Our friend Kathy Kersten attended a performance of “A Christmas Carol” at the Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis last night. She was astonished to find that the theater’s program included a lengthy “land acknowledgement” of the sort that is being promoted by a handful of Native American activists in Minnesota.

Land Acknowledgment: The Beginning

When the lights dim just before A Christmas Carol begins, you will hear the following as part of our pre-show announcement: We want to acknowledge that we gather on the traditional land of the Dakota People and honor with gratitude the land itself and the people who have stewarded it throughout the generations, including the Ojibwe and other Indigenous nations.

This statement is called a land acknowledgment, and I want to share some context for those who are new to the practice and those who would like to better understand the Guthrie’s decision to acknowledge the land in this manner.

In countries such as New Zealand, Australia and Canada and among tribal nations in the U.S., it is commonplace to open events and gatherings by acknowledging the traditional Indigenous inhabitants of the land. Some cultural and educational institutions in the U.S. have adopted this custom, and a variety of institutions include land acknowledgments on their websites. Last year, when I was attending a play at the Stratford Festival in Ontario, Canada, I heard a land acknowledgment similar to what you will hear today. I thought it was beautiful to hear a large cultural institution, similar to us in many ways, thank the original stewards of the land.

Over the last several years, the Guthrie has been building a partnership with Indigenous Direction, a consulting group co-founded by Larissa FastHorse (Sicangu Lakota) and Ty Defoe (Haudenosaunee, Six Nations/Anishinaabe Nation) that works with theatrical companies and artists who want to create accurate work about, for, and with Indigenous peoples.

In summer 2017, the Guthrie collaborated with Indigenous Direction to produce Water Is Sacred, a performance that blended ceremony, music, text, dance and discussion to celebrate water and acknowledge how water has been threatened on Indigenous lands. Stories From the Drum, a three-part project that launched in September 2018, built on this important work and was born from the hearts and minds of the Native community. Created through a
This is the Native American version of the 1619 Project—a perverted retelling of American history in which everything is extinguished except racism, slavery and oppression. Kathy, who writes for Center of the American Experiment, exposed the phenomenon here. Thus, one of the activists writes in the Guthrie program:

Colonization, history and racism cast a deep shadow over our perspective of land, life, culture and people. We have been exiled to a place of extinction.

“Colonization” means you and me. Kathy writes:

They actually read the land acknowledgment out loud, right before the opening scene in Victorian costume. Ridiculous beyond belief.

What any of this has to do with “A Christmas Carol,” God only knows.

The program includes a reference to “the sacred land on which the Guthrie sits.” But it seems that, if you listen to the activists, all the land in these parts is “sacred.” Thus, Fort Snelling, built
after the War of 1812 to protect the territory from British incursion and the single most historic
place in Minnesota, is currently the subject of a campaign to rename it “Historic Fort Snelling at
Bdote,” on the ground that it, too, stands on “sacred” land. Worse, the Minnesota Historical
Society, which operates Fort Snelling, is under pressure to transform it into an Auschwitz-style
monument to evil (“colonization”) instead of what it really was, an outpost of peace and a
beacon of freedom, as when thousands of Minnesota volunteers mustered there to fight to
abolish slavery.

The Guthrie’s land acknowledgement says that “we gather on the traditional land of the Dakota
People,” and includes a casual reference to “the Ojibwe and other Indigenous nations.” In fact,
the Dakota (Sioux) and Ojibwe (Chippewa) were bitter enemies, and southern Minnesota
became a “traditional land of the Dakota People” only recently—the early 18th century—when the
Dakota were driven here by the Ojibwe. Warfare between the Dakota and Ojibwe continued well
into the 19th century, and keeping the peace between the warring tribes was one of the
missions of the soldiers at Fort Snelling.

You may wonder, what is the point? What are the activists after? They want to recast American
history—your history and mine, not theirs—as evil. They want to bend the rest of us to their will, by
imposing “land acknowledgements” and renaming sites and buildings.

And, of course, as with all political activism of this sort, the day will come when money is
expected to change hands.