



Re-Matriating Territorial Acknowledgement: A Métis Women's Perspective

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Territorial acknowledgement has been taking up its rightful place since the release of the 2015 Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's (TRC) report. I was surprised to learn that, for some Indigenous Peoples, acknowledgement of land had been practised long before contact. While land acknowledgements are not directly called for in the TRC's call to actions, this practice has emerged in the climate of reconciliation. How I have come to understand them is that they serve to recognize the lands, the knowledge and the rights of Indigenous Peoples whose lands we live and, therefore, the collective responsibilities tied to this acknowledgement. Typically, land acknowledgements are a scripted statement that opens a public event. It can also be found on institutional websites, billboards in public spaces, or email signatures. Within an academic setting, it ranges from convocation to general faculty council meetings. Alongside recognition of their potential, concerns have been raised within and outside of academia regarding the performative nature of how land acknowledgements are often carried out. Some of the concerns point to the lack of demonstrable actions, such as concrete and sustainable actions of structural and systemic changes that benefit and include the lives and lands of Indigenous Peoples.

In 2019, the University of Alberta's Campus Saint-Jean Research Office, in collaboration with the Association Francophone de Savoir, organized a one-day Truth and Reconciliation forum event. As the event was commencing, I was surprisingly asked to do the territorial acknowledgement by the lead organizer. I unapologetically refused and reactively suggested she do it. She responded by stating she was uncomfortable doing so and did not understand its purpose. I replied, "well, let's not do it then." Both the request and my response stirred some discomfort in me for quite some time, and then I forgot about it. That is, until more recently, when I was invited to give a Métis perspective at another reconciliatory event organized by

Celina Yellowbird, Cree scholar, Campus Saint-Jean's newly hired First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Coordinator. She thoughtfully chose the theme "We Are All Treaty People."

Celina had the foresight to recognize the importance of a Métis perspective at the table. We had been working closely together on a research project that examines the development and delivery of my TRC mandatory courses over the past five years as part of a broader project with Indigenous women colleagues on the role of racial equity. She had also participated in my course focusing on Indigenous women in Canada and some of my other collaborative Indigenous women-led research. The emergence of our kinship connection offered an ease in dreaming and imagining together the "We Are All Treaty People" event with our respective relational ethics and protocols extending to students, community and colleagues. In this invitation, there was an equal of giving and receiving in our exchanges. I accepted without really knowing at the time what I would speak of, given my limited knowledge of treaties. After a few days of reflection, it became clear that I would share a critique and offer my perspective on land acknowledgements. Métis research demonstrates the complexities of Métis peoples' relationships to treaties and colonial authority, given our distinct experiences with land dispossession and displacement. My own thinking has been influenced by the generations of Métis women I belong to, alongside Métis scholars such as Drs. Kim Anderson, Cheryl Troupe, Maria Campbell, Brenda Macdougall, Jean Teillet, and Jennifer Adese, as well as research that centres Métis peoples' experiences. In my preparation, I became increasingly aware of how self-location and positionality inform how land acknowledgements are understood, expressed, and practised. An unease stirred inside my mind and body, both a cringe and an indifference tugging at one another with the increasing public articulations of scripted land acknowledgement. I was especially agitated with the word "respect" being recited over and over. Eventually, the land acknowledgement itself was demonstrated on a large billboard at the campus's main entrance.

I recognize that conversations on this topic are both polarized and polarizing given the structural and relational tensions on the movement to indigenize, decolonize, and, more recently, implement equity, diversity, and inclusivity principles. Within this context, I hope to contribute to the critical conversations on land acknowledgements in relation to the vital role of self-location and positionality. We are still on Indigenous Peoples' lands today, and Indigenous Peoples are still very much contributing to life itself, as is settler-colonialism. I recognize now that land acknowledgements will mean different things for different people and institutions depending on the context of their presence. With this in mind, I wondered what changes when land acknowledgements are approached within the respective climate of relationship to place and when people move away from scripts toward intellectual humility and the knowledge of who we are, where we come from, and where we are going. Métis scholar and Knowledge Keeper Maria Campbell repeatedly reminds me of the concept of *kwayskabsahsowin*, which means setting things right. In thinking about this deeply, I asked myself what a land acknowledgement means to me, *setting it right within my own thinking* and then inviting my students to do the same.

In the weeks leading to the event, I became consumed by this self-inquiry process. I'd wake up at night, reach for a pen and notepad by my bedside table, or reach to my phone, open my note app, and jot the words that came. I would scribble notes down during meetings. I'd write on napkins or any piece of paper I had at my reach or, again, my handy note app. The meaning for me kept coming for days and weeks. I kept telling myself, you only have fifteen minutes; this

should not be taking up so much of my time. But it was rightly so, all-consuming. I realized that this consumption was beyond a mere fifteen minutes; it touched on centuries, decades, generations of Métis Families, generations of land acknowledgements, like sonnets emerging, like a new melody of territorial acknowledgement. One that proved meaningful to me as a Métis woman, here today.

I became increasingly aware of the spaces where and when I read or heard land acknowledgements...Telus, Winspear, Jubilee, classrooms, and even my granddaughter sent me a personal video of the territorial acknowledgement she was reciting and enacting through movement for her school project. At six years old, she knows she is a treaty human in relation with the place she lives. During this time, I especially became critical of the poetic land acknowledgement shared during the Giselle Ballet at Edmonton's Jubilee Auditorium that I attended with my granddaughter. The costs of tickets began at \$180/each. The acknowledgement filled the auditorium, where I could almost imagine the Indigenous dancers of this land they poetically acknowledged. I then thought to myself, as Baron Von Sketch provokes in her performance, will some of the ticket sales go to Indigenous dancers, programs, regalia making, and and and...As most land acknowledgements go, little goes back to investing in the health and well-being of Indigenous Peoples whose land we are on. I will not elaborate on this given there is much brilliant research that speaks to the ongoing nature of enhancing and preserving settler liberties' and life as deeply rooted in settler-colonial logic. Rather, I wish to express and share in this next section what emerged in the generosity of my colleague, Celina Yellowbird's sincere invitation and inspiration to create space for diverse expressions of "We Are All Treaty People." Together, we weaved a cohesive tapestry of truths, experiences and perspectives that did not require applause nor praises. I spoke the following words from a voice that had been silenced.

This is my land acknowledgement today. It is grounded in Place, People, Life, and Community.

My first recognition of land is my *nimaamaa*, Norma Morrison Gaudet, the womb and her waters that sustained my life.

She is my first understanding of land.

I think of her mother, her *nimaamaa*, Auxile Lepine, who was born in 1908, the generation born after the 1885 Métis resistance in Batoche.

I think of their intelligence, their stories, their skills, and their struggles—the hard choices they had to make their children have a good life.

I think of their values, which live on within their children and grandchildren.

I think of Auxile's *nimaamaa*, Margaret Boucher, who, at the age of nineteen, was on the battlefield of 1885 and how she must have felt.

I think of the journey with five Métis families who were forced off their Red River lands in 1882 due to racism and discrimination and had travelled with oxen and carts for fifty-two days to the South Saskatchewan region.

I think of Auxile's grandmothers, Caroline Lesperance and Josephite Lavallee, who, too, were at Batoche in 1885 tending to the wounded children when the military waged war on Métis people to consume their lands.

I think of the Métis families and their kin who fought for the rights of their people and who still continue today for the future, for the present.

I think of the Métis babies born on the Carleton trail that my late Métis Matriarch Sophie McDougall calls the Trail of Babies.

I think of Métis women and children who died after 1885 due to illness and hunger.

I think of the Métis men sentenced to be hung to death or imprisoned after 1885.

I think of the babies born during the resistance.

I think of Missing and Murdered Indigenous women then and today.

I think of the injustices that, for some, continue unquestioned.

I think of how racism is actually about life, people's lives, and the ways in which this affects the land we live on.

I think of the colonial legislations, policies and attitudes.

I think of those who pray and enact ceremony for the health of the waters, all waters.

I think of Dr. Dwayne Donald's wisdom that the health of the river reflects the health of our people.

I think of the teaching that when I introduce myself in my language, the land knows who I am.

I think of the songs that continue to be sung, and the language that still continues to be spoken.

I think of the teachings that we are all related, and how we are bound to one another.

I think of the everyday simple act of resurgence.

I think of my Métis Matriarchs, the unrecognized pillars of our Peoplehood.

I think of epistemology as the network of Métis women.

I think of how we are wired for community.

I think of the ethics of harvesting medicines.

I think of what it means to come from sister communities.

I think of what has changed and will no longer be.

I think of how Métis women worked together and supported one another.

I think of Maria Campbell's teaching in HalfBreed, "We may not come together because we love one another but that we need one another to survive."

I think of the teachings that we have responsibility to the land, and the land has responsibility to us.

I think of reciprocity as giving and receiving fairly.

I think of the stories we tell and what stories want to be told and who will tell these stories.

I think of systemic harms, the microaggressions, the whiteness, and epistemic violence that perseveres in the academy.

I think of a decolonial future with generations knowing love, respect, and freedom to be themselves.

I think of the Michif language holders, keepers and lovers of all things Michif.

I think of the kitchen tables I sit at, sat at and those I long to be at.

I think of the centuries of Métis women's generosity.

I think of the ones that call me Auntie or Mataant.

I think of the little ones that call me Kookuum or Meemee.

I think of the old ladies who call me my girl.

I think of the ones who call me Sister.

I think of the ones who call me Coozin.

I think of those I can rely on and call on without any explanation.

I think of the uninterrupted web of Métis relations.

I think of the fiddle and the rabbit dance.

I think of the teaching I received from the Omushkego people, "We are the land."

I think of dandelions, of food sovereignty and how far I am from this life.

I think of summer thunderstorms.

I think of 1885, of resistance, of life, of love.

I think of clotheslines, back roads, old pickup trucks and hauling water.

I think of card games that go on until sunrise.

I think of my nimaama's grandmother, Harriet Bremners' beadwork that withstood time.

I think of those who were punished and humiliated for speaking their languages.

I think of the invisible labour of reconciliation to some but visible to those we care for.

I think of my nimaama's quilt made from the remnants of her clothes: fine velvet, tartan, corduroy, wool.

I think of picnics that feed spaces and generations of our kin.

I think of the beads on my matriarchs' rosaries and the blessing of their hands and thoughts that protected their kin.

I think of Métis women's stories who influence our everyday lives.

I think of Métis women's kitchen table that carried our Michif language project.

I think of Lii Kaart aen Michif themes: Laa Vii Toot Alentour, Nutr Mangii, Laa parentii, y Laa tayr.

I think of how good it is to gather with Métis women.

I think of nimaama's grandparents Josette Lavallee and Maxime Lepine whose land and threads of stories I have come to know as Lepine Flats from those who still remember.

I think of Métis road allowances as sites of resistance.

I think of what it means to own ourselves and that which hinders our sovereignty.

I think of the buffalo, their laws, and their teachings of how to live well.

I think of Dr. Lee Maracle's words that "killing Indians" was like a sport.

I think of day schools and residential schools, of the children, of the families, and of the many losses.

I think of violence, in all its forms, which continues today as though it was normal.

I think of Mother Mary as the comfort my relatives rely on.

I think of Madame Vandale, the Métis tea reader who my grandmother and mother turned to for guidance during those difficult times of loss and violence.

I think of the Métis flag that protects my land.

I think of beauty, dignity, and non-conformity.

I think of colonial ideologies that distort, contort, and disrupt kinship.

I think of bone marrow, the emptying and filling, the emptying, the filling...

I think of Sophie McDougall's consistent teaching: be proud to be Métis.

I think of Mataant Lawrence Lepine's front porch and her braided rugs.

I think of how the land and the body are not separate.

I think of the bridge of flags on Edmonton's Whyte Avenue that celebrates colonialism.

I think of the denial of relationality, the denial of love, and the ways I am complicit.

I think of Lii Taab dii Faam Michif, where we gather to visit because we are invested in each other's lives.

I think of the power of keeoukaywin and the ways in which it is misused or misunderstood in the academy.

I think of those old, old lullabies that are informed by the sounds of the land.

I think of the land as having its own agency.

I think of humility, what it means intellectually and spiritually.

I think of the epistemology of ignorance and who benefits.

I think of what the old people say that visiting rarely occurs now.

I think of which women's lives we choose to honour yearly in Canada.

I think of the lives of Métis women that are erased in textbooks but remembered at kitchen tables.

I think of food, a tool of oppression.

I think of my matriarch's big gardens that fed family for the year.

I think of that berry island held by the Saskatchewan River that the old Aunties talk about.

I think of the poplar trees.

I think of the scrip as equivalent to treaties.

I think of the berries, so many berries.

I think of Métis artists, demonstrating our resistance, our love, our existence.

I think of the Spirit Bears that hold court on the campus where I thrive.

I think of my given name and my ceremonial name.

I think of the visibility and invisibility of whiteness and how it remains unquestioned.

I think of Métis women gathering week after to week, sewing together their ribbon skirts.

I think of my maymair and my mataants' aprons.

I think of the sickness of racism and how it kills.

I think of laa rivayr and her different seasonal songs.

I think of my nimaamaa, and the generations of wombs I belong to.

Maarsii. Ekosi. That's all for now.

I am deeply grateful for the generosity of Métis scholar Lindsay DuPré for helping strengthen my contribution with her editorial comments, guidance, collaboration, and kinship.

Biography

Dr. Janice Cindy Gaudet is an Auntie, Sister, and Kokum. She belongs to a strong lineage of Métis women's families along the South Saskatchewan River and farming communities near Bellevue, Batoche, St. Laurent, St. Louis and One Arrow First Nation in what is now the province of Saskatchewan. She has ties to French Canadian relations through her father's family. She is an Associate Professor at Campus Saint-Jean, University of Alberta, and Canada Research Chair in Métis Kinship and Land-based learning. Métis women's expression of sovereignty is at the forefront of her health and well-being research.
