

If you work at a university, large corporation or left-leaning nonprofit or have attended certain [performances](#), you have probably heard a land acknowledgment, a ritual that asks you to remember that Native Americans were here long before the peoples of Europe, Africa and Asia. The [New York City Commission on Human Rights](#), for example, on its website “acknowledges the land politically designated as New York City to be the homeland of the Lenape (Lenapehoking) who were violently displaced as a result of European settler colonialism over the course of 400 years.”

The point is to make us more aware of the dispossession and violence that occurred in the establishment and expansion of the United States. But they’ve begun to sound more like rote obligations, and Indigenous scholars tell me there can be tricky politics involved with naming who lived on what land and who their descendants are. Land acknowledgments might have outlived their usefulness.

Instead of performing an acknowledgment of Native peoples, institutions should establish credible relationships with existing Native nations. In the United States, there are 574 federally recognized tribes, plus many state-recognized tribes and communities that own and manage land, operate social services and administer federal programs, much as counties and states do. They run tribal businesses and make small-business loans to their citizens. They provide jobs and revenue that help drive regional and rural economies. What they need from universities, corporations, nonprofits and local and state governments is partnerships that acknowledge and build on their continuing sovereignty.

Land acknowledgments arose in Australia, drawing from welcome-to-country ceremonies, performed when one Aboriginal group enters the lands of another. Canada’s 2015 [Truth and Reconciliation project prompted](#) widespread practice of land acknowledgments there. The movement in the United States, which did not result from a Native-led reconciliation process, has led to some particularly shallow and uniform versions.

The [Native Governance Center notes](#) that land acknowledgments often “become an excuse for folks to feel good and move on with their lives.” The journalists Graeme Wood and Noah Smith have criticized them as “[moral exhibitionism](#)” and [ethnonationalism](#). In an interview Keith Richotte Jr., the director of the University of Arizona’s Indigenous peoples law and policy program and a citizen of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians, told me that if land acknowledgments “are treated as the only or last step of one’s commitment to Indigenous peoples and nations, then they can become more harmful than beneficial.”

Land acknowledgments tend to reinforce the myth of Native disappearance and irrelevance. In calling attention to dispossession, they often miss the point that Native Americans survived and are having a renaissance in culture and sovereignty. The vanishing-Indian myth has deep roots in American history. As part of taking Indigenous land, 19th-century Americans found it useful to believe that Indians were fading away. They described precolonial North America as a wilderness — “occupied by a few savage hunters,” as President Andrew Jackson put it, who “were annihilated or have melted away to make room for the whites.” Jean O’Brien, a historian and citizen of the White Earth Ojibwe Nation, called it a “narrative of Indian extinction that has stubbornly remained in the consciousness and unconsciousness of Americans.”

Tribes are still here and have had to go to court to defend their remaining sovereignty and property, spending their revenue to buy back land that once was theirs. In 1996 the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians [bought back one of their sacred sites](#), the Kituwah mound, which once sat at the center of the Cherokee Mother Town, and the Osage Nation has saved the only ancient pyramid mound remaining in St. Louis by [buying its summit](#). In its 2020 *McGirt v. Oklahoma* decision, the Supreme Court ruled that the treaty-defined boundaries of the Muscogee, Cherokee, Quapaw, Choctaw, Chickasaw and Seminole nations remain in full force because Congress never disestablished their reservations. Yet the State of Oklahoma has continued to fight tribal jurisdiction over criminal cases. If tribes didn't have to spend revenue buying back land and defending their interests in court, they could use more of it on the health, education and criminal justice programs that benefit their citizens and their neighbors.

My colleague Amanda Cobb-Greetham, the founding director of the Chickasaw Cultural Center in Sulphur, Okla., and a citizen of the Chickasaw nation, told me that instead of lengthy discussions about whether and how to write land acknowledgments, institutions should engage in active and meaningful relationships with the Native nations that are now or were on the lands those institutions occupy. Florida State University and the Seminole Tribe of Florida have established such a relationship, which started with the tribe's involvement in [designing the mascot's regalia](#) but now extends to other partnerships, including creating a [Native American and Indigenous Studies Center](#).

Cities, counties and states could [share jurisdiction](#) of some of their lands and projects to tribes and work as partners. The Covid-19 virus hit reservations particularly hard in the early months of the pandemic, but because in the past few decades many tribes took over the management of their public health systems from the Bureau of Indian Affairs, many [tribal governments](#) ultimately had [better outcomes](#) than neighboring non-Native-majority counties. Tribes already partner with the federal government in areas such as [land and resource management](#), marking the [250th anniversary of the American Revolution](#) and [cleaning up](#) Superfund sites. Rather than mourn the past through land acknowledgments, institutions should expand these more practical efforts and work with modern Native nations as true partners.