

322. Land Acknowledgements Degrade Academic Occasions

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To complete their program, students in Masters programs must defend their dissertation before a small committee of evaluators and an audience of professors and fellow students. This is true at just about every university. Typically, what happens at a Masters defence is this. The candidate describes his project and then answers questions from and engages in discussion with members of the examining committee. Toward the end of the session, he or she answers a couple questions from audience members. Questions and answers completed, the candidate and the audience leave the room, the committee discusses the candidate's performance and takes a vote. Eventually, the chair of the session calls the candidate back into the room to hear the verdict.

Different departments flesh out these bones with their own customs and preferences. The role of the chair, the responsibilities of the different committee members, whether a committee member may enter the discussion another committee member is having with the candidate, whether the candidate or the committee sits at the front of the room—all might vary department to department and even supervisor to supervisor or candidate to candidate within a department.

My university, which always perceives mere variation as rampant chaos, recently adopted a slew of new practices for Masters defences, practices that are to be followed throughout the university, whatever had worked for departments in the past. Gone now are the various local ways and idiosyncrasies that helped give character to each particular session. None of the new imposed regularities are intended to promote high academic standards.

The thesis defence proper is now to begin with the chair inviting the Master's candidate to describe his or her project; the tradition in my department had been that the defence proper would begin with the candidate's supervisor pitching the candidate a soft-ball question, one that amounted to an invitation to describe the project. The session (not counting the committee's deliberation) is now not to exceed ninety minutes, and members of the audience are not to be given an opportunity to ask questions; formerly, we'd meet for up to two hours, and we'd open the session to the audience in the final half hour. The session is now to begin with the chair reading from an official script rather than saying a few words of welcome and informally introducing everyone. The chair's script contains both an acknowledgement of all the hard work everyone has put in and a land acknowledgement. We also get a required pee break.

In an article published in the April 2026 issue Newsletter of the Society for Academic Freedom and Scholarship, I explained for each of the innovations I've listed above (save one) the academic superiority of my department's old ways, ways common in philosophy departments at least until a decade ago ("[Bad Rules where No Rules are Needed](#)"). The main complaint I made, though, was that the new ways are mandatory. I would let those who favour the new ways run their session in accordance with them, even as I would continue to note how shabby the new ways are. What

matters most is that those who don't want to run a session as we are now instructed to do ought to be free to do things as they wish. All our overseers should care about is that the academic point of the occasion is served and served well. None of the new ways promotes the academic mission of the university (which is an excellent reason to prefer the former customs) and, for that reason, they ought not be mandatory university ways, even if there are good reasons to adopt them.

When I asked the dean and the associate dean why the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research won't leave departments and examining committees alone to run Masters thesis defences as they will, I was told that the rules are there to impose uniformity across campus. Not explained to me was why there should be uniformity, or why that there be uniformity is so important that it is appropriate for university administrators to impose it. Rules that protect the academic character and purpose of a thesis defence are rules enough, I would think. Anything else is anti-academic meddling.

One element within the new ways that I didn't discuss in the April SAFS Newsletter is the requirement that we sit through a land acknowledgement. In this present article I will explain why the chair of the session should not have to speak a land acknowledgement, and why a chair given to speaking land acknowledgements does well to discover whether the candidate and the committee would rather do without one. I'll end this article by noting that the tendency of university administrators and rule-makers to push projects not aligned with academic values speaks to how little commitment the people in charge these days have to the academic mission of our universities.

One good and sufficient reason that land acknowledgements be optional is that universities do best not to be participants in discussions of the matters of the day. A university that requires a land acknowledgement at university functions is taking a side in a current debate. In the case of my university, at least a few people who have studied the issue disagree that our university sits on unceded territory. The university should be silent whether it does, so that those wishing to pursue the matter may do so uninhibitedly and risk no official scorn for determining what they will.

An objection to the university's staying out of it is that there just is no staying out of it. By not acknowledging the provenance of the land, the university implicitly sides with those who deny whatever the acknowledgement seeks to acknowledge. This objection fails, though, at least if it is the university's *policy* to stay out of matters of the day. (A university would adopt such a policy in order to express its commitment to academic values and to its academic mission, and to promote unfettered discussion among professors and students.) By staying out of *all* disputes, a university is not implicitly siding with anyone. (Of course, for a university that picks and chooses which issues to speak on, staying silent on any particular matter might well reflect a choice of side. A university's speaking now and then at least suggests a political, social or economic motive for not speaking whenever the university is silent. People are right to be suspicious of universities that cover themselves with land acknowledgements but purport to stand on principle to remain silent about the Palestinians.)

No doubt I'm being naïve in assuming that in the case of land acknowledgements, the matter at issue has to do with the ownership, stewardship or provenance of university real estate. Land acknowledgements, those who would disabuse me of my ignorance will tell me, get their point

from their function, not from their truth. Whether they are true or false is irrelevant to their purpose. Their function (let's suppose) is to express the university's commitment to indigenous Canadians, whatever that commitment might involve and however strong it might be. In requiring land acknowledgements, the university is not really taking a position with regard to whose land it is, but is instead extending a welcome to indigenous people to participate in the university's life. The university's gesture is one of public relations or recruitment, matters which certainly are within the university's remit as an institution.

That land acknowledgements are not really about acknowledging anything, but are public relations exercises, may well be true; nonetheless, requiring a land acknowledgement at a thesis defence violates academic norms. For the chair of the session, his being required to speak a land acknowledgement is an instance of compelled speech; for the rest of us, we're a captive audience. Moreover, professors who would rather not speak one are thereby barred by the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research from chairing sessions. A willingness to make land acknowledgements is, then, an ideological test for an academic office. Can't we who object just stay home, then, as we might do for convocation and other university occasions? No, we can't, at least if we are the candidate or one of the committee members.

Land acknowledgements, whatever institutional purpose or significance they might have, have no academic significance. Because they have no academic significance, setting aside time for one affects the atmosphere of the session. They are like little yelps and yaps when we're trying to do something serious. Why not begin with O Canada, or a prayer, or a reading of the latest hockey scores? Land acknowledgements, singing O Canada and the rest express disdain for the reason for which we have assembled. For a university to require a land acknowledgement is for it to require that the tone of the meeting be lowered.

I take the above argument, that including a land acknowledgement degrades the session because it deflects attention from the academic business at hand, to be the strongest argument against requiring land acknowledgements at thesis defences. The meeting is an academic meeting, an academic engagement with an academic purpose: specifically, to test the cogency of a piece of academic work. Now, if a chair (or the candidate or a committee member) wishes off his own bat to speak an acknowledgement, when there is no requirement that he do so, well, fine, speak it and we'll move on. Part of the academic ethos is that we tolerate irrelevance, at least to some degree, when it comes from an individual, so long as we can return to our academic engagement soon enough. The university's requiring that someone speak an acknowledgement, though, and its requiring that the rest of us sit through it, amounts to our institution, which we should be able to assume will protect and sustain our academic endeavours, telling us that the academic purpose of a thesis defence is just one among various others of its many concerns and commitments.

Chairs whose preference for issuing land acknowledgements is stronger than their will to honour the academic nature of the occasion should be free to follow their preference, I've said. Even so, they should first consider what the candidate and the supervisor wish. Speaking a land acknowledgement against objections from the people to whom the session means the most amounts to an obnoxious display of wilfulness.

I've not mentioned a common complaint regarding land acknowledgements, the complaint that they are mere words never conjoined with relevant, substantial actions, such as returning the land or paying rent on it. The complaint is fair, and might even be of academic moment, in that insincerity is an academic vice. I haven't raised this complaint, though, for it is mainly the requirement that concerns me. No one should speak a land acknowledgement, but tolerance is virtue; certainly, though, land acknowledgements should not be required elements in any academic exercise. (I've also not mentioned how off-putting is the mawkish solemnity with which land acknowledgements are offered and received. They invite eye-rolling, and then censoriousness toward the eye-rollers, especially from those who worked hard to resist rolling their eyes. I strain not to roll my eyes, and then I strain not to stare daggers at those who do. Why should my university want to lead me twice into temptation?)

An objection to my observation that a land acknowledgement is an intrusion by a foreign agent into an academic space is that a thesis defence is not only (perhaps not even primarily) an academic occasion. It is also, importantly, a ceremonial space and occasion. It is a ritual, and comes with the traditional trappings of a ritual, trappings that have no meaning apart from their association with tradition. We have gathered to celebrate the candidate and to take him across a threshold in his life to a new stage of his journey. The testing of an academic document that he has produced is the central event within his journey at this time, but it gains its meaning from the context of the ritual in which he is involved and the celebration in which that ritual culminates. Neither O Canada nor a land acknowledgement need be foreign to the course of the ritual; indeed, if one or the other is installed in the ritual by a competent authority, such as the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research, then it is integral to the affair.

One thing I found attractive in my teenage daydreams about one day being a professor was the lack of ritual and ceremony at universities. (How naïve!) Well, at least, I thought, it is easy enough for a professor to avoid rituals and ceremonies. You don't *have* to attend convocation, you don't *have* to show up to the official welcoming of the new professors. The ceremonial side of university life doesn't penetrate into the academic world of thinking hard about difficult matters alongside others who are thinking hard about difficult matters. The ceremonial side needn't penetrate the academic world, but it has done so more and more over the years. The university of disputation, the university beloved by academics, has been transformed into the university of celebration. Disputing is bad manners, to be avoided as far as possible. Let us affirm and celebrate, not investigate, examine or criticize.

The objection I'm canvassing is that a thesis defence is properly and significantly a ritual and a celebration as well as (to some degree) the testing of an academic document for cogency. My response is to sigh a sigh of resignation. If that is how our administrators and enough of our colleagues think, there is little hope for the academic mission. My response is also to recommit to tending to the academic quality of any thesis defence with which I might be involved.

The reality of the contemporary university is that ritual and celebration supersede academic engagement. Much of the blame for this sad state of affairs, understood both generally and with regard to the academic deracination of our Masters programs, falls to our university administrators and legislative bodies, such as the academic senate (and the faculty union). I say blame, because I don't think that professors active in university governance have been reacting to outside pressures

as best as they can academically, accepting to compromise the academic mission of their institution only when necessary to keep the institution solvent and functioning. It is not governments that have forced equity, diversity and inclusion on universities, or suggested that affirmation and celebration would serve the public better than study, criticism and disputation. Our administrators *want* to divert our universities away from their academic mission, and to give them new missions. For this reason, pointing out to them the anti-academic character and effect of their actions does not and will not make a difference.

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