

Section II

Growing Perceptions

PRAXIS B

THE OBLIGATIONS OF OUR ECOLOGICAL RELATIONS:

A CHALLENGE FOR LAND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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This short praxis offers reflective questions to help readers move beyond performative land acknowledgments toward concrete practices that reanimate land and shift from temporal to spatial thinking in order to interrupt patterns of multispecies and colonial violence.

Challenge 1: Reanimating the Lands We Acknowledge

Wider modes of knowing life, which is the topic of this collection, invite us to be experimental, creative, and expansive in our thinking around land acknowledgments. In our short reflection, we challenge readers to move beyond the performative and human-centered tendencies of acknowledgments toward responsible enactments of our obligations and ecological relations to land. This includes reconsidering the reciprocal giving *and receiving* of care from land as a living, knowing, and animated being, as well as from the Indigenous peoples and nonhuman entities who make a place home.

At their best, land acknowledgments are attempts to reveal settler colonial relations of power, the fact that we live on violently settled terrains, and the colonial erasure that has historically dominated the space and its human and nonhuman beings.

Land acknowledgments as they currently exist, however, are primarily performative, a way to demonstrate “wokeness.” In that pursuit, they often work to assuage settler anxiety and white guilt at the expense of true anti-colonial thought. It is easy to stand in front of a crowd or post a statement that simply states the

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current conditions that settler colonialism has constructed. Doing so provides an avenue of expression without requiring further action or accountability for either the speaker or the listener. It is far more challenging and time-consuming to work with Indigenous peoples and ecologies towards a future where land acknowledgments no longer need to exist.

Perhaps, as a consequence, this leads to land acknowledgments' second shortcoming, namely the human-centered approach they take in relationship to land. Often, land acknowledgments use a framework of stewardship to describe Indigenous peoples' roles and relationships to land. Furthermore, stewardship is often framed as the ideal form of relationality non-Native peoples should aspire to. This anthropocentric approach denies the complex and diverse ways nonhuman animals and beings care for land, and, importantly, how the land cares for us. Anthropocentric approaches to land acknowledgments are unable to properly conceptualize the eco-terror settler colonialism has wreaked upon the natural world, and how this has severed relations between land, beings, and peoples.

This leads us to what we believe is the most critical limitation of land acknowledgments: the inability to conceptualize land as anything beyond an object. By de-animating and sterilizing land, acknowledgments often obfuscate the relationality and reciprocity of land as a living being, and subsequently cannot ever fully confront the history of colonization, nor the "terrestrial intelligence that lies beyond our human knowing and grasping," as Chickasaw poet Linda Hogan writes (1995, 11). Across centuries, land has come to know the horrors of dispossession, genocide, and enslavement; it has been witness to the worst humanity has to offer. When they perpetuate the de-animation and objectification of land, land acknowledgments reinforce the processes of settler colonization that render such knowledge meaningless. Hogan's affirmation of "terrestrial intelligence" reminds us that as a living being, land remembers and retains beyond the human capacity for H/history. That is, land asserts the falsity of authoritative claims to the past at the same time that it transcends and exceeds the linear way of remembering that humans often embrace. Thus, land acknowledgments, in their de-animation and sterilization of land, can never allow us to mourn *with* the land the violence and terror it has been made to know, nor do they allow for the celebration of land's regeneration under such precarity.

Our first challenge for readers is to think beyond the human and begin noticing how the lands you live on are animate, vibrant, and full of life and life-giving power. Thinking beyond the human requires us to get dirty with land, in order to, as Anishinaabe scholar Melissa Nelson says, "embody an ethic of kinship so needed in the world today to address ecological and cultural challenges" (2017, 232). If we are to imagine a future that does not require land acknowledgments, we must begin to think otherwise. Kinship allows us to develop a relationship to land that embodies reciprocity. Kin are who we look out for and who look out for us.

Questions for Reanimation:

- How do the lands you live on care for you? How do you care for them?

To deepen our engagement with these questions, we will focus on spatiality to more fully understand land as genealogical kin and the obligations of our ecological relations.

Challenge 2: The Temporal Nature of Land Acknowledgments: Thinking Spatially Allows Us to Think Relationally and With Reciprocity

While land acknowledgments are often attempts to acknowledge physical space, we find that land acknowledgments are loaded with temporal implications that, on the one hand, deaden and objectify land, its beings, and sometimes even its peoples, and, on the other hand, assume a static settler future. This settler future becomes apparent in two primary ways that we touched upon in the first challenge: land acknowledgments rarely allow for a practice-based response, but are often solely performative, and they very rarely gesture towards ways to disrupt or challenge the present state of settler colonialism, assuming this state will continue into the future. We assert that thinking spatially can move us beyond a settler future.

To do this, we bring Standing Rock Sioux scholar and activist, Vine Deloria, Jr. into this space with us. Among his many important, field-forming insights, Deloria's critique of time and linear temporality is particularly profound in that he connects Eurocentric notions of linear, progressive temporality to a distorted relationship with land. He writes, "If time becomes our primary consideration, we never seem to arrive at the reality of our existence in places" (1994, 73). In other words, Deloria cautions against a singularly temporal framework because of the ways in which it can abstract the physical, material, tangible realities of place. By thinking past the idea that settler societies operate teleologically, wrongly asserting that society is moving within a framework of "progress," spatial thinking can productively engage histories of colonization and racialization. Consequently, we can, as Deloria suggests, come to understand ourselves in relation to the spaces and places around us. For example, storytelling prompted by a tree or other marker in a specific geographical location situates the storyteller and listener spatially through a process of place-making and memory. That triad—tree, storyteller, and listener—can only fully understand that story through the place that bore it. From such a grounded point of view, we can prioritize our ecological obligations with the purpose of recognizing and being responsible to the livingness of the land and other nonhuman relations.

As Deloria argues, "Spatial thinking requires that ethical systems be related to the physical world and real human situations, not abstract principles, and are believed to be valid at all times and under all circumstances. One could project, therefore, that space must in a certain sense precede time as a consideration for thought" (1994, 72). Thus, rather than emphasizing the temporal here and now of settler colonialism and assuming this will continue—as land acknowledgments often do—thinking spatially, in its emphasis on the physical, real world, can point us towards challenging a settler colonial future. Settler colonialism within a liberal multicultural society tends to view itself as moving through time toward an ever-perfecting future. Focusing on time and progress obfuscates the material realities

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of settler colonialism—its exploitation, its violence, and its destruction. A focus on temporal progress likewise obscures what we know about a settler colonial future, namely, the violence and terror settler colonialism has wrought upon the land, which would lead to an unlivable future. When land acknowledgments do not think spatially, such a future remains unchallenged and the movement through time drags us further into a world of colonial death and decay.

Thinking spatially, as a methodology of grounding and materializing relations of land, allows us to see how we are dependent upon land, literally formed from the land, and that, therefore, these relations with land are ongoing, reciprocal, and genealogical. Thinking spatially might mean that instead of acknowledging land, we tell grounded stories of place that account for complex histories, make clear our obligations and relations, and animate and enliven land and its beings, all while not assuming a settler future of further destruction. These spatial approaches can gesture toward a future when land acknowledgments are no longer necessary, because they work towards an Indigenous futurity that fulfills the aims of the landback movement where land is always already known to be a relation.

Questions for Spatialization:

- What story can you tell about a place to illuminate a complexity of its history?
- Do you have any experiences that awakened you to an obligation or relation with the land or its inhabitants?
- How can animating land in a new way challenge futures of ongoing destruction?

Ultimately, part of our obligations to ecological relations is making this way of spatial thinking a practice that goes beyond a chapter in a book or recited land acknowledgment. This can, and, we challenge, *should* be an ongoing responsibility to land as a genealogical relation. How have you been formed through land? We invite you to find these stories and share them. Through our stories, located in the place and space that situates our intimacy with land, we can come to understand and fulfill our obligations to ecologies.

Bibliography

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