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# The Significance of Land Acknowledgements as a Commentary on Indigenous Pedagogies

*Linda Tuhiwai Smith*

In my decades of navigating both the academic institutional world and the world of Indigenous peoples, the emergence of land acknowledgements in academic institutions and in public and government contexts is a fascinating story of how one small element of Indigenous pedagogies has come to be expressed in institutions that have historically reviled Indigenous peoples. Land acknowledgements are often made as statements at important events within institutions. The land acknowledgement can be a “Welcome to Country” greeting by an elder, often given in Australia, or a formalized statement that is read out by a non-Indigenous official at an occasion such as a graduation ceremony. Indigenous pedagogies encompass the worldviews, philosophies, cultures, histories, ways of knowing and being, and practices of diverse Indigenous peoples. Every Indigenous nation and peoples will have their own way of defining, naming, and even thinking about the idea of an Indigenous pedagogy. In my own Māori culture from Aotearoa New Zealand, for example, we have no one word that exactly translates to pedagogy. We do have a word, *ako*, that means both teaching and learning, and it is from this one word that we get a glimpse into a worldview about the relational nature of knowledge transmission, teaching and learning, teacher and learner. Our pedagogical ideas and practices are deeply connected to our understandings of who we are, where we have been and may come from, why we exist, and what our responsibilities are while we are alive and then beyond our physical lives. It is with that deeper sense of an Indigenous pedagogy that I want to reflect upon the significance of what may seem like the simple act of a land acknowledgement.

It is of course easy to critique the land acknowledgement expressed in institutional settings as a tokenistic and meaningless gesture, an awkward and embarrassing display of institutional arrogance, a show of neoliberal performativity, and a cynical act of cultural appropriation. Yes, I have personally witnessed numerous epic failures to deliver a respectful land acknowledgement, many condescending attempts at land acknowledgement alongside dreadful and demeaning mispronunciation of Indigenous language. Along with my colleagues, I have felt outraged, offended, embarrassed, ashamed, implicated, and bemused. However, I have also witnessed acknowledgements that have brought me to tears, raised me up, exposed me to a different experience, expanded my knowledge, and filled me with hope.

My questions for this commentary, however, are not about institutions and why they make such spectacular mistakes and yet still expect to be praised, but rather about why land acknowledgements matter from an Indigenous perspective, why Indigenous communities have sought such an acknowledgement, often over decades, and what land acknowledgements can open up in terms of engaging in a broader, more transformative set of Indigenous pedagogical practices. I will answer those questions by drawing from my own Māori knowledge and understandings with an absolute recognition that other Indigenous nations will have their own knowledge and understandings about land acknowledgement.

I generally begin most of my talks with an acknowledgement of one or all of the mountains from my own tribal areas. We share with many other Indigenous cultures the idea that the earth is our ancestral mother. The land and all its features, such as mountains and rivers, are important. The land came into existence before humans. The land is a being. It is alive. It gives us life. It gives us identity. It shapes our practices. The mountains dominate the landscape of Aotearoa and so every *iwi*, or nation group, can

point to one or more of the mountains as their mountain. Many of our mountains are volcanoes, some still very active. Others have been pushed up out of the earth. Mountains, for us, are gendered and have their own stories, love affairs, battles, and journeys. There are proverbs, stories, and songs about our mountains that have been passed down from generation to generation. My own iwi or tribal and family lands lie at the foot of the mountains. When I see these mountains I know I am in the home of my ancestors.

Acknowledging the land and our mountains is the first phrase of what we call a pepeha, the protocol of introducing oneself. For Māori, acknowledging the land is one of the most important and respectful ways to greet others and is far more important than announcing one's individual name as an opening greeting. Your name is not as important as the name of your lands, mountains, waterways, and iwi. Where we are from, who we are from, comes first in any introduction. The pepeha is reserved for introducing yourself to people who are not from your own family or nation and in contexts where you are a visitor on someone else's land.

Acknowledging the land we are standing on or speaking from is also a way to identify by name the nation whose territories are within this land. Nations are the guardians of the land and exercise governance over their territories, and it is important that visitors know which nation's land they have come to so they can exercise the right protocols or forms of respect. In my culture, the public acknowledgement of land and exchange of introductions can be extremely formal and filled with ceremonial significance or, when strangers meet, very simple and ordinary. It is considered very important that it happens at the beginning of an event, arrival, or encounter and that visitors or strangers enter and participate in a respectful manner.

Acknowledging the land is also a way of revealing important connections and alliances across nation groups. Our nations share connections to waka, or our ancient voyaging canoes, that journeyed across the Pacific. One ancestral waka is shared by several nations, as the descendants of those early voyagers settled the lands and formed different groups over generations. The land and water also connect us to other Indigenous peoples. Our ancestors navigated the Pacific, and we see ourselves as related to other Pacific peoples. The land and the ocean are connectors for humans. It is humans who exercise jurisdiction over land.

Finally, the land itself is a witness to what occurs on it. When we acknowledge the land, we understand that the land can hear us and see us practicing our pedagogies in respectful ways that honor Mother Earth and ourselves. The land has witnessed the comings and goings of all that has occurred on Earth, including all human endeavours. We regard some lands as tapu, as set aside from ordinary activities. We have many ceremonies that recognize the sacredness of some land, that apply or remove sanctions on land, and that assert mana over land. Some of our land has been traumatized, just as our people have been.

From within my Indigenous context and culture, the land acknowledgement is the beginning or the continuation of a relationship. It begins the task of making the connection between people and places by laying out some epistemic protocols and symbols that form the basis of a relationship. It is the relationship that becomes the vehicle of change. If there is no relationship, then Indigenous communities cannot engage. Furthermore, the land acknowledgement conveys significant information that helps visitors to position themselves in terms of identifying how they might connect to this place, this land that is being acknowledged. It does not exclude their own lands of origin but is an invitation to bring visitors into a space where their land can also be greeted and acknowledged. That happens when people respond to the land acknowledgement with their pepeha.

There are a number of decolonizing elements that are also part of the land acknowledgement, especially in academic institutions that are so deeply implicated in the colonization of Indigenous peoples. Academic institutions represent political, economic, social, environmental, and cultural exploitation and expropriation of Indigenous peoples. Expressing a land acknowledgement is a potent recognition of the intellectual, material, moral, and symbolic presence of these institutions on lands once occupied by Indigenous peoples. It is, in a decolonizing framework, a necessary reorientation to place, to the lands these institutions stand on, and to the colonial history written and witnessed in the land. It has taken hundreds of years in some places for those acknowledgements, which take less than five minutes to express, to occur. The very fact that it has taken so long for academic institutions to give a land acknowledgement indicates how symbolically significant it is for them to say it.

The land acknowledgement signals what ought to be a healing, restorative, and reconciliatory process that engages in institutional transformation that influences all aspects of knowledge, teaching, and research. Can words heal? Of course they can, but not on their own. Actions and change must be wrapped around the acknowledgement. The land acknowledgement is about being seen, recognized, and honored. Remember that for us, it's merely the first utterance, the beginning of the telling of a story, the beginning of a process, the signal of intent. To do anything less is to knowingly perpetuate colonialism.

When applied in an institutional context, the land acknowledgement is often expressed as a statement, a declaration of intent, high on symbolism and effort. It is, and ought to be, intentional. As institutions begin a journey of Indigenous recognition, the land acknowledgement may seem like a small first step, a sign of something greater to come. Gaining support to express land acknowledgements in official contexts can come about through the hard-fought struggle—taking enormous effort of a generally minority group of Indigenous scholars, students, allies, and communities. The land acknowledgement carries the weight of expectations that most institutional practices that are taken for granted are never measured by, such as whether a practice is inclusive of every group and individual in society, or crosses the line between religion and secular education, or is delivered by someone of a specific gender. The land witnesses those anxieties. The land is the home of all human beings. Acknowledging the land is the most simple and yet most profound act of humility and respect that humans can offer. We need institutions to engage in that genuine act of humility and respect. Perhaps then, relationships can form and changes can occur more rapidly.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



**Linda Tuhiwai Smith, PhD**, is a Distinguished Professor at Te Whare Wānanga o Awanuiārangi in Whakatane, New Zealand. She is Māori and from Ngāti Awa, Ngāti Porou, and Tuhourangi. Distinguished Professor Smith is known internationally for her work on decolonising research methodologies, Indigenous education, and kaupapa Māori. She was the founding co-director of Ngā Pae o Te Māramatanga, the Māori Centre of Research Excellence, and has held several senior academic roles at the University of Auckland and Waikato University. She is a fellow of the American Education Research Association, a fellow of the Royal Society of New Zealand, and an honorary international member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. Distinguished Professor Smith is a companion of the New Zealand Order of Merit.