

October 25, 2021

To support the Peter Holleley presentation to the October 25, 2021, Toronto Public Library Board meeting in respect to Agenda item #1, **Call to Order**, specifically the **Land Acknowledgement**:

Greetings, Honourable Toronto Public Library Board Members, Staff and public,

In my presentation to the Board last month, just three days before the **National Day of Truth and Reconciliation**, that new very special day for all Canadians “to Reflect and Respect”, I asked three questions of the City Librarian and Directors.

On behalf of the Board, *Chair Sue* asked staff to respond to my questions. I was pleased that soon after, *Pam Ryan, Director, Service Development & Innovation*, sent me a full response, quite a detailed overview that referenced current virtual programs and reinstatement of face-to-face programs that may include Indigenous Initiatives “as pandemic restrictions permit.” Thank you for this, Pam.

While it's nice that TPL has 11 staff to lead its Indigenous initiatives and an Indigenous Advisory Council is supported, it is unfortunate that all of their work is done in secret which results in a polished “this is what the people need” top-down program rather than *grass-roots self-directed “programs of the people” visibly led and enacted by First Nations, Inuit and Metis people*. As I've discovered over 22 months, there's no place in TPL decision-making for public input and, particularly on Indigenous matters, this closed-door policy contradicts the very essence of the meaning and importance of the word “reconciliation” ... at all its levels, coast to coast to coast.

Nevertheless, I do appreciate the opportunity to “add my five cents worth” in these Board meeting presentations and I ask Board Members, Directors and Staff to review and consider the two attached copy-and-pastes from two CBC.ca/news articles last week (or just follow the links to the originals):

1. Under the titles, “*What's wrong with land acknowledgments, and how to make them better, 5 First Nations people weigh in with their thoughts, advice and expectations*” one can clearly see the room for improvement, building relationships that reconcile.
2. While the second piece “*Our superficial view of diversity will only lead to cultural assimilation*” focuses on Muslim communities, its urging that “*True diversity is accepting and embracing individuals who are nothing like you*” can usefully encompass Indigenous communities too.

Thank you all for your attention.

Best wishes,
Peter Holleley
TPL Customer and Toronto Ratepayer

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What's wrong with land acknowledgments, and how to make them better

<https://www.cbc.ca/news/indigenous/land-acknowledgments-what-s-wrong-with-them-1.6217931>

Posted Oct 21, 2021; an Indigenous piece by Ka'nhehsí:io Deer

5 First Nations people weigh in with their thoughts, advice and expectations *<usefull!>*

They've become so commonplace that you'll hear land acknowledgments at the start of hockey games, during academic conferences and even written at the bottom of corporate email signatures.

In an era of reconciliation, they're political statements meant to recognize First Nations, Inuit, and Métis territory, however many Indigenous people argue they've grown to become superficial, performative — and problematic.

CBC Indigenous spoke with five First Nations people about the issues they see, what they expect when others make land acknowledgments and advice on how they can ring less hollow.

Make it meaningful

For **Ta7taliya Michelle Nahanee**, who offers workshops on how to give territorial acknowledgments, land acknowledgments shouldn't be copied, pasted and read statements but rather meaningful personal commitments. Nahanee is Sḵwxwú7mesh (Squamish) from Eslha7án (Ustlawn) in B.C.

"I don't tell people which word to use, but I ask them to consider each word critically," said Nahanee, founder and CEO of the Vancouver-based business Nahanee Creative, a company that provides education and awareness to promote social change.

"I want people to be able to back up what you're saying, truly believe in it, and be ready to answer the question when someone criticizes you."

That also means taking the time to research specific names of nations rather than sweeping generalizations and being cautious of subtext.

Even though they're called land or territorial acknowledgments, Nahanee said using the phrase "I acknowledge" can imply that it's not true.

"You wouldn't say, 'I acknowledge that my hair is brown, my eyes brown.' You just are on the land of these peoples," she said.

It's also important to keep the wording in the present tense, she said.

"A tool of colonialism is to keep us in the past tense," said Nahanee.

"To speak about your territorial acknowledgment in the past continues that dominant narrative."

Do the work

Hayden King, who is Anishinaabe from Beausoleil First Nation in Ontario, helped write Ryerson University's land acknowledgment in 2012. It's something he said [he now regrets](#).

King said some of the problems he sees in Toronto is that land acknowledgments are simply inaccurate, include the same nation multiple times under different terms, or misinterpret treaty concepts such as the Dish With One Spoon into a metaphor of a "multicultural utopia."

"There's a ... sort of historical untangling that's required to do this right, well and in a genuine way," he said.

"It really actually becomes harmful to the actually existing Indigenous nations that are still trying to negotiate and unravel their diplomatic relationships with each other."

King wants to see institutions, organizations, or whoever plans on making a land acknowledgment to collaborate with and support Indigenous communities.

"A land acknowledgment should be an obligation," said King.

That doesn't always have to be something that is public, either, he said.

"Do the internal work before you decide to step out into the world with your reconciliation mime. Do something different, actually work with Indigenous communities in a meaningful way."

Action is required

That sentiment was echoed by **Devon Saulis**, a member of the Tobique First Nation who lives in Ottawa.

"It's the very bottom layer you can do," she said of land acknowledgments.

"Actions speak louder than words."

Like King, Saulis said she's personally not a fan of land acknowledgments because of their performative nature. Even when acknowledgments point to wanting to build better relations and future with Indigenous people, she said, often institutions or organizations fail to put action to those words.

"You can have the nicest, most beautiful and most respectful land acknowledgment of all time but if you have no actions to back up your words, then why are you bothering?" said Saulis.

"If you're going to explicitly say in your land acknowledgment that you want better relations, then you have to prove and you have to show consistency and that you're actually doing those actions."

For **Claudette Commanda**, an Algonquin elder from Kitigan Zibi, Que., the issue boils down to the concept of land back.

"Are they ready to give us back our land? There has to be absolute action behind it," she said.

"Not just saying that we're scoring a brownie point on our Truth and Reconciliation Commission report card. There's much more to just words."

A first step to building relationships

When it comes to action, **Kahsennoktha George** wants to see companies and institutions participating in systemic change.

She is from Kanesatake in Quebec and is the ambassador and education and mobilization officer for Mikana, a non-profit organization that works for social change by educating different audiences on the realities and perspectives of Indigenous peoples.

"A starting point would be to initiate some kind of sustainable relationship with the people that you're going to be acknowledging," said George.

"The problem is that there are people, groups, institutions and systems that are benefiting from the continued land dispossession of Indigenous peoples while making territorial acknowledgments."

Despite the problems with land acknowledgments, George wants people to continue making them. She views them as opening the door toward decolonizing practices, reconciliation, or bridging awareness into action.

"It's still the beginning of some kind of conversation," she said.

Ka'nhehsí:io Deer is a Kanien'kehá:ka journalist from Kahnawake, Que. She is currently a reporter with CBC Indigenous covering communities across Quebec. Email her at kanhehsio.deer@cbc.ca

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Our superficial view of diversity will only lead to cultural assimilation

<https://www.cbc.ca/news/opinion/opinion-pseudo-diversity-token-minority-assimilation-1.6217039>

Posted Oct 21, 2021; an Opinion piece by Narjis Karani.

True diversity is accepting and embracing individuals who are nothing like you <yes!>

Our current view of diversity relies on and is mainly measured through external character traits, such as race, ethnicity, and gender. These traits are visible and merely create a visual diversity.

This superficial, flawed view of diversity (or pseudo-diversity) inevitably leads to and encourages tokenism while also prescribing a narrative for the ideal or model minority.

In order to remain within the boundaries of such a narrative, minorities inadvertently feel obliged to signal acceptable beliefs, behaviours and practices. Eventually, this leads to assimilation through loss of language, cultural traditions and religious practices, resulting in the elimination of true diversity.

It's not surprising that public demands for representation within our workplaces, our government and the media have pressured organizations to bring diversity and inclusion (D&I) strategies to the forefront of their mandate.

But these strategies are not based on a holistic understanding of diversity. They are implemented and measured through inappropriate and incomplete metrics.

For instance, organizations often use an identity declaration form, which simply asks about an individual's physical character traits, such as gender, race, and ethnicity. This practice of utilizing only superficial metrics to measure diversity within an organization has become our entire view of diversity.

As you can imagine, the acceptance of pseudo-diversity as a norm within public discourse has significant implications on minorities.

Acceptable vs. unacceptable differences

It ingrains within minorities a deep understanding regarding the acceptable level of diversity and the permitted type of differences. It imposes the idea that superficial differences like race, gender or ethnicity are indeed acceptable, while differences in their practices, beliefs or values are intolerable.

This undoubtedly prompts minorities to change their behaviours, thoughts, practices, traditions and speech in order to (virtue) signal compliance.

Minorities are also often asked questions that assess their level of religious and cultural differences: "I know you're practicing, but you're not, like, that religious, right?" Or minorities are complimented, with comments such as, "She's faithful but doesn't wear her religion on her sleeve." These questions and comments enforce the boundary that defines an acceptable versus an unacceptable difference within the mainstream view of diversity.

This further separates minorities from their real identity, leaving only visual differences and superficial diversity. Over time, compliance with pseudo-diversity will result in cultural assimilation, rather than the preservation of true diversity.

It's crucial to recognize that the system of pseudo-diversity not only encourages tokenism and creates a path to assimilation, it also rewards those that follow this path.

The assimilated minority is the model minority. The celebration of the assimilated model minority continues the cycle of virtue signaling. It creates an environment that leads minorities to believe that their cultural background and historical struggles are irrelevant, or simply another hurdle to overcome.

It dictates that success, prosperity and the shattering of the glass ceiling is attainable, conditional upon your ability to assimilate with the majority and signal it. I refuse to believe that acceptance of minorities within society based upon their similarities can ever be true diversity.

What is true diversity then?

True diversity is accepting and embracing individuals who are nothing like you. It encompasses the differences in one's physical characteristics as well as the differences in values, upbringings, cultural practices, traditions and religious beliefs.

Keeping this in mind, it's essential that we shift the mainstream view of diversity. Acknowledging the idea that we as individuals may have material differences is the first step in accepting true diversity and embracing minorities.

In addition, we must ensure that organizations develop adequate metrics to measure true diversity and create environments that allow minorities to exist as their holistic and authentic selves. For instance, workplace accommodations that support members of the Jewish community to leave early on Fridays for Shabbat or provide appropriate prayer spaces for Muslims.

Minorities must play a role in addressing pseudo-diversity. We should not allow ourselves to become a hollow representative token. Take the example of the former member of parliament Celina Caesar-Chavannes, who resigned when she recognized that her position within cabinet was merely to act as a token of representation for her party.

'So what if we're different?'

In addition, minorities must stop using signaling language such as "We're just like you, except for the colour of our skin" or "We're just like you, except for the curls of our hair..." Instead think, "So what if we're different?"

It's imperative for minorities to realize that if they continue this assimilation exercise, over time it will strip them of their true diverse identity.

Minorities will avoid practicing or passing down cultural traditions or religious practices because those practices and traditions might require accommodation; they might make others feel uncomfortable.

The American actress Gina Rodriguez once stated in an interview that her parents never taught her Spanish because they were afraid that their children would be made fun of for their Latino accents and it would prevent them from fitting in. **<Shame!>**

Minorities will lose the unique diversity that they once strived for simply because they unknowingly advocated for pseudo-diversity.

In the end, statements like "diversity is our strength" will become meaningless because minorities will have lost their diverse identity. There will be no diversity or strength to bring to the table.

Narjis Karani is a designated CPA, financial auditor and accounting instructor. She is also a board member of the Canadian-Muslim Vote, a national charity.

<The writer is Muslim and may be focusing on that but, surely, the above applies also to Canadian First Nations matters. PH>

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