



The Rematriation of Indigenous Place Names

by Christina Gray and Andrew Ambers

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CREDITS

AUTHORS

Christina Gray
Ts'msyen, Dene,
Lax Kw'alaams, Łutsël Ké

Andrew Ambers
Kwakwaka'wakw,
'Namgis and Ma'amtagila First
Nations

EDITOR

Hayden King
Anishinaabe,
Beausoleil First Nation

PROJECT COORDINATOR

Ash Vols
Métis

COPY EDITOR

Jasmine Galley
Anishinaabe,
Wiikwemkoong Unceded
Territory
& London, UK

DESIGNER

Dennis Pierre
Little Shuswap Lake,
Indian Band

ARTWORK

'Cliff Painting', 1988, 38' x 28'
Marianne Nicolson
Kwakwaka'wakw,
Musgamakw Dzawada' enuxw
First Nations

FACEBOOK

fb.me/yellowheadinstitute

WEBSITE

yellowheadinstitute.org

BLUESKY

[/miskoaki.bsky.social](https://miskoaki.bsky.social)

INSTAGRAM

[@yellowheadinstitute](https://www.instagram.com/yellowheadinstitute)

TIKTOK

[yellowhead.instit](https://www.tiktok.com/yellowhead.instit)



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ABSTRACT



Across Canada and around the world, Indigenous peoples are working toward the reclamation and rematriation of Indigenous place names, rooted in their governance principles, values, and legal orders. In this Yellowhead Special Report, authors Christina Gray and Andrew Ambers illustrate how the rematriation practices shared among Dene, Ts'msyen, and Kwakwaka'wakw communities – truth-telling, gifting, and witnessing – can work to activate legal responsibilities, restore right relationships, and reaffirm Indigenous laws.

Despite the myriad ways Canadian law may constrain or selectively recognize Indigenous legal authority, rematriation and place-naming are important corrective tools. In legal contexts where multi-jurisdictional legal systems overlap, intersect, and oftentimes conflict, place names offer remedies, rooted within Indigenous legal orders.

This Special Report explores the process and outcomes of generating and re-asserting (re-matriating) place names in a Ts'msyen, Dene, and Kwakwaka'wakw perspective, providing a resource to expand that work in B.C. and across the country.

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INTRODUCTION



ACROSS CANADA and throughout the world, Indigenous Peoples are working toward the reclamation and rematriation of Indigenous place names. This work necessarily includes strengthening and affirming the governing authority of Indigenous Peoples. Rematriating place names is a process that draws upon and is rooted in Indigenous Peoples' governing principles, values, and legal orders to make things right. It centres Indigenous women, matriarchs, LGBTQIA2S+¹ and gender-diverse people, and revitalizes Indigenous gender norms, as well. We argue that rematriation efforts can help to restore matriarchal authority and responsibility through inherent relationships among complex kinship networks, land, and histories.

In this Special Report, we illustrate how the process of rematriation can play an important role by shaping and reshaping how we think about land, relate to place, and fulfill responsibilities in relation to our kin. As Indigenous Peoples move through the journey of rebuilding and revitalizing our social, political, and legal orders, each community brings important principles with them to enhance good governance practices.

One of the sources of authority that communities are drawing upon is Indigenous naming practices. Indigenous place names, we argue, are expressions of Indigenous law and sovereignty, and can be used as a corrective tool if relations are imbalanced and history is recorded incorrectly.

Colonialism targets place names through a process of erasure and the imposition of English and French across Canada. In other countries like Aotearoa (New Zealand), Australia, and the United States, Indigenous Peoples are also striving to correct these colonial place names.

In this Special Report, we highlight how Indigenous Peoples in Canada have actively reclaimed place names and why this is crucial for communities and the rebuilding of Indigenous legal orders. To discern and articulate the significance of Indigenous place names, we draw upon our collective knowledge of laws and practices that are shared among our Dene, Ts'msyen, and Kwakwaka'wakw communities regarding rematriating, witnessing, gifting, and truth-telling. By grounding our analysis of place naming in the legal orders of our own communities, we have attempted to honour this deeply meaningful work.

Based upon our perspectives and research, we argue that the rematriation and revitalization of place names is most appropriately guided by Indigenous voices and laws in a way that honours the respective Indigenous Peoples' complex kinship networks, laws, histories, and languages. We further argue that this revitalization is a means to correct past wrongs. We illustrate, through a shared practice of witnessing in our own legal orders, that Indigenous Peoples' rematriation of their languages enables an appreciation for the deeply legal and political implications of deciding to reawaken Indigenous languages on Indigenous lands.

Ultimately, we illustrate that the rematriation of Indigenous place names inscribes practices of recovery and return to the relationships between Indigenous lands, laws, governance, values, and cultures.² Rematriation is a process of recovery and return to Indigenous law because it affirms the legal authority of those silenced in our communities by patriarchal governance structures. Revitalizing place names can help make relationships right by placing Indigenous names on the land, thereby reawakening the laws of the territory on which the place name rests. Further, by empowering the application of Indigenous laws, we suggest that replacing colonial place names with Indigenous place names does not erase history, but rather corrects it.

Building on this understanding of rematriation as corrective, renaming colonial place names with Indigenous ones is part of three interrelated processes: gift-giving, truth-telling, and witnessing. These processes work together to activate legal responsibilities, restore right relationships, and reaffirm Indigenous laws on the land. Through this multi-faceted approach, Indigenous Peoples are correcting legal histories and colonial narratives. The revitalization of Indigenous place names is part of a larger remedial framework that ensures renaming moves beyond symbolic gestures and toward meaningful acts of Indigenous self-determination that inscribe Indigenous identities, laws, languages, and cultures directly onto the land.





As part of the revitalization of Indigenous place names, we are focused on how Indigenous languages and legal orders function in relation to governance to make things right. Indigenous law is a source of authority to draw upon for instruction when disputes arise, helping to guide conduct among our extended kin.

Indigenous Peoples' choice to name and rename is deeply embedded in community-based decisions to reawaken responsibilities, rights, and jurisdiction. It is a process that is rooted in Indigenous legal orders.

The relationship between language and law is one that is both meaningful and enduring. This is because Indigenous laws can address complex issues in a particular area of law, and Indigenous languages facilitate this process. For example, Indigenous laws function in relation to both voluntary and involuntary obligations in matters relating to property, intellectual property, procedural fairness, contracts, and treaties, among many other areas.

Similar to other legal systems, Indigenous societies are governed by laws that organize rights, obligations, and expectations of a particular conduct. The ways in which these rights and responsibilities are organized, however, often remain distinct and less hierarchical. This is because many Indigenous societies are not governed by centralized state authorities but by a decentralized system.³

Further, Indigenous law may be articulated and expressed through the norms, values, and measures that are grounded in Indigenous Peoples' stories, narratives, or oral histories, as well as ceremonies, artistic expressions, names, dreams, and community decision-making processes.⁴

Despite state suppression of Indigenous Peoples' governing institutions, the laws of Indigenous Peoples permeate their territories today. Indigenous communities are actively working to rebuild and reawaken their laws to guide conduct, correct wrongs, and inform how to live together in a good way. Today, there are multiple ways that Indigenous Peoples are drawing out their laws⁵ and applying their legal authority over diverse matters, including through linguistic, political, and cultural methods.⁶ In this report, we focus on how Indigenous Peoples are applying their legal orders through the repatriation of Indigenous place names.

By means of imposition through settler colonialism, England and France brought with them foreign legal systems to supplant Indigenous Peoples' laws over the land. Notably, the colonial legal systems that form the legal fabric of Canada include the common and civil law systems (in Quebec). However, Canada is not bi-juridical but multi-juridical, which means there are concurrent legal systems that are applicable and binding at the same time; this includes Indigenous legal orders alongside the French and English legal systems.⁷



Through these governance systems, the rights and obligations that Indigenous laws affirm and create, in turn, create corresponding observable standards. These obligations are subject to processes that make things right if the standards are not met, which may be instructive, interventionist, corrective, or remedial.



The settler colonial imposition of Canadian laws has attempted to eliminate and subsume Indigenous laws and displace the rights of Indigenous Peoples.⁸ Colonialism has resulted in a disorienting process of (re)navigating social, political, and legal landscapes by perpetually reconstituting them. This reality is animated because colonialism has impacted the knowledge and laws of our communities, and we must prepare for the work to come.⁹ However, the settler colonial project's attempts to eradicate Indigenous people and erase our laws through racist assimilationist policies have failed. In the context of rematriation, we see how colonialism has affected our systems of knowledge and governance, but also how we can meaningfully build up our ways of living and governing to return prepared to the land and our seas of relations.

Indigenous laws continue to overlap, intersect, and, in many cases, conflict with Canadian laws.

In what is now called Canada, Indigenous Peoples' laws and histories can, and do, overlap with those of Indigenous communities in other countries. As a result of these overlapping legal landscapes, Saulteaux legal scholar Val Napoleon argues that "Every geographic space in Canada has more than one legal order occupying it."¹⁰



WITNESSING: AN INDIGENOUS LEGAL APPROACH



Witnessing is a relational responsibility to record important processes, transactions, and historical narratives and, if called upon, to act by recalling what one has witnessed.¹¹ Through feasting, potlatching, and hosting ceremonies, many Indigenous Peoples' cultural, political, and legal processes carry witnessing protocols with them. Feasts are a central legal forum for our Indigenous governance systems: they operate to publicly recognize laws and oral histories in relation to the territory and the complex kinship networks in which they occur. During a feast, laws are validated through the process of witnessing.¹² Through a reciprocal exchange of gift that recognizes the work that has occurred and knowledge that has been affirmed, the responsibilities of witnesses are activated to recall the legal events of the feast within these extended kinship networks.

For the Ts'msyen peoples, like some other Indigenous communities on the west coast of British Columbia, guests of a feast validate the substantive and procedural aspects occurring there through the act of witnessing.¹³

As a process, witnessing is not simply a role of observation and fact-finding; it is grounded in the affective, embodied, and spiritual roles the witness steps into within governance, political, and ceremonial forums.¹⁴

In this way, witnessing is a role that is intended to ensure the truths of the acts are honoured, validated, and perpetuated.¹⁵

Because witnessing is about relational responsibilities, the process can occur not only in formal legal processes but also in everyday and interpersonal relationships. As a legal process to maintain truth, political accountability, and community well-being, witnessing empowers those in our communities who are disregarded on a systemic basis within Canadian society. For instance, witnessing addresses both ecological and gendered violence. In doing so, it validates the truths of relatives that have been, and continue to be, disrespected in state contexts and processes.¹⁶

Witnessing, then, is about strengthening the voices of those silenced by colonialism, and as Kwakwaka'wakw scholar Sarah Hunt argues, it creates space for the voices of those silenced by violence to be heard on their own terms.¹⁷ Necessary to this process is countering the ways in which colonialism attempts to dispossess women, girls, and Two-Spirit people from their authority, leadership, and jurisdiction within our communities.¹⁸ Witnessing is a means to correct the colonial practices of erasure to affirm and elevate the authority held by women, girls, and Two-Spirit people in our communities. Witnessing in the lived reality of Indigenous Peoples' everyday lives often requires "being able to discern, then translate into action, what colonial systems render invisible and unintelligible."¹⁹ Therefore, being a witness today is not limited to adequately and accurately sharing what takes place but also supporting those who colonialism attempts to disempower.

As witnessing is about the creation of and active adherence to a responsibility of truth and community well-being, we draw on this legal process to understand the reclamation and rematriation of Indigenous languages on Indigenous lands.

This action is a step towards making things whole and right once again. By engaging our own legal orders and orienting ourselves as witnesses, we understand the work that Nations are undertaking to put place names on their territories as a gift that honours the truths of Indigenous laws, languages, and lands.





Through a practice of witnessing, we seek to validate the process and nature of communities' repatriation journeys: Choosing to rename a place recognizes that it is time to set aside some place names to prevent continued community harms.



REMATRIATION AND PROTOCOLS OF RETURN



Our understanding of repatriation is deeply informed by the work of Indigenous scholars, leaders, and matriarchs. Repatriation means applying appropriate and adequate remedies to address imbalanced relationships to make things right. It requires standing up the authority of matriarchs, including Two-Spirit leaders; affirming connections to Indigenous territories; observing Indigenous laws to instruct good governance; and implementing measures to ensure future generations thrive.

Repatriation is also about honouring, remembering, and awakening responsibilities of living according to the laws of Indigenous Peoples, uplifting all in our communities to make things whole again. For example, Tsastilqualus Umbas / Ambers (Kwakwaka'wakw) initiated a land repatriation project to build a "Little Big House" on Ma'amtagila territories at the Village of Hiladi on Vancouver Island, B.C.²⁰ This Village is known as "the place to make things right."²¹ As is the case here, repatriation may be deeply rooted in Indigenous law and can guide measures to decide when to enact an Indigenous legal remedy, which includes looking to and from Indigenous lands, histories, and laws. For Tsastilqualus' Little Big House, repatriation meant returning home, returning to Ma'amtagila law and sovereignty, and reaffirming matriarchal authority.

The leadership of people like Tsastilqualus indicates that Indigenous legal orders often operate to empower the authority of matriarchs. This stands in stark contrast to Canadian society, where women often face numerous barriers in leadership. For example, Canada has had only one woman hold the office of Prime Minister, and it was not until 1988 that the first Dene (First Nations) woman was elected as a Member of Parliament.

Matriarchs and LGBTQIA2S+ people are also often the holders of names, guiding the process of naming within Indigenous Nations, including within Ts'msyen society. The special knowledge that matriarchs hold includes determining when and why a particular name is appropriate for a person or site, taking into consideration the context, history, and purpose of the name. As such, Indigenous place names are often embedded with knowledge, stories, and histories specific to that site, region, or people.

Repatriation, therefore, animates the community-based practice of deciding to put something away when it becomes too harmful, which is a type of corrective and interventionist legal remedy.

It is in this way that we see repatriation efforts as “redirect[ing] our energy, attention, activism, and resources toward sustaining, nurturing, managing, protecting, healing, adapting, renewing, creating, and generating our relationality with all of creation and within and between our families, communities, and Nations.”²²

Shifting from colonial place names to Indigenous place names does not rewrite history; rather, it attempts to once more make things right among our relations. The repatriation process is remedial in nature and is validated through the acts of gift-giving and truth-telling. The act of witnessing reminds us of our responsibilities to attend to our relations, rights, histories, and truths. Indigenous place names are about land-based and linguistic repatriation. To us, repatriation builds upon the principle and responsibility of leaving no one behind.





Truth-telling is more than a guiding principle in Indigenous communities; it is an obligation closely associated with good governance and integrity. As Jeff Corntassel (Cherokee), Chaw-win-is (Nuu-chah-nulth), and T’lakwadzi (Kwakwaka’wakw) argue, truth-telling is “not effective without some larger community-centred, decolonizing actions behind them.”²³ In the context of reclaiming Indigenous place names, renaming without uplifting those in our communities who have been disempowered is not enough to make things right.

Truth-telling, as a legal responsibility, is about relentlessly advancing the valid and accurate accounts of the genuine nature of relations, no matter how much colonial narratives attempt to displace, distort, and disappear these truths.

Truth-telling also requires being able to navigate landscapes of violence and erasure in settler colonialism by challenging the language of violence inherent in systems of domination. The systems that commit epistemic violence are embedded in the colonial landscape and require interventions with Indigenous legal remedies. For example, as of 2025, there were fifteen official geographical names with the derogatory term for Indigenous women (e.g. “squaw”). Such sexist

names are not only incorrect; they operate in tandem with processes that continue to target the inherent authority of matriarchs and their relationships with their territories. In this sense, these naming practices are acts of violence meant to further displace matriarchal realities and histories through the day-to-day maintenance of settler colonialism.²⁴

The process of renaming is about truth-telling. Rematriating Indigenous place names ensures that the landscapes of relations represent valid, accurate, and grounded accounts of places, their histories, and any associated stories to guide relationships into the future. Indigenous communities involved in renaming share a common story: Harms have been, and continue to be, perpetrated through place names. Returning to an Indigenous name — on a street or site — not only corrects those harms but also provides a path toward building meaningful relationships between Indigenous Peoples, governments, and society at large.

Indigenous Nations have been working to inscribe responsibilities of truth into our daily lives. In 2022, Victoria, B.C., renamed a street that commemorated Lieutenant Governor Joseph Trutch, who was known for his racist attitude towards Indigenous Peoples, to səʔit in Lekwungen and Su'it in English — meaning “to be true” in Lekwungen.²⁵ This street renaming demonstrates the process of re-inscribing Lekwungen onto the land, affirming the guiding principles that inform ongoing relationships between society at large and Indigenous Peoples. By centering truthfulness, the new street name serves both as a marker to correct settler colonial histories and as a powerful symbol of rebuilding relationships between settlers and Indigenous Peoples within the colonial framework.

Likewise, the concepts of truth and responsibility are inscribed into place names in Winnipeg, Manitoba. In 2021, three streets were renamed in the languages of Anishinaabemowin (Ojibwe), Cree, and Michif. Previously, three place names commemorated Bishop Vital-Justin Grandin, who contributed to the operation and implementation of the Indian Residential School system. This renaming process began with the Indigenous Knowledge Naming Circle composed of Elders, Residential School Survivors, Knowledge Keepers, and Youth convening to determine an appropriate direction for new place names.²⁶ The Circle concluded that the important principles and practices to guide changing place names are truth-telling, caring, educating, and honouring children.²⁷ This resulted in the following name changes:

- ✦ **Bishop Grandin Boulevard to Abinojii Mikanah, which means “children’s way” in Anishinaabemowin (Ojibwe)**
- ✦ **Bishop Grandin Trail to Awasisak Mēskanōw, which means “children’s road” in Cree**
- ✦ **Grandin Street to Taapweewin Way, which means “Truth” in Michif²⁸**

Such names reflect the importance of recalling the strength of past generations and honouring the interests of future generations in the work being done today. As one Métis citizen noted regarding the name changes, “Truth is uncomfortable. The truth is we need to ... include [I]ndigenous people in the society here. Part of that is through the naming of our history.”²⁹ What this means is correcting the colonial practice of erasing and displacing by enacting Indigenous laws regarding truth-telling.

Overall, the role of truth is significant in Indigenous societies, and through rematriating Indigenous place names, the truth about history and the work to come are recalled, expressed, and inscribed onto the land. As Elder Betty Ross of the Pimicikamak Cree Nation reflected during the Indigenous Knowledge Naming Circle, the renaming in Winnipeg “signifies [the] power, sacredness, resilience of Indigenous Nations and the revitalization of Indigenous voices and our First languages...”³⁰





In many Indigenous political and legal orders, gifting is a crucial function of law, economies, and relations of care. As an important ceremonial, everyday, and ethical practice for Indigenous Peoples, gifting is often associated with living legal and lawful lives, and often involves both recognizing and assigning particular responsibilities to individuals or collectives.

Indigenous languages are repositories of knowledge, stories, and guidelines for conduct. As a means of expression, languages guide how to act, think, and hold oneself respectfully and lawfully. For instance, Kwakwaka'wakw artist and linguist Marianne Nicolson/Tayagila'ogwa writes that “the Kwak'wala language anchors us to the land and to each other as Kwakwaka'wakw people.”³¹ Acting as a connection between land, law, and communities, language is a powerful means of inviting groups to participate in the process of rematriating law and language on Indigenous lands. If an Indigenous community extends an invitation to bear witness to the process of renaming, we understand it as a gift that activates shared responsibilities to understand the values, principles, and laws that arise from their language and to honour these teachings throughout all aspects of life.

The act of gifting is not simply an exchange of goods; it is a fundamental basis for good governance and relationship building.³²

Therefore, Indigenous Nations involved in renaming streets and sites are often engaged in gifting a name in their language to an institution or government. Gifting a place name can be understood as placing Indigenous laws on the land. It is an important process to recall, assign, and recognize the responsibilities of Indigenous Peoples, governments, and the public, which honours the truth of territories, including the histories and relationships that give meaning to place names.

For instance, in 2022, the x^wməθk^wəyəm/Musqueam Nation gifted the City of Vancouver a new place name to replace Trutch Street and hosted a renaming ceremony. At this ceremony, the Nation called four witnesses: Mayor Kennedy Stewart and City Manager Paul Mochrie for the City of Vancouver and təlnaqə (Alec Guerin) and məneʔl (Johnny Louis) for Musqueam.³³ Musqueam gifted the City with the name šx^wməθk^wəyəmasəm, or Musqueamview Street, and after subsequent years of engagement and planning, the street name was changed in 2025.



As it relates to rematriating Indigenous place names, when language is shared by being publicly placed upon a street or site, gifting is an invitation to see from another worldview and honour the pre-existing relationships with the territories on which the street names are placed.



CONCLUDING THOUGHTS: LOCATING LAW IN PLACE NAMES



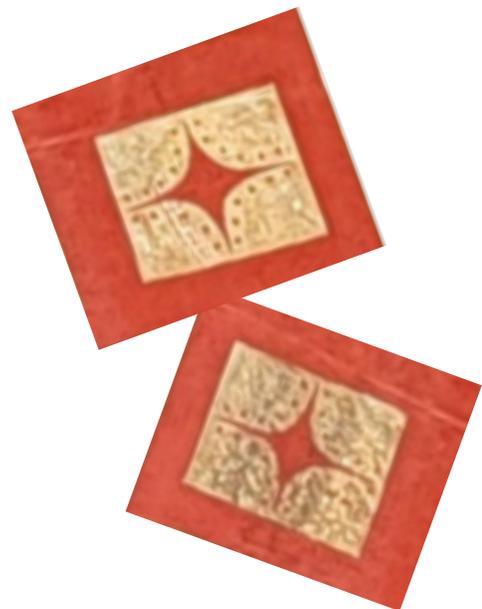
Our understanding of the law of witnessing recognizes that truth-telling and gifting activate legal obligations to honour Indigenous languages on Indigenous territories. Furthermore, Indigenous renaming practices affirm Indigenous legal orders and foster relationship building among Indigenous Peoples, governments, institutions, and the public.

We find that Indigenous communities bring their ancestors, youth, elders, matriarchs, and future generations with them on the rematriation journey. By leaving no one person or group behind, they honour the wholeness of their societies. As such, this rematriation process is correcting historical wrongs imprinted by Canada's colonial past and present.

Just as legislatures and courts are significant sources of law for Canada, we argue that Indigenous place names are equally authoritative for identifying legal obligations, rights, and remedies within Indigenous legal orders. By enacting witnessing as an Indigenous legal approach, we have located how place names become activated as legal through truth-telling and gifting.

Bearing witness to this work has enabled a reciprocal responsibility to recount why the rematriation of Indigenous place names is a significant move towards redress.

Overall, rematriation is about making things right and correcting past wrongs. Indigenous Peoples seeking to rename streets and sites are doing exactly this. It is a choice to put aside some street names for the harm they have caused and their distortion of true histories – not to erase them or their associated histories.



CALLS TO ACTION

1

Meaningfully support the rebuilding of Indigenous governance systems and repatriation processes.

Meaningfully support Indigenous people, with particular attention to matriarchs, including LGBTQIA2S+ people, in the process of land-based reclamation and repatriation processes. Supporting the revitalization of Indigenous social, political, and legal orders requires long-term and sustained institutional support to articulate legal principles, resolve disputes, and organize governance structures. This work must include all community members, and especially Indigenous youth, women, and Two-Spirit people.

2

Establish a working group to help guide the process of reclamation and repatriation of place names.

A working group with regional and national representation will facilitate dialogue to establish processes to implement naming protocols at the municipal, provincial, and federal levels. Policy directives can guide the repatriation process and government cooperation, education, and implementation of Indigenous languages and laws.

3

Support and accommodate the plurality of Indigenous legal orders and languages in the decision-making process for the repatriation of Indigenous place names.

Canada is a multi-juridical and multi-lingual society. Indigenous languages should be celebrated for their diversity and reflect contextual territorial considerations in repatriating Indigenous place names.

ENDNOTES

1. Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer or Questioning, Intersex, Asexual, and Two-Spirit.
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