Territorial acknowledgements have become common in many spaces. You hear them at the beginning of events, in speeches, during school and even at hockey games. But there's growing tension about the politics of territorial acknowledgements. Are they emptied of meaning as they become more commonplace? Hayden King helped write Ryerson University's territorial acknowledgement in 2012, but now he regrets it.

King, an Anishinaabe writer and educator who works at Ryerson University, spoke to Unreserved host Rosanna Deerchild about territorial acknowledgements, what they mean in today's political climate and how they can be improved. Here's part of that conversation.

Let's start with the basics — what is a territorial or land acknowledgement?
A territorial acknowledgement, as they have evolved, is sort of a political statement encouraging primarily non-Indigenous people to recognize that they're on Indigenous land and hopefully do something about it. It's sort of an intervention into the business-as-usual conversations that are held in universities or government where we typically see these land acknowledgements.

You wrote the acknowledgement for Ryerson University. Tell me at the time why you wrote it.
Back in 2012-2013 there was sort of a rush to catch up, and a lot of pressure [was] put on the Indigenous community at Ryerson to come up with a territorial acknowledgement. We wrote it under pressure and not really anticipating the growth of the acknowledgement in Ontario or the politics that would accompany it. Ours basically said that Ryerson is on the territory of the Haudenosaunee, the Anishinaabek, and it's a territory that is governed by the Dish With One Spoon Treaty, a treaty that committed these nations to share the territory in peace, friendship and respect and all newcomers are invited into this treaty and in the spirit of those obligations.

That sounds OK to me. Why do you regret it now?
I think that as the conversation has advanced around territorial acknowledgements, some more scrutiny was put onto ours, among others. I think internally, we were having an internal conversation about it and it's [like], who are we, really, to invite anybody into the Dish With One Spoon Treaty? For me, personally, I think I started to see how the territorial acknowledgement could become very superficial and also how it sort of fetishizes these actual tangible, concrete treaties. They're not metaphors — they're real institutions, and for us to write and recite a territorial acknowledgement that sort of obscures that fact, I think we do a disservice to that treaty and to those nations.

If you were writing it today, what would that acknowledgement say?
I'd like to move towards a territorial acknowledgement where you provide people with a sort of framework and then let them write it themselves. The really important aspect of a territorial acknowledgement for me, anyway, is this sort of obligation that comes on the back end of it.
It's one thing to say, "Hey, we're on the territory of the Mississaugas or the Anishinaabek and the Haudenosaunee." It's another thing to say, "We're on the territory of the Anishinaabek and the Haudenosaunee and here's what that compels me to do."

**Why do you think that scripted acknowledgements are not effective?**

I think that the territorial acknowledgment is by and large for non-Native people. So if we're writing a script then providing a phonetic guide for how to recite the nation's names, then it doesn't really require much work on behalf of the people who are reciting that territorial acknowledgement. It effectively excuses them and offers them an alibi for doing the hard work of learning about their neighbours and learning about the treaties of the territory and learning about those nations that should have jurisdiction.

**Some people might hear that and think, "Well, that's a lot. That's a big ask." How would you react to somebody saying that's too much?**

I think it varies from region to region and circumstance to circumstance, but often where we hear the acknowledgement is in relatively privileged spaces, like the university or the conference setting. There is a danger of the acknowledgement just becoming that excuse, through, which these institutions provide themselves permission to be on that territory ... I don't think that that's too much to ask in that particular circumstance. Now, in other circumstances, where you're in less privileged spaces and maybe the acknowledgement is just evolving for the first time, then it does have the power to compel a conversation. And that's helpful.

**Our conversation started by me asking you what a territorial acknowledgement is. But what should it be?**

I'd like to see that commitment. I have to emphasize the circumstance — I think in settings where it's an unfamiliar practice or a new practice, I think beginning with that acknowledgement ... that's a good thing. But as this is a longer process where we've heard the territorial acknowledgement, now it's a historical practice almost in some cases ... I want to see the provost of the university or the president of the academic conference or the premier of Ontario saying, "This is the land that we're on and this is what we're going to do to breathe life into our obligations to those communities and those treaties."