reject denial, ignorance, and apathy, and embrace awareness, engagement, and responsiveness. Land acknowledgments will remain ritual words if our institutions and universities are not proactive in educating and explaining its importance, purpose, and call to action. Without awareness of the stories of Indigenous people, we will fail to pursue engagement and identify our responsibilities to contribute in the healing and reconciliation of our nation. Indigenous land acknowledgment ought to help in closing the gap by

instilling not only recognition but all the more, education and commitment to action. There is more to analyze and investigate about the implications of land acknowledgments and what it does to our society. Some argue that underlying colonialism persists through these gestures of atonement or recognition. Thus, we need to remain critical in distinguishing our methods and continue to be empathetic in our engagements and actions. Further research and, more importantly, application of those research are critical to keep advancing in our nation's goal. We are together in this journey of reconciliation.

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