



GESTURING TOWARDS DECOLONIAL FUTURES

Returning lands (GTDF 2023)

This set of depth education diagnostic exercises was created as a thought experiment for settlers to engage with some of the tensions and complexities that often emerge in discussions about returning land to Indigenous peoples in what is currently known as Canada. The set of exercises is grounded on the current context of Indigenous land dispossession in Canada and based on a fictional campaign to support Indigenous Nations to share governance of lands and have stolen lands returned to them.

Diagnostic exercises, like the ones presented below, are different from prescriptive exercises. Diagnostic exercises are meant to provoke different responses and to invite you to sit with the diversity and complexity of these responses within and around you. In this sense, they serve as a stimulus for inquiry, where your responses (how you are receiving and processing information and the emotions associated with them) become the real content of the exercise. The exercises were also designed to support you to familiarize yourself with some of the common dynamics that emerge when difficult issues are presented, like settler complicity in colonial violence or Indigenous aspirations for land back.

As you engage with the exercises, we invite you to try and observe the different and often conflicting thoughts and feelings that emerge within you in response. Rather than search for certainty, consensus, coherence or solutions/resolutions, try to hold space for conflict, complexity, uncertainty and ambivalence as you observe your responses. Ask yourself what you are learning from these observations about the individual and collective dynamics that emerge within and amongst settler Canadians when the issue of Indigenous land rights and land return is engaged.

Understanding the context of land occupation and Canadian sovereignty claims

It surprises many settlers to know that orders made by the Pope in the 15th century underlie Canada's claims to sovereignty. A series of these orders, known as "papal bulls," cohere under the Doctrine of Discovery, in which it was asserted that European powers gained sovereignty over non-European lands when they "discovered" them. Through the Doctrine, the sovereignty of Indigenous peoples living on those lands was denied, and the dispossession and settlement of those lands by Europeans was justified. The Doctrine has been the basis for Canadian sovereignty since its beginnings and is now enshrined in Canadian law; similar dynamics operate in the US. With the passing of Bill C-15 in 2015, the Canadian government pledged to harmonize its laws with the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, including an official rejection of the Doctrine of Discovery. However, the actual impacts of the Bill are still unfolding.

Today, reserves comprise 0.2-0.3% of all land in Canada. Yet even reserve land is not owned by Indigenous Nations; it is owned by the Crown, and Indigenous Nations are permitted to live there according to laws of the Indian Act. About [40%](#) of the land in Canada is covered by treaties between the Crown and Indigenous peoples. Because people frequently make a distinction between “treaty land” and “unceded land”, it is often [mistakenly understood](#) that “treaty” lands were “ceded” to the Crown by Indigenous Nations. However, many Indigenous Nations maintain that the treaties are more appropriately understood as nation-to-nation agreements that established the terms for shared existence on the land. By signing the treaties, Indigenous Nations did not commit to give up their sovereignty and they did not “sell” their land to the Crown. Today, many Indigenous Nations are still fighting to have their Treaty rights upheld and respected, alongside struggles to have their inherent rights upheld, often at great financial [cost](#).

While settlers often expect Indigenous peoples to speak with a coherent voice, as with all communities, there is significant heterogeneity both within and between Indigenous Nations. There are growing movements calling for decolonization, #LandBack, and [#CashBack](#) calling for the rematriation of Indigenous lands and the restitution of wealth that has been stolen from Indigenous peoples. These movements are often led by young people, but even amongst those calling for #LandBack, it means different things to different Indigenous people (and to different generations). One Indigenous youth leader [suggested](#) that regardless of these internal discussions amongst Indigenous peoples, “What is needed next is for non-Indigenous peoples to work on their relationship and reaction to giving land back.”

Text of poster of fictional campaign in support of shared governance and land back

Poster title: Reconciliation through justice

There cannot be collective healing or reconciliation without justice. Justice means repairing past wrongs in the present. We need to do the right thing. We are an anonymous concerned group of Canadian citizens and permanent residents who are raising awareness about our responsibilities as settlers on stolen Indigenous lands.

We recognize the injustices that Indigenous peoples were subject to in the past and that they are still subject to today. We acknowledge our debt to Indigenous peoples: our comforts in this place we know as Canada are made possible at their expense. We cannot move forward without some form of justice. As a gesture of reparations and redress, we are campaigning for three things:

- That more settlers, especially those without heirs, choose to leave their property in their will to local Indigenous Nations;
- That more settlers offer financial and other forms of support for Indigenous Nations to have their lands returned to them and their self-governance systems upheld;
- That land-based organizations engage in shared land governance. For example, in 2019 Parks Canada [pledged to](#) revise relevant legislation, policies, and guidance in ways that “respect Indigenous rights and worldviews, and enable implementation of shared stewardship at heritage places.” We think they need to go further to actually co-govern all Parks Canada lands with local Indigenous Nations. As part of this co-governance, we propose that for 50% of the time that parks are open, local Indigenous peoples have exclusive control of access to the lands for seasonal ceremonies, hunting and gathering, and intergenerational knowledge transfer.

Diagnostic Exercise 1: Identify your own internal responses to the poster

You are invited to pause and identify different intellectual and emotional internal responses to this fictional campaign. You can use the “bus within us methodology” for this exercise, where you imagine yourself as a bus with a driver and different passengers with conflicting views. The invitation is not for you to impose consensus or coherence, but for you to observe and learn from the dynamics between the “passengers” in order to learn to hold space for the complexity within you. Identify three different responses (or “passengers”) and observe the cognitive, affective and relational dimensions of each response, for example: What are the passengers thinking, saying and feeling? How old are they? What are their fears and desires? Where are they coming from? Can you connect them to people who you know (e.g., relatives, friends, former mentors, etc.)? Do they crave absolute certainties or can they tolerate or embrace complexity, uncertainty, and ambivalence? What kind of imagery would each passenger associate with the poster? How does their attitude (e.g., frustration, anger, guilt, self-righteousness, excitement, etc.) affect the driver of the bus? Who/what is each passenger accountable to?

Diagnostic Exercise 2: Mapping clusters of short responses to the poster

- a) *Read the responses to the flyer below, which were organized in clusters. Try to identify the criteria used to map the clusters. With these criteria in mind, place the responses that emerged on your bus into the clusters that you feel they belong to.*

Cluster 1

- Over my dead body.
- I can't believe they are asking for more, after all we have done for them! If anything, they owe us for all the improvements we have brought them.
- I'd better not say what I really think about this...
- I would do what they are asking, but what if Indigenous people just build casinos on the land?
- Can't you go bother someone else?

Cluster 2

- Good luck with that!
- They have a point, but it's not my problem; future generations can deal with it.
- Why are they asking me to do it? I am just an ordinary person, trying to get by. The government should return lands, not individual property owners.
- Sure, I'll do it - but only once everyone else agrees to it, too.
- I am not having kids and I can't afford to buy my own property; they can't take the parks - parks are all we have left.

Cluster 3

- I get it, but I'm disadvantaged, too, and I didn't create this problem.
- This is it, the rent is due, and it's about time. But collect it from the 1%, not me.
- I can't do much, but I can definitely re-tweet it.
- I am totally for it - if they support queer rights.
- This won't work now, but it is important for Indigenous young people to keep land back as a horizon of hope for the future. This hope was beaten out of older generations through the residential school system.

Cluster 4

- Indigenous people have been waiting for this for 600 years.
- Indigenous people can take care of the land better than us.
- In 30 years everything will be on fire and there will be no clean water. You might as well return all the lands, it won't make any difference.
- I feel the pain of everything. It is freaking exhausting. I don't want to be here, stuck with this inherited mess. If they want the stolen land back, then give it back.
- It is the right thing to do. For all of us. Period.

b) *Re-read the responses in each cluster and assign each response with the emotion associated with the five stages of grief (denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance), including your own responses.*

Diagnostic Exercise 3: Scanning for patterns in conversations

a) *Read the four conversations about the poster below and identify the types of demeaning and supportive patterns that emerged:*

- **Demeaning patterns:** paternalism, deficit theorization, tokenism, white supremacy, racism, bargaining, belittlement, arrogance, delegitimization, denial of responsibility
- **Supportive patterns:** acknowledgement of complicity, recognition of accountability, call for reparations, uplifting Indigenous knowledges, supporting the critique

Conversation A

Speaker 1: We have brought them progress and earned our right to be here. They should be grateful we civilized the savages - and it cost us a fortune to do that.

Speaker 2: Yea, nothing is ever enough for these people. What guarantees that Indigenous people will be happy with what they propose and not demand more?

Speaker 3: Who are these “concerned citizens” anyway? Are they working with local Indigenous groups? Why are they anonymous? What is their real agenda?

Speaker 4: I don't have kids and would actually be happy to leave my property to the local Indigenous peoples. But I worry they would just sell the land and misuse the money.

Conversation B

Speaker 1: These “responsible settlers” are out of their minds! They need to be shut down immediately before they spoil the minds of our children! This is worse than Critical Race Theory!

Speaker 2: But we don't have control over what our kids are exposed to - they can find everything on the internet and if they see we are against it, they will want to do it just to contradict us.

Speaker 3: I wouldn't worry, this is so extreme that no one will pay attention.

Speaker 4: I think you're stuck in the past, and in an outdated racist mindset - a lot has changed in the past few years, and younger generations are not going to put up with this colonial system. They will fight for what is right, whether you like it or not!

Conversation C

Speaker 1: Many of our parks are at risk of wildfires because of climate change and western-style fire management. Partly returning the land to the care of Indigenous peoples could reduce this risk, since they have more knowledge of their lands and how to adapt it to a changing climate.

just want to enjoy the spoils of capitalism and consumerism, like everyone else.

Speaker 1: Ok, but even if that were true, this disconnect happened because the lands were stolen in the first place. The knowledge is still there, with the Elders. Intergenerational knowledge transmission needs to happen on their land.

Speaker 3: Returning Indigenous lands to Indigenous people who really care about it and who have the knowledge to look after it better than we do is good for the land and ultimately for everyone. But who can guarantee that these lands won't end up in the wrong hands?

Speaker 1: If someone stole your car, you would want it back. It doesn't matter what you do with it once it's returned. Maybe you end up crashing it, or selling it. But the point is that it's your car, and you can do what you want with it. It's not for the thief to decide.

Speaker 3: But land isn't a car. It doesn't "belong" to anyone, including Indigenous peoples. That's what an Indigenous Elder told me once.

Conversation D

Speaker 1: Young people and families who love to enjoy the parks and lakes with their boomboxes and jet skis won't take lightly to losing access to the parks. They feel entitled to enjoy their carefree summer. The campaign would have more support if they advocated for Indigenous people to have exclusive access only in the low season.

Speaker 2: Indigenous youth should also be able to enjoy the summer, on their own land, following their own protocols and free from boom boxes, jet skis and the discomfort of the gaze of settlers. They have been waiting for this for a long time.

Speaker 3: They are waiting because their ancestors lost the battle. They need to get over it already and move on. This is everybody's land now.

Speaker 2: No, it's not. It's still Indigenous land. And they have been waiting because settlers have refused to give up what we stole. It's time for us to give it back. Now.

b) *We invite you to think about the impact of the demeaning patterns you have identified in this exercise on Indigenous individuals and communities who often have to endure them on a daily basis. These patterns are not rooted in the bad choices of individuals, but responses that are systemically sanctioned by the normalization, naturalization and legalization of the dispossession and destitution of Indigenous Peoples. These patterns are socially "wired" and mostly unconscious. To what extent do you think they are active and/or latent on your "bus"?*

Debriefing exercise: dipping in and diving deeper questions

Dipping in questions

1. What other responses do you think are likely to emerge amongst settlers in response to the flyer, but are missing from the lists above?
2. What do you think is the most likely distribution of responses in your professional context, in your family, amongst your friends, in your province, in the courts of law, and in your generational cohort (e.g. which are more or less likely to emerge and have wide support)?
3. Did some of the responses listed bother or resonate with you more than the others? If so, which ones and why? Were there some you felt ambivalent about?
4. Have you encountered other efforts to secure the return of Indigenous land? If so, in what context? How did you respond at the time? Would you respond the same today?
5. How would you respond if someone approached you with the poster and asked you to sign a petition in support? Would it depend on who the person was, and how they asked?

Diving deeper questions

1. What have you learned from observing your internal responses (i.e., your “bus”)? Were there any internal responses (passengers on your bus) that surprised you, and what (if anything) did you learn from this experience of surprise?
2. Did you find yourself immediately poking holes in the requests of the poster? If so, how did this manifest and where did this/these response/s come from?
3. How did this exercise differ from usual exercises where you are asked to either agree or disagree with an argument or proposition (rather than process different internal and external responses to it)?