(Amy and Skye Smoke. Photo by Bangishimo Johnston)

Land Matters

Reflections on what it means to be a settler on Indigenous lands and to truly give land back

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I heard the news from my apartment in California, that summer of 2020: Indigenous protestors had set up camp in Kitchener's Victoria Park, and they were calling for Land Back. It wasn't the land claim that surprised me—I had been reading, and ultimately writing about, my home region and the contested Haldimand Tract since the 2006 land dispute near Caledonia, downriver. What surprised me was the bold simplicity of the act. The way one unauthorized teepee and a small sit-in can so suddenly and successfully assert Indigenous presence in the midst of this city.

Nearly two years to the day since the founding of Land Back Camp, I'm sitting around a red Formica table on a small brick patio with two of the three co-founders. Amy Smoke, a queer Haudenosaunee from Six Nations of the Grand River, is eager to recount the joy of the past evening's party they'd hosted among friends on Indigenous People's Day. Bangishimo Johnston, an art photographer and IndigiQueer Anishinaabe, laughs that 11pm is as late as they've stayed up since the beginning of the pandemic. It's only 10am but already it's a sweltering day in mid-June. The staff at The Yeti Cafe are readying for a small wedding party brunch at the back of the patio. A bubble machine by the sidewalk sends iridescent orbs into the air around us, an infusion of wonder in the morning light.

I ask first about what all the news reports tended to focus on: their presence in the park and their four demands: waive fees for Indigenous groups to use public space for communal gatherings, create a Black and Indigenous advisory committee for the region, hire a team of Indigenous people to work with the city councils, and designate space in several park lands for ceremonial gatherings. To varying degrees, and with a number of caveats, these demands are being met, with the spillover effect of other cities and municipalities following suit, waiving fees and hiring

Indigenous consultants to help them navigate their stated reconciliation efforts. I learn that the fourth demand, land for ceremonial gatherings, is in-process: Kitchener's city council currently has a line item in the budget and Indigenous-led consultations are underway for the construction of at least one such gathering place, likely at Huron Natural Area, and the City of Waterloo is preparing to build their own sister-site.

But what about the lead-up to June 20th, 2020 I ask. There's a long story, involving COVID lockdown and mounting fury at the numerous, and now infamous, killings of Black and Indigenous people throughout North America. The short story, as Bangishimo tells it, concerns their community's plans to hold a spring feast in Kitchener's downtown park to mark the summer solstice. A bylaw stipulated their need to pay $500 to reserve the space, a fee that was prohibitive for the small group. And insulting. "Why do we need to pay money to hold a traditional gathering on our own land?" Smoke recalls texting the group over Signal. So instead of cancelling their plans, they simply moved in on Indigenous People's Day. They erected a large teepee, painting its white canvas with a water line around the base, light purple fish leaping in unison, and a large turtle bridging a doorway hung with the Pride flag. They'd originally intended to stay for three days, but as more tents were erected, they simply stayed put. Eventually, they stayed for 122 days in Victoria Park, moved north to Waterloo Park for another 62 days until winter closed in, and then spent a fraught summer of 2021 in a section of Laurel Creek Conservation Area on the northeast edge of Waterloo.

"If we sit around waiting for approval," Smoke asserts, "we'll wait forever."

“We’re living in a time of great disruption,” says Meg Ruttan Walker through my computer speakers during a midafternoon Zoom call. Our connection’s unstable, so we’ve gone off camera. “But uncertainty can be good,” her voice insists. “It’s where change can be most effected.” The key is to learn to live between the binary fault line where either everything is doomed or everything is fine.

Ruttan Walker is a climate activist who campaigned heavily in 2020 and 2021 with the environmental group 50X30 WR, successfully pushing the region to make a more aggressive climate commitment—a 50% reduction in carbon emissions by 2030, instead of the 30% reduction they’d planned to pass. When I ask her about what drives climate activism in the region, she says the overwhelming mode is techno-optimist, the vision one of a ‘simple’ green technology shift. She admits that climate activists aren’t talking enough about reconciliation with Indigenous people, noting “I can’t be a climate activist without a right relationship with the land I’m on.”

“You’ve got to love the place you’re on and the people you’re with,” her voice calls out as we say goodbye.

David Alton is the kind of person who loves this place. That’s the palpable feeling I get from hearing them explain their different hats. For Alton is a wearer of many hats (both figurative and literal). A community planner and facilitator, Alton is involved in

many projects from Mennonite summer camps to housing insecurity. Though they have a Masters in Urban Planning (and once worked for Google in Toronto before quitting on matters of conscience), they're now pursuing a Masters in theology at Conrad Grebel University College. "But Christian work is frustrating," they admit. "The corporate sector is ruled by profit and churches are ruled by discrimination."

Even so, Alton seems as committed as any to seeing social change push through the silent steadfastness of old church pews. They've recently preached six sermons to local "General Conference" Mennonite churches (that is, the mostly assimilated Mennonites in the region as opposed to those who drive horse and buggies or black-painted cars) on the biblical themes of promised land and covenant-making. They've held conversations with Abundance, a Mennonite estate and will-planning organization, about steering end-of-life discussions, with both individuals and churches, toward funding responses to Land Back and climate change mitigation. They've spoken with MennoHomes, an affordable housing organization, about modeling an effort to heed the Haudenosaunee Confederacy Councils' moratorium on development within the Haldimand Tract. They've also built relationships with Land Back Camp and insisted on holding a call-to-action conversation at the Indigenous-Mennonite Encounters in Place and Time conference at Conrad Grebel this past spring.

"Our generation," Alton explains to me at the picnic table outside Cafe Pyrus Outpost, "thinks religion is bullshit, but there is faith throughout 'secular' society. It just doesn't look like traditional religion and that's the problem: you decrease your power to effect change by isolating yourself from your systems of belief."

Alton's preaching now, growing animated ("Who decided that just because the universe is massive and expanding that our lives are, therefore, tiny and insignificant? That they don't matter? All of life is matter. It all matters."). As Alton pivots into a succinct analysis of the racial dynamics within the region's Mennonite churches—where roughly half are whiter, wealthier, and aging congregations and the other half are rapidly growing, racialized newcomer congregations—a woman at the next table over steps into our conversation and asks—apologetically, awkwardly—"um, who, ah, are you?" She'd had an ear in the conversation for the last ten minutes and wants to exchange names.

I'm feeling Alton's Word too. For a long while, I've been quietly critical of the individualism of the evangelical Christian tradition in which I was raised, so much so that for a while I avoided any religious label at all. More recently, I've said, somewhat sheepishly, that I feel more Mennonite than Christian. But now, in a way that would be entirely heretical to the faith of my upbringing, I'm coming around to the idea that I'm Christian by dint of the fact that my parents, grandparents, and ancestors were Christians. As with the place and time and family into which I was born, I don't get to choose. There's a certain freedom in accepting that constraint.

The challenge of course—and one that's not always possible for everyone—is to find ways of working within those parameters to make a meaningful life not just for yourself but for an expanding circle of others around you. What, then, does it mean for me to accept the fact that I'm a Christian in a historical moment when the great sins of Christendom are being called to account?

One of the most striking photographs from Bangishimo's portrait series, On the Land, is of Amy Smoke sitting cross-legged on the grass in front of the rainbow turtle of Land Back Camp's painted teepee. Smoke's child, Skye, hangs over their right shoulder, arms crossed in a light embrace. They both look at ease, smiling brightly.

It's also the portrait that keeps getting vandalized. Mounted on wooden posts, the outdoor portrait exhibit, which has now moved around to several locations throughout Kitchener-Waterloo keeps getting damaged. Each time, Bangishimo pieces it together again but refuses to reprint or touch up the photographs. They argue instead that the violence enacted on the people the portraits represent is now part of the art piece itself. The vibrant color and joy captured by the photo looks that much more precarious for the creases and kicks they've received.

I'm clicking around online one afternoon, avoiding some other work, when I stumble onto the website for Faith Climate Justice Waterloo Region, a collective that formed in 2020 to urge local faith communities to respond to both the climate crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic. Their vision page cites a Kitchener City Hall talk in January 2019 by then-Environmental Commissioner of Ontario, Dr. Dianne Saxe, as the impetus for their formation. Intent on still not writing, I follow the link to the video.

Saxe, a veteran environmental lawyer from Toronto, stands at the speaker's podium and makes a compelling case for Ontarians to wake-up to the present threats of climate change-impacts on the province, which is warming, she notes, faster than the global average. Already climate extremes are happening four times more often than mere decades ago. And worse, these weather events are currently fueled by fossil fuel emissions from a generation ago not our recent emissions. This means Ontarians face increasingly longer, drier, hotter summers with fluctuating temperature extremes in winter that issue rain instead of snow followed by flash freezes and ice storms, which destroy infrastructure, knock out power, and kill animal and human lives. Through slide after slide, Saxe points to Ontario's significantly increased insurance losses (with uninsured losses one to three times higher), adverse human health impacts, and fire. So much more fire.

As if she could see the writing on the wall (two and a half months later Premier Doug Ford would abolish her office), she offers a frank critique of the Ontario government's reneging on ten large clean energy contracts, eight of them made with First Nations participation, and its repeated attempt to cancel Ottawa's cap and trade carbon model.

Near the end of the talk, however, she makes a pivot by quoting Gus Speth, co-founder of the U.S.-based Natural Resources Defense Council: "I used to think that top environmental problems were biodiversity loss, ecosystem collapse, and climate change. I thought that thirty years of good science could address these problems. I was wrong. The top environmental problems are selfishness, greed, and apathy, and to deal with these we need a cultural and spiritual transformation."

And then Saxe closes on a personal note. She talks of the unique role her synagogue plays in moving her to live up to her responsibilities, in bringing to her attention the needs of others and the calls to action from the network of her faith community. She references the World Parliament of Religions two months prior, where representatives from each world religion got up and talked about "their shared moral basis for the care of Creation and their duties to their children and grandchildren."

But in the three years she was Commissioner, as of the date of her talk, no representatives of religious groups in the province "have ever crossed my desk," she bemoans. "Not one of you has spoken at the select committee about the damage that's being done in Ontario. Where are you when it counts? Invisible."

It's an interesting bit—Saxe is at City Hall, but instead of appealing for by-laws to enact or political actions to take, she's urging her listeners to consider the power of persuasion and action within their existing faith networks. "The climate crisis presents an opportunity for the world's trusted faith leaders to not just avoid catastrophe but also to create a better world," she states at the end. "It's not just a moral obligation—it's a moral opportunity."

When I ask Alton and Ruttan Walker about local religious organization's responses to the twinned challenge of climate justice and Indigenous justice, both of them suggest I talk to Scott Morton-Ninomiya. He's the Indigenous Neighbours Program Coordinator for Mennonite Central Committee of Ontario and a former member of

Mennonite Church of Eastern Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Working Group. He's also keen to meet.

We're on Zoom a week or so later and the white board behind him is scrawled by a child's handwritten announcement, "Welcome Home!" Though the message isn't for me, I take it as such. I've been away a good while—most of my adult life in fact. Though much of my writing has been about the complex histories of this place, that writing was partly a way of grounding me from afar, I realize—a way of tethering my wandering. Moving home, I'm now faced with the much more immediate question of how to live here, quite specifically, on this land, again. No longer just a historical question or a personal quest for social and religious self-understanding, the gift, which is to say the work, of raising a child here, owning a house here, making a life here—likely for the rest of my life—has taken on immediate spiritual, political, and environmental gravitas. There are now mulberries on my tongue from the tree-lined, industrial alleyway behind my house. I taste this place, and I love it. But the question of how I might live rightly here, lightly here, is now central.

Morton-Ninomiya's bio states that he's interested in speaking about "the connection between Indigenous justice and climate justice and the role of churches in helping to pursue both." So I ask him to parse that statement. Beginning with an apocryphal Albert Einstein quote, that "you can't solve a problem using the same way of thinking that created it," Morton-Ninomiya says he's worried the climate movement is in danger of doing exactly that. Instead, "Land Back is climate justice" because it (re)centers the land in our mode of thinking, living, and decision-making. It refuses our mainstream economic models that treat land degradation or air and water pollution as mere externalities. Land Back efforts re-assert Indigenous sovereignty to,

and from, and for the original and ongoing stewards of this land and welcomes those voices rightfully into the center. Land acknowledgements before, say, a city council meeting can be a good thing, he says, but not if the subsequent business decisions, the dollars and cents and planning discussions, are absented from Indigenous perspectives and wisdom.

He's talking, in other words, about cultural and spiritual transformation, echoing Dr. Saxe. “Faith communities,” he claims, “are well-placed to facilitate this transformation” because they consist of an increasingly rare kind of semi-public, semi-private community, gathering weekly and seeking to operate explicitly from a values basis. He acknowledges the terrible legacy of religious organizations using their values to justify enacting a range of atrocities on other groups of people, especially those it has labeled “heathen.” But he also says that faith communities can have an easier time understanding the ways in which Indigenous cosmologies are made explicit in their meetings and gatherings. The corporate sector, regional and city councils, academic institutions are all less adept at this.

Over the last number of years, Scott has detected what he calls “a definite shift—not yet a sea change but an unprecedented degree of interest” in Mennonite/settler engagement with Indigenous justice concerns. “I’m getting very interested to see how Mennonites can get more creative with the land that we have and the resources we have…. There’s real movement there,” he argues, and it calls for “friendly urgency.”

Back at The Yeti Café, I ask Bangishimo and Smoke what, in their view, is the focus of local climate activism in the face of the climate crisis. "I dunno…lightbulbs," says Smoke with a sardonic laugh.

Ontario's Crown Land, the government's website informs me, represents 87% of the province, or some 776,000 km2 of land. The Grand River Conservation Authority (GRCA), which manages the watershed running throughout the Haldimand Tract, owns about 48,000 acres of land, much of which they lease out as farm land, hold as conservation lands or urban parks, or negotiate maintenance agreements with third party businesses, charities, and organizations.

When the founders of Land Back Camp met with the Region of Waterloo to discuss finding a new home for the camp in Spring 2021, a representative from the GRCA opened, according to Smoke, by saying, "So we took a look at our surplus lands…."

Smoke lets the sentence hang for dramatic effect. "You've got surplus lands?" they laugh incredulously. "Don't ever tell an Indigenous person you've got surplus lands! That doesn't even exist, anyway."

It's only later, while listening to my recording of the conversation, that I catch the double joke. It's certainly the ham-fisted admission to a Haudenosaunee from the Haldimand Tract that you're sitting on hoarded land. But it's also the lunacy of the idea that land can ever be considered "surplus."

Later that day, I'm pushing through the lights along Weber St., heading north on a preschool pick-up run while listening to an episode from the Dismantling the Doctrine of Discovery podcast, produced by an Anabaptist-founded, interfaith coalition of the same name. The two co-hosts, Sheri Hostetler, my former Mennonite pastor from San Francisco, and Sarah Augustine, a Pueblo (Tewa) descendent living on the land of the Confederated Bands and Tribes of the Yakima Nation in Washington, are talking about calls for Land Back across North America. Augustine quotes a Minnesota-based Mennonite activist-friend from the Coalition, John Stoesz, who says, "it is unrealistic to return all the land, but it is unjust to return none."

After inquiring more with Hostetler by email, I learn the second part: "Then it is not a theoretical question of whether to return land, but a practical question of how."

In September 2017, Emmanuel United Church in Waterloo facilitated the return of 10.5 acres of forest land to White Owl Native Ancestry Association, an Indigenous children's and family services organization in Kitchener. The church's children's program had raised $2,000 that year for White Owl, but when the then-Executive Director, Michelle Sutherland, came to receive the donation, she admitted to a few of the congregants, among them a man named Arthur Hills, that what they really needed was land. They couldn't gather as a community for lack of indoor space, and they certainly couldn't build ceremonial fires outside their shared office complex.

Hills ears perked up, he tells me five years later from the front wooden pew of the church's domed and buttressed sanctuary. He knew of just such a piece of land. He'd served on the Waterloo Presbytery Extension Council for the United Church of Canada and had helped acquire a wood lot on Stauffer Rd. southwest of the city in the 1950s. But when the GRCA stipulated that they couldn't cut down any trees or build road access in for construction, the property had sat unused by the larger denomination. Within a month of hearing about White Owl's need for land, Hills and Sutherland and several others had worked out a bill of sale for $1. As a registered charity-to-charity land transfer, the process proved seamless.

With white tufts of hair about his ears, Hills eyes are bright, smiling with a faint mischievousness, as he retells the story. The process was as simple as it was, seemingly, rare, and for that it has garnered some degree of media coverage, especially when the sap is flowing. There's an APTN news video on YouTube from early spring this past year, interviewing Metis and First Nations people who had gathered to make maple syrup together. White Owl has partnered with the Waterloo Region District School Board to bring busloads of kids out to the sugar bush, and other Indigenous organizations in the region have used the forest for gatherings and sweat lodges.

"We're inside the 10km line," Hills remarks matter-of-factly as our conversation wraps up. He's referring to the boundaries of the Haldimand Track. Of this land hand-off, he says, "It just felt right. It was the right thing to do."

Scott Morton-Ninomiya alerts me to the speaker series, “Treaty as Sacred Covenant,” hosted by MCCO’s Indigenous Neighbours Program in 2021. The online archive features eight video-recorded conversations with local Indigenous leaders who are working on this land, for this land. An hour later, I prop my phone on the kitchen counter and begin to watch while clearing a stack of dishes from the sink. I find myself listening to a man named Skyler Williams who is sitting on a brown corduroy couch beside his friend, Eric Larkin, a Mennonite-raised activist and ally. Williams, wearing a faded red Land Back t-shirt and signature black cap, is describing his involvement with and spokesmanship for the 2020 land reclamation act on the edge of Six Nations of the Grand River. A developer had begun slotting in 218 housing units up against the northeastern border of the reserve, a nebulous boundary line since a bevy of Six Nations claims for parcels of that land have been mouldering at the Land Tribunal Office since 1987. A long silence that, with each passing year, speaks more loudly to the legitimacy of the claims.

Exactly one month after the founding of Land Back Camp up in Kitchener, Haudenosaunee land defenders moved into the planned development project named McKenzie Meadows on a Sunday night, alerted the Ontario Provincial Police (OPP), and then had a meal together. They renamed the place 1492 Land Back Lane and have stuck it out together, despite several police raids, with the backing of the Confederacy Council.

How is it, asks Williams to the camera, that the only mode of consultation and negotiations between Indigenous people and the government about land development in this province is via the OPP moving in, guns drawn and firing rubber bullets? According to Williams, the OPP spent 16.8 million dollars on policing during the heightened first six months of the occupation. Almost 17 million dollars, he repeats, for a plot of land the developer bought for 4 million. “So they can police people sitting by a fire?” he says, shaking his head. “This is absolutely ridiculous that this is the state we’re in” he says later.

As with the land dispute over Kanonhstaton (Mohawk for “the protected place”) fifteen years earlier and on the neighbouring property (for which Williams was imprisoned for seven months, beaten by prison guards, and locked in solitary confinement for four of them), the provincial government has simply—yet again—bought out the developer while refusing to decide on the claim. Tax dollars at work in a vastly more expensive act of silencing.

“The issue with land claims is that they have nothing to do with land,” Williams says near the end of the talk. “Land claims have only to do with money. And for us, that is absolutely unacceptable…. There’s no monetary value that can be put on this connection to the land. For us, our creation story comes from this land, our bodies are made from this clay.”

“Comfort and convenience are so central to settler culture,” Morton-Ninomiya is saying to me over Zoom, that sometimes we stop ourselves from doing things, from taking low-stakes actions we know are right simply because “we’re worried about a few moments of potential embarrassment or awkwardness.”

This makes me think of my conversation with Alton, for whom Land Back is climate justice and climate justice is Land Back because “to embrace the idea of Land Back means you and your community have shifted your perspective on land and ownership.” The sky above us was bright blue, horizon to horizon. Just as we wended our conversation down, Alton crystalized their argument into three pillars—statues, perhaps—that the processes of land return in the face of the climate crisis can help topple: extricating the political philosophy and theology of white supremacy that undergirds setter colonization in North America, changing people’s defensive relationship to private property and ownership boundaries, and refusing the hollow allure of modern individualism “since you can’t do Land Back nor climate mitigation alone.”

I was scribbling fast then. Alton paused a moment to think, adjusted their ball cap, and then offered this distillation: “Land Back is a communal act that changes a group’s relationship with land and their relations with race.”

“Both a treaty and the idea of a Christian covenant are similar things,” Adrian Jacobs is saying in another of the Treaty as Sacred Covenant video talks. A former pastor

from Six Nations of the Grand River, Jacobs is Turtle Clan from the Cayuga Nation and worked as an educator for Mennonite Church of Eastern Canada (MCEC) from 2007-2010, traveling to various churches and educating their congregants on Six Nations land claims. Though serving at the time of the talk as Keeper of the Circle of Sandy-Saulteaux Spiritual Center in Anishinaabe Treaty One territory, Manitoba, Jacobs was recently hired as the senior leader for Indigenous Justice and Reconciliation with the Christian Reformed Church in Canada and is in the process of moving back to Six Nations.

In his talk, he describes sitting down for a lunch in 2007 with Rick Hill, a traditional Haudenosaunee knowledge keeper. When Jacobs confirmed to Hill that churches do not pay property taxes, Hill said, "good, then they're not a part of the system." He then proposed the idea of a spiritual covenant with churches on the Haldimand Tract. The premise is that a church could acknowledge Six Nations' jurisdiction over their land, make a token annual lease payment as a good-will gesture, and be granted a 99-year lease and the freedom to continue their spiritual work. And if the church decommissions, the land would revert to Six Nations to be used for continued community work and spiritual support.

The idea has percolated for well over a decade now. No church has yet entered into the covenant with Six Nations of the Grand River, but Jacobs continues extending the offer. There has been, however, renewed interest in the idea in the last year or two, Morton-Ninomiya tells me over Zoom, and several Mennonite congregations are considering making this kind of spiritual treaty with their Haudenosaunee neighbours.

“We maintain that this is a peaceful occupation,” states Skyler Williams during his video talk from 1492 Landback Lane. “We’ve not said that people up and down the Grand River need to get out of their houses. What we are saying, certainly with respect to the doorstep of our community, is that for any vacant lands, there needs to be a process to have that returned to the reserve. We’re not saying we need to evict anybody.” Williams’ argument is about both Indigenous justice and environmental protection: he calls for the equal opportunity at Six Nations of the Grand River—as other towns and cities have done over the past century—to grow their borders as well as to safeguard land for other animal life. He’s urging the province and its citizens to return these vacant border lands to Haudenausanee stewardship.

Land Back, in this case, is an effort at rightfully returning vacant lands to Six Nations of the Grand River. Land Back in Kitchener is currently about securing gathering places for urban Indigenous people—their communities and organizations. Most often, Land Back is discussed in terms of land already outside of private ownership, like crown and federal lands, national and state/provincial parks, conservation areas. Sometimes, Land Back entails settler fundraising efforts for a property, a donation to service an Indigenous nation or organization’s expressed need. Whatever the differences in approach, Land Back—for the people actually giving some land back—requires a reorientation to the land beneath their feet and a recognition that they have a longstanding-if-forgotten relation to the original people who have stewarded life on this particular confluence of soil and water.

Against tremendous odds and an almost unfathomable violence, Indigenous People in North America have survived—are surviving—the apocalypse of colonization. We are all now facing another kind of global apocalypse, this one brought on by the colossal burning of fossil fuels in just two hundred years by a small fraction of the world's population. Many commentators, scholars, and activists have pointed out that there is a great deal of correlation between the orientation that begat colonization and the orientation that is now exacerbating global carbon emissions. To do differently requires a re-orientation to power and privilege and an entrenched status quo. It means, well, ceding ground.

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I had hoped to talk with the folks at White Owl, had thought maybe I could get out to see the sugar bush in summer. I was thinking as a writer, about my own need for a framing device, about a potential scene and setting. But after several emails went unanswered and my phone message wasn't returned, I began to feel increasingly awkward about my presumptiveness. What right have I to see "what's going on out there"—a phrase that, especially written out, looks menacing and interrogative. There's an abundant set of news stories about the land transfer, the maple syrup-making, and the education camps being held in the bush. I don't need to go there. That land is theirs. It's not mine to see. So I let it go.

Is Land Back an impossibly big solution for the impossibly big problem of Indigenous justice within a climate crisis? The idea is certainly big, but practically speaking, the way it is occasionally getting worked out, is small because it is based on relationships between various individuals, organizations, and communities moving forward together. So it looks like Emmanuel United Church hearing about the desperate need for land by a representative from White Owl, and one man knowing about just such a woodlot the church no longer needed. It could look like people of faith covenanting themselves to their Indigenous neighbors and re-seeing the existing treaties as both imperfect and a structuring of a relationship. It could looks like aging churches, staring down end-of-use questions for their buildings, properties, and trust accounts and then putting pieces in place to move some of that wealth into the twinned projects of Indigenous resurgence and climate mitigation/adaptation. It looks like individuals making some of those same plans for their estates or “surplus” wealth. It looks like lower-tier governments making space where Indigenous gatherings can drum an old-new way of being in this city we share.

I’m coming to see the call for this cession—for Land Back—as far less daunting or scary or quite-frankly-impossible. The movement entails a profound reconsideration of what counts as enough, what’s worth holding on to tightly and what’s worth holding open, giving over, re-turning.

After an hour and a half at The Yeti, I ask Bangishimo and Smoke a final, personal question about how Land Back Camp has changed them, what it has meant for them. Smoke jumps in first to express how transformative it has been, sleeping on the ground for such extended stretches, watching the sun rise and set, the moon wax and wane. They've also watched Skye—who was six back in 2020 when Smoke first said "we're going camping for a few days"—learn and flourish while hauling water, playing guitar, and Zooming in to public school, via the park's WiFi, from the shade of the teepee. For Bangishimo, who has been organizing for fifteen years, the gift of Land Back Camp has been to see the way in which it has helped so many others find their voice, especially queer and two-spirited Indigenous youth, and nurture their well-being. They've now navigated through the loss of a camp member this past year, and they're planning their third summer together. Meanwhile, other Land Back Camps have cropped up in other cities around the country. "It's just been really cool to see so many changes in the Region, to continue advocating for changes," Bangishimo says.

They're also beginning the process now of registering as a non-profit organization, so as we're slinging our bags over our shoulders, I ask if this institutionalization worries them, if it risks constraining some of Land Back Camp's animating, disruptive energy. But they both say no, it's an exciting new stage for the group, and it will hopefully, helpfully, offer them some better supports to do all the work they still want to do.

As we part ways out on Eby Street, hundreds of bubbles continue spilling forward from the concrete steps, floating up—lighter than air—before being carried off, in haphazard formation, out over the neighbourhood, rippled en masse by the currents of the atmosphere.