

Language use in Indigenous-authored television series

Anna B. Whitney, Ashley McDermott, Therese Cerdan, Samantha Bloomstein, Meredith Randall, Monika Bednarek & Barbra A. Meek

Abstract. For much of telecinematic history depictions of Indigenous characters and languages have instantiated racist stereotypes that perpetuate White, colonial frameworks. However, a new generation of Indigenous writers, directors, producers, and actors use scripted performances to illuminate, contest, and reconfigure these representations, and ideally provoke new interpretations. Our paper examines how Indigenous screen creatives address the linguistic and representational erasures of dominant White, colonizing frameworks through the restructuring and performance of a (sub)genre of scripted speech: fictionalized land acknowledgements. Using discourse analysis, we examine land acknowledgements across five Indigenous-authored television series (two in the U.S. and three in Australia), focusing on how they diversify and complicate mainstream characterizations and bring in Indigenous discourses and perspectives. By “bending the rules,” characters (and authors) maintain the (sub)genre, but regain authority over it through such discursive refashioning. Our analysis explores how Indigenous screen creatives use language to transform, critique and/or reappropriate this (sub)genre. Ultimately, our research contributes to ongoing conversations about Indigenous language, discourse, and media’s role in transforming societal norms and structural injustices.

Keywords. semiotics; media; land acknowledgment; Indigenous

1. Introduction. Indigenous language practices have long been the backbone of American linguistics and salvage documentary work. However, the field’s foundational models of language and fieldwork have relied on ideologies of a monolithic, monolingual speaker, a homogeneous language community, and elicitation as the method of data extraction. Current Indigenous language practices across different contexts and media are often overlooked. Indigenous scripted speech is disregarded as linguistic data, except in instructional contexts. Institutional, academic conceptualizations of language fail to recognize spirituality, land, and ancestors (Tsikewa 2021, summarizing the LSA’s 2018 Natives4Linguistics workshop). In contrast, Indigenous screen creatives use language to address the linguistic and semiotic erasures of dominant White, colonial, and colonizing frameworks. We examine fictional television series’ versions of land acknowledgments, a type of formal speech event that entwines settler-colonial and Indigenous meanings, as one example of how Indigenous language practices produce different meanings that index Indigenous perspectives. We explore semiotic processes of overlay, which add detail to complicate and contradict already-rhematized forms or to return to that which has been erased. Through overlay, Indigenous screen creatives can reinforce Indigenous messages which may otherwise be lost in typical land acknowledgments.

2. Background. Originally intended as “statements of presence, center[ing] Indigenous priority,” recognizing ongoing colonial violence and continuing Indigenous presence on colonized lands and seen as a step toward decolonization, land acknowledgments are also criticized as tokenistic or performative, as they do not usually specifically acknowledge injustices or commit the speaker or audience to action, acting more like a disclaimer (Vowel 2016:1; Blenkinsop & Fettes 2020; Cooks & Zenovich 2021).

Land acknowledgements mark the beginning of a formal event by recognizing the Indigenous peoples whose land one occupies (Wark 2021). Increasingly, universities, corporations, and government agencies create acknowledgments for their organization, publishing them on their organization's website (called “Web acknowledgements”; see Wilkes et al. 2017). Land acknowledgements differ significantly across the globe, but still follow conventions of the genre enough to be recognizable as acknowledgments.

Widespread institutional land acknowledgements appeared in Australia in the mid 1990s largely due to state-sponsored reconciliation efforts (McKenna 2014; Perea and Solis 2019). In Australia, acknowledgements delivered by Indigenous Elders are a “Welcome to Country” while an Acknowledgement of Country is given by the chair of an event (McKenna 2014). The most common structure of an Acknowledgement of Country is based on the Reconciliation Australia model: “I would like to acknowledge that this meeting is being held on the traditional lands of the (appropriate group) people, and pay my respects to Elders both past and present” (Reconciliation Australia qtd in McKenna 2014) with variation on the wording describing the relationship between people and land such as “Aboriginal owners of the land,” “traditional owners of the land,” or “traditional custodians of the land” (McKenna 2014). The structure of a Welcome to Country is more variable, and the emphasis changes based on the Elder officiating.

Meanwhile, land acknowledgments in Canada started to become a widespread practice after the 2015 final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (Wark 2021). Land acknowledgements in Canada are more varied. A review of universities across Canada found several different emphases according to their location: land, unceded territory, and people; specific treaties and political relationships; multiculturalism and heterogeneity; people and territory; and openness to more action (Wilkes et al. 2017; Stewart-Ambo & Yang 2021). They are also more likely to explicitly acknowledge treaty relationships than Australian acknowledgements (Wark 2021). Though acknowledgments have varying stresses, many Canadian acknowledgments draw from universities as examples, with the Canadian Association of University Teachers even offering a guide based on the acknowledgements from several universities throughout Canada—though the guide is not intended to serve as a template (Wark 2021; Canadian Association of University Teachers 2023).

While in Australia and Canada land acknowledgments are widespread, prefacing events as diverse as sessions of government, children's school days, and hockey games, they are not quite as prolific in the United States. However, they are becoming more common, especially in educational settings (Stewart-Ambo & Yang 2021; Wark 2021; Marche 2017; McKenna 2014). In a brief discourse analysis of US university acknowledgements based on Wilkes and

colleagues' 2017 analysis of Canadian universities, Stewart-Ambo and Yang find that the most “common rhetorical approach involves honoring, respecting, and thanking Native peoples, their histories, and their stewardship as the traditional/original inhabitants of a territory” (2021:29). Colonization and decolonization are also included in this discourse, though less commonly (Stewart-Ambo & Yang 2021).

There is a tension between the message of the land acknowledgement and their purpose of acknowledging historic erasures and how they are employed. Before state-sponsored and institutionalized land acknowledgements grew in popularity, the first efforts to establish land acknowledgements in government proceedings and universities were led by Indigenous scholars and students. These acknowledgements were meant to “educate and build relationships of solidarity with settlers” (Wark 2021:194; Asher et al. 2018), with the hope that this practice would be widely adopted (Wark 2021; Robinson 2016). However, the way land acknowledgements have been adopted is controversial. They are often critiqued as “disclaimers” or “box-ticking exercises” and even compared to microwave warranties (Marche 2017; Vowel 2016; Wark 2021). They are accused of being a move to settler innocence, absolving institutions of involvement in colonial projects and not committing them to action. They are also seen as a means of rewriting Indigenous and settler colonial history and perpetuating stereotypes of Indigenous people (Anderson & Christen 2019; Hamilton 2015; D. Robinson et al. 2019; R. E. K. Robinson 2016, Tuck and Yang 2012).

3. Literature. Land acknowledgments are meant to be a tool for combating Indigenous erasure, yet they are full of “contradictory impulses” (Stewart-Ambo & Yang 2021:29). Overlay highlights the “contradictory impulses” (Stewart-Ambo & Yang 2021:29) erased in land acknowledgments circulating in White public space (Hill 1998, 2008).

Within White public space, the speech, actions, and thus representation of minoritized people are policed in ways that uphold White hegemony (Page 1999; Page & Thomas 1994; Hill 1998). Expanding on Page and Thomas's 1994 use of White public space, Hill explains that it is “a morally significant set of contexts that are the most important sites of the practices of a racializing hegemony, in which Whites are invisibly normal, and in which racialized populations are visibly marginal and the objects of monitoring ranging from individual judgment to Official English legislation” (Hill 1998:682). Important in Hill's definition is that the monitoring, surveillance, and patrol targets difference from an “invisibly normal” Whiteness; everything that deviates is pathologized or erased.

This erasure is part of a broader semiotic process that works to uphold the racializing hegemony (Irvine & Gal 2000; Gal & Irvine 2019). Irvine and Gal describe it as: “the process in which ideology, in simplifying the sociolinguistic field, renders some persons or activities (or sociolinguistic phenomena) invisible” (Irvine & Gal 2000:38). Within film and television, this is often erasure of linguistic variety and complexities in the lived experiences of Indigenous groups that do not conform to stereotypic images.

Rhematization and erasure are two processes that go hand in hand in formulating meaning and difference. In rhematization, “a contrast of indexes is interpreted as a contrast in

depictions”; particular features are taken as signs of some more pervasive, underlying feature, often thought to be iconic of a contrast between groups (Gal & Irvine 2019:19). Erasure is related in that the process causes phenomena to become invisible, especially those phenomena which contradict a rhematization.

The rhematized forms of film and television media that the public sees are most often products of White public space. To counteract this and regain space, Indigenous creatives must disrupt the erasures of that White public space. We argue that Indigenous creatives employ semiotic processes, particularly overlay, to highlight what is usually ideologically rendered invisible. Semiotic overlay is the “act of adding new, often disruptive, elements to WEIRD images and discourses” (Bednarek & Meek 2024:6). By reproducing the indexical relationships of tropes but then marking and adding new relationships, both overlay and erasure marking challenge dominant stereotypes circulating in White public space.

In land acknowledgements, Indigenous screen creatives use overlay to highlight the erasures of dominant, White, colonizing frameworks. Enough elements of the rhematized form of acknowledgements are used so that it is recognizable as such, but additional information is “overlaid” to highlight flaws or ironies. This overlay serves to point out the ways in which land acknowledgements are grounded in colonization.

4. Methods

4.1. LAND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS AS SPEECH EVENT. To analyze land acknowledgements, we take a semiotic approach to explore how the performance of land acknowledgements in our corpus of Indigenous-authored TV series differ from the genre's conventions. Land acknowledgments have become a well-known genre for opening formal events, much like acknowledging sponsors and singing a National Anthem at the start of sporting events. Some people assume land acknowledgments to be Indigenous acts and therefore a (linguistic) act of decolonization. While the structure can (and arguably should) vary, a typical land acknowledgement includes the name of local Indigenous group(s), a recognition of some colonial or pre-colonial past, and an expression of respect or acknowledgement. In the United States, land acknowledgements have become standardized within many institutions, such as colleges and universities. In such contexts, the institution itself is often juxtaposed against an Indigenous past. For example, many land acknowledgements at the University of Michigan begin with the following sentence, or one like it:

“The University of Michigan is located on the traditional territory of the Anishinaabe, Wyandot (Wyandotte), Seneca, Delaware, Shawanese (Shawnee), Miami, Sauk and Fox, and others.”

The institution is the perspective from which such land acknowledgements are given, and often first person pronouns vaguely reference back to this institution through the use of the plural (“We acknowledge...” rather than “I acknowledge...”), even when an acknowledgement is spoken aloud by a single individual. Typically, this is precisely how a land acknowledgment is delivered: by a single individual, usually with some authority over an event, speaking to the crowd at an event. There is usually no assumption that the acknowledgment was authored by the individual

delivering it, nor that they are the originator of the ideas. Additionally, land acknowledgments are usually authored entirely in English, with the occasional exception for names of Indigenous groups. Within the narrative of the acknowledgment, the past is usually characterized as Indigenous, with the future/present optionally characterized as colonial.

The genre is not only present across multiple contexts, but also recognizable and characterized by the hallmarks listed above. Although the characterization here is broad and not intended to capture the diversity that is possible in this speech act, this characterization will allow us to examine several examples. Working around this genre, we chose episodes from our corpus of Indigenous-authored TV series in which an actor performed some version of a land acknowledgment. In a corpus with thirteen shows, we focus on examples of land acknowledgments from *8MMM Aboriginal Radio*, *Reservation Dogs*, and *Rutherford Falls*. Methodologically, we take a semiotic approach, identifying words, phrases, and languages that are marked when compared to stereotypical, rhematized, performances of land acknowledgements. In many cases, these are instances in which speech has either or both Hollywood Indian features and non-Hollywood Indigenous features.

4.2. OVERLAY AS SEMIOTIC PROCESS. We posit overlay as a semiotic process that disrupts or reverses erasure and rhematization. Rather than simplifying a representation by removing elements, overlay allows us to add new elements or indexes into an already rhematized sign. In doing so, the representation is still recognizable for a general audience, but that representation is complicated. We find that characters can be individuated beyond the stereotype, or incongruous detail can be added to a stereotype, without inhibiting our ability to recognize the underlying images, and without necessarily disrupting the underlying stereotypes—however, it can make us more overtly aware of covertly rhematized types and the features associated with them.

To demonstrate the semiotic process of overlay, Bednarek and Meek discuss Comanche/Kiowa artist Nahmi A Piah (J. NiCole Hatfield), whose artwork uses overlay to "interrupt historic colonial photographs of Native Americans" (2024:6). The basis of much of Hatfield's work are photographs, such as those by Edward S. Curtis, who engaged in a kind of salvage ethnography via photography. Hatfield takes his solemn, sepia-toned photographs and paints over them in color. The original image is still recognizable, but the new layers remind us that in white public space, Indigenous people often seen as part of a tragic and distant past *instead of* a vibrant, living present

Beyond art, overlay is a common semiotic process. In mainstream media, this might look like combining two stereotypes in a way that does not undo either one. In the corpus presented in this work, overlay often takes one of two forms: 1. Layering unexpected features over colonial frameworks, or 2. Erasing a stereotyped feature from the representation and replacing it with something else. In the examples of land acknowledgements from our corpus, we find instances of both the addition of unexpected elements and the replacement of stereotyped features.

5. Analysis. The following analysis looks to examples from three shows to explore semiotic processes of overlay in land acknowledgements within Indigenous-authored television shows.

5.1. 8MMM ABORIGINAL RADIO. *8MMM Aboriginal Radio* follows the staff of the titular radio show, reinventing the office sitcom in a way that often sheds light on clashes between settler-colonial and Indigenous perspectives. In examples 1 and 2, a clear pattern emerges. Jake, the white manager at the radio station, performs a pre-written acknowledgment of country which is more or less identical in both clips. That acknowledgement of country does not commit to any specific action, and is rather basic. (Notice that it closely resembles the Reconciliation Australia example(s) provided in the Background section.) His Aboriginal coworkers respond by telling him he's being repetitive. Beyond the dialogue included below, they question the intentions behind such an acknowledgement and suggest more concrete plans for equity in the office, such as replacing Jake with an Aboriginal head of staff.

(1) *8MMM Aboriginal Radio* (Morton-Thomas et al. 2015)

- 01 JAKE: OK, welcome, everyone. Now, first of all, **I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we meet, past and present, the Central Arrernte people.**
- 02 LOLA: Thank you, Jakey.
- 03 JESSIE: **Oh god, you're not gonna do that every time we meet, are you?**
- 04 KOALA: Why? It's just respectful. I mean if you ask me, we should have been doing it from the very beginning.
- 05 JESSIE: Shh!
- 06 JAKE: Look, 8MMM is the proud voice of the Indigenous community, right? But we can go further. We can be the pin-up organisation for black and white relations, with 8MMM's very own Reconciliation Action Plan.
- 07 JAMPAJINPA: If we da pin-up peeps, then why this joint being run by the pinkies and why is Jessie still professional trainee?
- 08 DAVE: Hey, hey, hey, hey, there is nothing wrong with the training here. Very high professional standard. If people aren't progressing, well, I dunno, just draw your own conclusions.
- 09 JESSIE: We're an Aboriginal organisation. We don't need a reconciliation plan. Hey, we didn't invade your country.

(2) *8MMM Aboriginal Radio*

- 01 JAKE: No, no, no, that's the last thing they need. They're just suffering the last vestiges of a long history of brutal colonial oppression that them and their families have been dealing with for generations. We should be begging them for forgiveness. Welcome, everyone. First RAP workgroup meeting. **Um, OK, first of all, I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land, past and present on which we meet, the Central Arrernte people.**
- 02 LOLA: **You been already say that this morning, Jakey. You sound like a broken record.**
- 03 JAMPAJINPA: ((imitates record scratching))

Most often, acknowledgements of country and land acknowledgements are treated as unquestionable and formal speech acts. By inserting the Indigenous commentary that is not often otherwise invited, a process of overlay pushes us to reconsider land acknowledgments and

acknowledgements of country, especially when they are rote disclaimers used by white settlers who maintain positions of power.

5.2. RUTHERFORD FALLS. The show *Rutherford Falls* features a fictional Indigenous tribal group called the Minishonka, who, at times, use the well-documented, still used Indigenous language, Mohawk. In example 3, Terry Thomas, the CEO of the Minishonka tribal casino and a member of the tribe himself, is played by Canadian First Nations actor Michael Greyeyes, and he uses the Mohawk language strategically.

The scene begins with Mayor Deirdre Chisenhall (Dana L. Wilson) as she approaches a crowd to make a speech. She is interrupted by Terry when he attempts to give a land acknowledgment. Prior to the speech in this example, Deirdre had promised Terry time for his land acknowledgment, but she rushes to move past it when the moment comes. The two characters often have disputes and conflicts throughout the show's two seasons.

Example 3 features many of the elements of a rhematized land acknowledgement, but uses codeswitching to an Indigenous language to draw attention to the erasure of Indigenous languages in both television and the performance of land acknowledgments. For much of US telecinematic history, “Hollywood Indian English” (Meek 2006), a speech style marked with features perceived to be dysfluent, indexed “Indian” identity. This way of speaking was not grounded in actual Indigenous language practices, but created in television and cinema, and indexed Native characters as primitive and less sophisticated than white “American” characters (Meek 2006; see also 2020). In Example 3 from the television show *Rutherford Falls*, Terry Thomas, a leader in the Minishonka community, gives an unexpected land acknowledgement in his Native language at an event hosted by the town's Mayor. Use of an Indigenous language in the land acknowledgement unsettles expectations because it is not legible to an English monolingual audience—except for the mayor's name and codeswitched English phrases like “unfortunate genocide” and “unemployment” (Tremblay et al. 2022).

(3) *Rutherford Falls* (Helms et al. 2022)

[During a feud with Mayor Deirdre Chisenhall – the first black mayor of *Rutherford Falls* –Running Thunder casino CEO Terry Thomas, Minishonka, interrupts her to offer to give a land acknowledgement at a History Fair.]

- 01 TERRY: Many apologies. I was hoping to do a quick **Minishonka land acknowledgement**.
- 02 CROWD: ((clapping))
- 03 TERRY: I'd like to take a moment to acknowledge that we are currently standing on Minishonka land.
- 04 DEIRDRE: Beautiful. Okay.
- 05 TERRY: ((speaking Mohawk)) **Mayor Deirdre Chisenhall** ((speaking Mohawk)) **Chisenhall** ((speaking Mohawk)) **unfortunate genocide** ((speaking Mohawk)) **Mayor Deirdre** ((speaking Mohawk)) **so frigid** ((speaking Mohawk)) **Mayor Deirdre** ((speaking Mohawk)) **unemployment** ((speaking Mohawk))

06 CROWD: ((clapping))
07 MAN: Thank you!
08 CROWD: Io!
09 DEIRDRE: Io.

This example begins with a land acknowledgement that matches the basic rhematized form, but it continues on with a twist. Linguistically, Terry’s performance of the land acknowledgement disrupts a number of tropes associated with the genre and with Native Americans more broadly. As a result of language shift and general linguistic discrimination, one might expect an Indigenous language to be used in White public space in an emblematic way of greeting and introduction, and perhaps for naming Indigenous people/groups. Terry skips a greeting or introduction and instead launches directly into his version of a land acknowledgment. In his Minishonka-style land acknowledgment, Mohawk is the majority language rather than English which is marked as the minority language (however briefly). This situates monolingual English speakers—including Mayor Dierdre and much of the television audience—as mostly ignorant listeners who must piece together bits of a message that was overall not intended for their comprehension. When English is used, it is to highlight and link the mayor (and by extension the settler community) with the negative circumstances affecting the tribe (as in, their “unfortunate genocide”). Terry’s acknowledgement holds the settler community and its elected official(s) accountable in a way that, arguably, land acknowledgements were originally intended to do. Beyond merely naming Indigenous communities in remembrance of a pre-colonial past, Terry delivers a land acknowledgement that seems to suggest certain non-Indigenous elected officials are responsible for a settler-colonial present and its negative repercussions (“unemployment”).

The humor of this scene is found in the amplification of tension between English and Indigenous language, and the encompassing erasure of Indigenous language, which gains some sense of power in this brief moment. Terry’s speech makes it clear that a land acknowledgement can have vastly different meanings for Indigenous and non-Indigenous members of the community, with many layers of meaning left inaccessible to a non-Indigenous audience.

In sum, this example subverts the genre of the land acknowledgment. It mixes English with Mohawk (as the language of the fictional Minishonka nation in *Rutherford Falls*), creating a semiotic overlay which disrupts the genre and its rhematized perfunctory use. English is used for reference (to Mayor Deirdre) as well as negative evaluation, while Mohawk remains untranslated for both Deirdre and the television audience, as no subtitles are provided. The humorous effect that is created in this scene from *Rutherford Falls* calls into question the discourse of extinction that erases Indigenous languages from the media landscape, and Indigenous people from the physical landscape.

5.3. RESERVATION DOGS. These next two examples come from *Reservation Dogs*, a show about four teenagers coming of age in Indian Country Oklahoma. Although both examples keep some of the typical features of a land acknowledgement or formal speech event, they deviate from the rhematized form in specific and very salient ways to provide two different approaches to the genre.

In example 4, the main characters attend a Native American Reclamation and Decolonization Symposium. Old Man Fixico (Richard Ray Whitman) is called up to start the symposium with a ceremony, one of the most common roles and performances assigned Indigenous individuals in White public spaces and White media. His first action upon the stage is his refusal to use the microphone, creating a closer relationship with the audience while simultaneously distancing himself from the technology (and modernity) recommended by the non-Indigenous symposium organizer. He continues by asking everyone to rise and take hands.

Fixico then proceeds to announce, “The greedy whites took our lands.” Compared to the beginning of the scene, this statement is much less conventional and causes a physical reaction in much of the crowd: the whole room turns to look at White Steve (Jack Maricle), who appears to be the only white person in attendance. Rita (Sarah Podemski), one of the women running the event, clears her throat as if to indicate uncertainty and suggest they move on.

In the next portion of Old Man Fixico’s opening ceremony, pan flute music begins to play in the background. This addition creates a feeling of satire, as the music keys a seriousness and rituality, despite the potentially incongruous setting of a hospital cafeteria full of teenagers. Soft pan flute music is a stereotypical cinematic cue for Indianness that has been used countless times by non-Indigenous TV and film productions. Fixico goes on to call for the group to face each of the four directions—a well-known way of orienting towards space and place in many Indigenous communities, but one that is not typically considered a land acknowledgement.

As he instructs the audience to face the east, Fixico adds, “where our relative here is from as well,” referring to Dr. Kang (Bobby Lee), a character who is ethnically Asian but grew up in California. This addition is much to the discomfort of Kang, who seems offended at the connection made between himself and an assumed “homeland.”

(4) *Reservation Dogs* (Tremblay et al. 2022)

- 01 RITA: I would like to bring up Elder Fixico to start us off with an opening ceremony.
- 02 CROWD: ((clapping))
- 03 DR.KANG: ((points to the mic))
- 04 FIXICO: Oh, no no no.
- 05 DR.KANG: ((through his teeth)) Use the mic!
- 06 FIXICO: No. Would everyone please stand? Take hands. We stand here as a first people to walk on this land. **The greedy whites took our lands.**
- 07 RITA: ((clears throat))
- 08 CROWD: ((turn to look at White Steve))
- 09 FIXICO: ((clears throat)) Well maybe another time. We must honor the four directions. **Let us face the east. Where our relative here is from as well,** and greet our Grandfather Sun.
- 10 FIXICO: ((pan flute music plays)) Let us face the south and honor our southern relatives, Mexico and Central and South America. Let us face the north.
- 11 CROWD: ((chattering))

- 12 BEAR: Just pick a way pick a way.
 13 FIXICO: ((whispering)) Uh, I'm not sure...
 14 DR.KANG: ((whispering)) It's this way.

Old Man Fixico has now made two clear distinctions between his Native audience members as opposed to the white and Asian individuals in the space. In both cases, the call-out to another ethno-racial group is not dissimilar to what would be expected within a land acknowledgement – land acknowledgements often tie nearby individuals to the actions and homelands of their ancestors. What is unexpected, and what goes against the rhematized form, is that this call-out comes from an Indigenous person and singles out non-Indigenous individuals.

The ceremony concludes with the young adults in the audience comically trying to turn to face the different directions despite their interlocked hands. This adds not only humor, but a physicality and confusion to the scene. On many levels, the details added here disrupt existing binaries that are reinforced by rhematized ideas about land acknowledgements and about ceremony. Old Man Fixico's performance is both and neither: land acknowledgement and ceremony, serious and humorous, sacred and mundane.

After Old Man Fixico's introduction, the symposium continues on with other guest speakers. In example 5 below, a young Lakota online influencer Miss Matriarch, played by Amber Midthunder, begins by greeting her audience with a mixture of English and Lakota and by identifying herself in Lakota. While she starts her land acknowledgment adhering to the structure of the speech event, she quickly takes it in a new direction. She not only acknowledges the Caddo, the Osage, and the Muscogee, but also their Neanderthal relatives, the Dinosaur Nation, and Star People. The insertion of these additional groups is unexpected to the speaker's audience, evident in their confused reactions as the camera cuts to them.

The specific mention of "Neanderthal relatives" is likewise amusing given that Neanderthals were not native to any lands in the Americas. Land acknowledgements are used as a way to respect past and existing Indigenous people of the land, building on a pre-existing connection or relation between the audience and the land, yet the mentioning of dinosaurs and Star People unsettles the genre. One could argue these additions emphasize the relationality of land acknowledgements; rather than just tying a group of people to an area of land, Miss Matriarch's land acknowledgement also ties people to non-human and other relatives, "above and below earth."

(5) *Reservation Dogs*

- 01 CLINTON: I hope you're as excited as I am today to welcome two outstanding role models. I've been DMing them for the past two years and I'm excited for the opportunity to have them on our reservation. Miss Matriarch and Augusto Firekeeper. **Wobvcēces**. Aho!
- 02 MISS M8TRI@RCH: **Hau, hau. Ompetu washte** my young relatives. Miss Matriarch **imachiapelo**. I am a PhD student at Dartmouth. An auntie, a Beader, uh... a sister, and a friend. But before we get started today, I want to take a moment to acknowledge the traditional

caretakers of this land, the Caddo, the Osage, and the Mvskoke, of course. But before them were **our Neanderthal relatives**, so acknowledge them. And before that, even, **the Dinosaur Nation, Dinosaur Oyate**, ya know? Before that, **the Star People**.

- 03 AUGUSTO: Mm.
- 04 MISS M8TRI@RCH: Also, our **reptilian relatives, above and below earth**.
- 05 AUGUSTO: Mm ((nodding))
- 06 MISS M8TRI@RCH: Yeah. And the people who will come after us and take care of this land once we are gone, because someday, we will die. So just blessings everywhere. Uh... **Lilawolpela pilama ayelo** for having me in your sacred space today.
- 07 CROWD: ((clapping))

There is a clear dichotomy in the speech given by Old Man Fixico and the subsequent land acknowledgement delivered by Miss Matriarch. Old Man Fixico's speech event attempts to be ceremonial and serious, but it is instead subverted due to the uncomfortable comments he makes about race. In contrast, Miss Matriarch's land acknowledgment attempts to be solemn and "woke," but it comes across as performative and insincere given the character's background as a social media influencer. However, both speeches are meant to be performed in an almost absurd, satirical way.

In sum, these two performances upset expectations for traditional land acknowledgements by adding or overlaying unexpected features/elements. This calls attention to the controversies surrounding the message and intent behind land acknowledgements, demonstrated in the varying styles of delivery by these two characters. That is, the use of overlay in these scenes expands the messaging of traditional land acknowledgements which typically apply a simple calculus equating one group with one parcel of land, often only identifying one local Indigenous tribe with the piece of land that the speaker is currently standing on and reinforcing the colonial concept of property and ownership.

6. Discussion. The scenes analyzed in this paper play with legibility, genre, and audience, overlaying the expected with the unexpected. There are clear breaks from prior representation of Indigenous characters as depicted by white writers and producers for white audiences. There is no "Hollywood Indian English" (or "Tonto Speak") in any of these scenes; no one has to resort to the most demeaning and tired stereotypes to be legible to a white, settler-colonial audience. In fact, we see a mix of Indigenous language varieties alongside English varieties, shaping legibility for different audiences.

In the examples discussed above, overlay highlights the tension between the rhematized form of land acknowledgements and their intention by adding unexpected elements. The unexpected elements create new indexical connections which disrupt the stereotypic form of the land acknowledgment and also draw attention to dominant tropes and stereotypes.

8 *MMM*'s multiple acknowledgements of country, given by a white character with nearly the exact same structure as the generic template given by Reconciliation Australia, is overlaid with Indigenous commentary on the form, calling attention to its repetitive and formulaic nature. Meanwhile, in *Rutherford Falls*, Terry's use of unexpected land acknowledgements, given when he takes the floor from Mayor Deirdre during the history fair, disrupt expectations about scriptedness and make his audiences uncomfortable with reminders about "genocide" (example 3 line 5) and potential demands for action. The addition of Native language (example 3 line 5) also makes the audience uncomfortable, highlighting Terry's fluency in multiple languages that the audience cannot understand, and countering tropes of disfluent Native speakers.

In *Reservation Dogs*, unexpected unscripted additions to an Elder's opening remarks and the extreme extension of land acknowledgments in multiple dimensions draw attention to who is acknowledged and for what purpose. Old Man Fixico explicitly states "the greedy whites took our land" (example 2 line 6) as everyone turns to one of the only non-Native members of the audience. He also singles out Dr. Kang when he asks the audience to turn to the East, when he remarks "where our relative is from as well." (example 2 line 9). White Steve is taken to represent all settlers, and Dr. Kang is equated to everyone from the "East," like Indigenous people are often called on to represent their entire, diverse, communities. In Miss Matriarch's land acknowledgement later in the same episode, she adds Neanderthals, dinosaurs, Star People, and reptiles "above and below the earth" to a land acknowledgement, extending the acknowledgment temporally, spatially, spiritually, and extending who counts as kin (example 3 lines 2 and 4). Her remarks highlight relationships between people (and others) and the land as both historic and ongoing. Overlay in the examples above complicate colonial assumptions of landownership and problematize the relationships among people and land.

7. Conclusion. Overlay in these examples unsettles stereotypes both by adding in unexpected features (such as expanding the acknowledgment to include non-humans) and by pointing out missing "erased" features by adding them back in (such as the use of a Native American language). The effect is that the land acknowledgment speech event can be used to index settler colonial space – including the influence of settler-colonial space on land acknowledgments themselves. Overlay interrogates the target audience for land acknowledgments, the purpose they are intended to serve, and ways in which this space could be used to better serve Indigenous interests. There is also an effect of humor – in each of these examples, overlay helps create a parody that is not only legible but especially funny for certain Indigenous audiences.

Overlay does not undo the layers of meaning that exist beneath it, but it can tell us important things about those other layers of meaning. The examples analyzed here support the idea that land acknowledgements are a ritualized part of life in White public space rather than a linguistic act of decolonization. Overlay is one way that speakers can "bend the rules" around land acknowledgments, which in turn allows them to reassert their authority over this genre and potentially transform it.

References

- Asher, Lila, Joe Curnow & Amil Davis. 2018. The limits of settlers' territorial acknowledgments. *Curriculum Inquiry* 48(3). 316–334. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03626784.2018.1468211>.
- Anderson, Jane & Kimberly Christen. 2019. Decolonizing attribution: Traditions of exclusion. *Journal of Radical Librarianship* 5. 11452.
- Bednarek, Monika & Barbra A. Meek. 2024. 'Whitefellas got miserable language skills': Differentiation, scripted speech, and Indigenous discourses. *Language in Society* Online. 1–26. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047404523000994>.
- Blenkinsop, Sean & Mark Fettes. 2020. Land, language and listening: The transformations that can flow from acknowledging indigenous land. *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 54(4). 1033–1046. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9752.12470>.
- Canadian Association of University Teachers. 2023. Guide to acknowledging first peoples and traditional territory. Website. [LINK](#).
- Gal, Susan & Judith T. Irvine. 2019. *Signs of difference: Language and ideology in social life*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Helms, E. (Writer), M. Schur (Writer), S. Teller Ornelas (Writer) & L. Sher (Director). 2022. (August 31). History Fair (Season 1, Episode 5) [TV series episode]. In E. Helms, M. Schur, S. Teller Ornelas, D. Miner, M. Falbo (Executive Producers), *Rutherford Falls*. 3 Arts Entertainment.
- Irvine, Judith T. & Susan Gal. 2000. Language ideology and linguistic differentiation. In Paul V. Kroskrity (ed.), *Regimes of language: Ideologies, politics, and identities*, 35–84. Santa Fe: School of American Research Press.
- McKenna, Mark. 2014. Tokenism or belated recognition? Welcome to Country and the emergence of Indigenous protocol in Australia, 1991–2014. *Journal of Australian Studies* 38(4). 476–489. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14443058.2014.952765>.
- Meek, Barbra A. 2006. And the Injun goes "How!": Representations of American Indian English in white public space. *Language in Society* 35(1). 93–128. <https://doi.org/fbbp3f>.
- Meek, Barbara A. 2020. Racing Indian language, languaging an Indian race: Linguistic racisms and representations of indigeneity. In H. Samy Alim, Angela Reyes & Paul V. Kroskrity (eds.), *The Oxford handbook of language and race*, 368–397. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Morton-Thomas, Trisha (Writer & Creator), Danielle MacLean (Writer), Sonja Dare (Writer & Creator), Rachel Clements (Creator), Anna Cadden (Creator) & Dena Curtis (Director). (2015, June 3). Episode 6 (Season 1, Episode 6) [TV series episode]. In Andrea Denholm, Laura Waters, Sally Riley & Erica Glynn (Executive Producers), *8MMM Aboriginal Radio*. ABC Television.
- Page, Helan Enoch. 1999. No Black public sphere in White public space: Racialized information and hi-tech diffusion in the global African diaspora. *Transforming Anthropology* 8(1-2). 111–128.
- Page, Helan E. & Brooke Thomas. 1994. White public space and the construction of White privilege in U.S. health care: Fresh concepts and a new model of analysis. *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* 8. 109–116.
- Perea, Jessica B. & Gabriel Solis. 2019. Asking the indigeneity question of American music studies. *Journal of the Society for American Music* 13(4). 401–410. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1752196319000348>.

- Robinson, Dylan, Kanonhsyonne J. C. Hill, Armand G. Ruffo, Selena Couture & Lisa C. Ravenbergen. 2019. Rethinking the practice and performance of Indigenous land acknowledgement. *Canadian Theatre Review* 177. 20–30. muse.jhu.edu/article/716610.
- Robinson, Rowland Keshena. 2016. Whose land?: Performative practice and the analytics of territory. *Maehkon Ahpehtesewen*. Website. [LINK](#).
- Stewart-Ambo, Theresa & K. Wayne Yang. 2021. Beyond land acknowledgment in settler institutions. *Social Text* 39(1). 21–46. <https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-8750076>.
- Tsikewa, Adrienne. 2021. Reimagining the current praxis of field linguistics training: Decolonial considerations. *Language* 97(4). e293–e319. <https://doi.org/10.1353/lan.2021.0072>.
- Tremblay, E. (Writer), S. Harjo. (Writer), T. Waititi (Writer), & T. Chavez (Director). 2022. (August 31). Decolonativization (Season 2, Episode 6) [TV series episode]. In S. Harjo, T. Waititi, G. Basch (Executive Producers), *Reservation Dogs*. FX Productions; Film Rites; Piki Films.
- Vowel, Chelsea. 2016. *Indigenous writes: a guide to First Nations, Metis, & Inuit issues in Canada*. Winnipeg: Portage & Main Press.
- Wark, Joe. 2021. Land acknowledgements in the academy: Refusing the settler myth. *Curriculum Inquiry* 51(2). 191–209. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03626784.2021.1889924>.
- Wilkes, Rima, Aaron Duong, Linc Kesler & Howard Ramos. 2017. Canadian university acknowledgment of Indigenous lands, treaties, and peoples. *Canadian Review of Sociology/Revue canadienne de sociologie* 54(1). 89–120. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cars.12140>.