

‘Reconciliation is Dead’: Unist’ot’en Camp, Land Back and How the Movements can Inform Settler Responsibilities and Indigenous-Settler Relationships Going Forward

by
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Abstract

This capstone research paper discusses the contemporary ‘Reconciliation is Dead’ movement, which appears to have gained traction during the 2020 raids at the Unist’ot’en Camp on unceded Wet’suwet’en lands in what is now known as Canada. I argue that the colonial government continues to utilize empty reconciliatory politics and gestures that have led many Indigenous peoples and settler accomplices to proclaim that reconciliation is ‘dead’. This paper will unpack colonial state forms of reconciliation, as well as discuss Land Back and how actions towards Indigenous sovereignty must include a returning of land and Indigenous self-determining authority over land. Some of my questions include: how can the Reconciliation is Dead¹ movement inform us on current Indigenous-settler relations? How can the movement encourage people to think critically about ‘reconciliation’ and the government’s lack of material changes? I also discuss the Unist’ot’en Camp as a site of Indigenous resistance and resurgence, and how differently situated settlers need to engage in ongoing self-reflection on their positionalities, as well as their responsibilities to and with the Indigenous peoples and nations on whose lands they live. Finally, I share personal experiences as a white settler and how it is crucial to embrace the discomfort and to actively work to build relationships across difference that challenge settler colonialism, capitalism, empire and the state.

¹ The ‘Reconciliation is Dead’ movement received national and international coverage during the 2020 RCMP raids at the Unist’ot’en Camp on unceded Wet’suwet’en lands in what is now known as Northern British Columbia. Some Indigenous land defenders and their supporters proclaim that the Canadian government’s attempts at reconciliation are vacant and meaningless, because the government - along with the RCMP and the resource extraction company Coastal Gaslink - are attempting to force through a pipeline without Indigenous consent on unceded lands. This is one issue among many. Reconciliation efforts by the Canadian government and Canadians without material actions and actual change are beginning to be seen as empty.

Positionality

First, I would like to acknowledge that this paper was researched and written in Amiskwaciwâskahikan (Edmonton) on Treaty Six territory, the ancestral, traditional and occupied territories of the Blackfoot, Cree, Dene, Nakota Sioux, Saulteaux, and Métis Nations. Specifically, the University of Alberta is on the ancestral lands of the Papaschase Cree. It is important to state that I am a second-generation Irish settler who was born and raised on Treaty Six territory in what is now known as Alberta. I believe that as a white settler, I must constantly be interrogating my daily, normative encounters with settler colonialism and whiteness, and within power structures and institutions such as the university. It is imperative that settlers, such as myself, critically look at colonial histories and their contemporary implications, as well as pay respect to the caretakers of the land and the land itself. I am not Indigenous and I do not want to speak for Indigenous Peoples. I do, however, want to encourage other settlers to be critical, embrace the discomfort and do *the work* necessary to stand in solidarity with Indigenous communities and nations. I recognize that this work is uncomfortable and messy and that I will fumble along the way as I engage with it, but I cannot ignore this work or be exempt from it because of these reasons. I feel a duty and a responsibility to unpack settler colonialism and attempt to work towards better relationships on these lands, ones that do not reproduce colonial relations. Settler scholar Paulette Regan asserts that settlers must name and unpack these power dynamics and “engage in the lifelong work of breaking their hold” (2010, p.27). This requires being reflexive and listening and speaking truthfully. Also, I recognize the boundaries of this paper and that further research could utilize a more intersectional lens, one that analyzes more in depth the different and overlapping systems of power that prop up oppression alongside settler colonialism, such as cisheteropatriarchy, white supremacy, neoliberalism, anti-Black racism,

transphobia, and others. Not all people are positioned the same and intersectional approaches require more nuanced responses based on an awareness of how power structures interlock and oppress people based on their gender, race, sexuality, ability, class, age, etc. Arvin, Tuck and Morrill (2013) assert that decolonial intersectional feminism must build alliances that wholly address difference and actively commit to struggling towards structural change. The struggle towards new futures and world-making demands an intersectional feminist politics that recognizes the ways in which our differences exist and that these differences can connect us deeply to one another against larger structures of power and oppression. Solidarity and resistance work require a framework that *recognizes, supports and upholds* difference, with goals of building “transformative solidarities that can generate unthought possibilities for us as human beings who care for each other” (Cannella & Manuelito, 2008, pp. 46-47).

Additionally, it is critical to recognize that research and academic work are never objective. As Māori academic Linda Tuhawai Smith highlights, research ‘through imperial eyes’ that has been deemed ‘objective’ has been utilized against racialized and Indigenous populations to convey “a sense of innate superiority and an overabundance of desire to bring progress into the lives of [I]ndigenous peoples” (2012, p.58). These forms of research merely reinforce colonial hierarchies and injustice. It is imperative that I - as a settler and a student - reject participating in damage-centered research, as Unanga scholar Eve Tuck (2009) notes, that has predominantly saturated Indigenous-settler relationships within the colonial academy historically and contemporarily. Damage-centered research “is a pathological approach in which the oppression singularly defines a community” (Tuck, 2009, p.413). What about resistance, resurgence, brilliance? Tuck asserts that damage-centered narratives are overused, and that research on Indigenous communities should move towards complexity and desire; desire that recognizes the

“loss and despair, but also the hope, the visions, the wisdom of lived years and communities” (Tuck, 2009, p.417). Within these processes, it is crucial for settlers to think through their responsibilities to Indigenous Peoples and the lands they live on in reciprocal and beneficial ways, within the academy and beyond. Academic research must not solely stay within the university, but must also be connected to on-the-ground actions within communities, and settler scholar-activists upholding an “ethics of *making space and showing face*” (Tuck, 2013, p.365, emphasis in original). Being a settler accomplice means educating and positioning oneself, being uncomfortable, unlearning and relearning, and building long term relationships with Indigenous communities - all which are foundational aspects of any anti-oppression and solidarity work on Turtle Island. Accomplices, not allies, as Indigenous Action Media (2014) asserts, fight alongside Indigenous communities in struggles towards liberation; “the work of an accomplice in anti-colonial struggle is to attack colonial structures and ideas” (p.7). Accomplices are not temporary or self-proclaimed.

As Regan asserts, “settlers cannot just theorize about decolonizing and liberatory struggle; [settlers] must experience it, beginning with [them]selves as individuals, and then as morally and ethically responsible socio-political actors in Canadian society” (2010, p.23-24). My responsibility is to be self-reflexive and critical of my privileges, recognizing that discomfort is crucial and that it can be transformative within this work. This work is very important, and it is also important that awareness and education within settler communities does not fall to Indigenous Peoples. White and non-Indigenous peoples need to deal with their own issues around racism and settler colonialism. Settler scholar Richard Day asks “what does the resurgence of Indigenous individuals, cultures, and powers, their recovery of their lands, traditions, and powers mean to and for [settlers] as we struggle to decolonize ourselves?” (2010,

p.262). I recognize that self-education is integral, but it is also vital to *embody* accompliceship and take responsibility – my *ability to respond* – and find my own ways of “building decolonizing practices, engaging in transformative struggle, and supporting the resurgence of Indigenous nationhood without claiming or pretending to possess a connection to the spiritual and material practices of Indigenous identity” (Lowman & Barker, 2015, p.113).

Although settlers today, such as myself, are not complicit in a legal sense in crimes that happened before we were born, we still continue to benefit from the dispossession of Indigenous Peoples from their lands due to the historic and contemporary structures of settler colonialism. As French-Tunisian scholar Alfred Memmi highlights, “all Europeans in the colonies are *de facto* colonizers, and whether they want to be or not, they are colonizers in some ways” (1967, p.130). Memmi’s work, although written in 1967 about colonialism in Africa, resonates contemporarily in the settler colonial context of Canada: settlers are *implicated*. Implicated subjects “occupy positions aligned with power and privilege without being themselves direct agents of harm; they contribute to, inhabit, inherit, or benefit from regimes of domination but do not originate or control such regimes” (Rothberg, 2019, p.1). Reflecting on and confronting our privileges and implication is absolutely crucial for struggles towards justice. This means that settlers must become reflexive and responsible, embodying actions that embrace difference and solidarity with Indigenous communities, and to use “approaches that acknowledge complicity and move [settlers] from objectifying thinking” (Regan, 2010, p.33).

Reconciliation is Dead

“To put it simply, before two parties can reconcile they must, at some earlier time, have been conciled”

- Chrisjohn & Wasacase, 2009

“The real task of reconciliation, however, is not in Canada waiting around to be forgiven for colonialism so business can carry on as usual; it is for Canadians to end the ongoing colonial violence that still suffocates Indigenous lives”

– Erica Violet Lee, 2016



Photo by Emily Fagan (<https://www.martlet.ca/news-unsettled-reconciliation-is-dead/>)

In February 2020, during the RCMP raids on the Wet’suwet’en blockades, the statement ‘Reconciliation is Dead’ kept appearing on my newsfeed. It encouraged me to reflect on state promises and platitudes of reconciliation, compared with the on-the-ground realities of the government in regards to extractive industries and Indigenous rights. Promises from the government became even more hollow when heavily armed RCMP officers enforced Coastal GasLink’s injunction against the Wet’suwet’en while arresting Indigenous Matriarchs and land protectors. This has led many Indigenous Peoples and settler accomplices to state that reconciliatory efforts are dead. I wonder, was reconciliation ever alive? It is important to note

that the term reconciliation originates from the Latin word ‘reconciliare’ which can be translated into ‘to make good again’ and/or ‘to repair’. How can something be ‘made good again’ if it was never good or fair in the first place? Furthermore, the term is not rooted in Indigenous languages, nor does it demand material changes or actions. Reconciliation is a European concept “with religious connotations of restoring one’s relationship to God... Reconciliation is not an Indigenous concept” (Corntassel, 2012, p.145).

Mi’kmaw lawyer and activist Pamela Palmater (2017) asserts that governments and institutions utilize the language of reconciliation as a means to move forward as though colonialism was in the past – something that can be acknowledged, forgiven and then forgotten. For example, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission focused heavily on the residential school system, and now, it seems as though many Canadians link reconciliation to the historical legacies of the residential school system, not to larger, contemporary structures of settler colonialism. As settler scholar Patrick Wolfe (1999) notes, colonialism is a structure, not an event. Colonialism is not something that happened in the past; it is ongoing and insidious and in many cases, willfully ignored by the majority of settlers. Mohawk scholar Taikaie Alfred proclaims that “the complete ignorance of Canadian society about the facts of their relationship with Indigenous peoples and the willful denial of historical reality by Canadians detracts from the possibility of any meaningful discussion on true reconciliation” (2009, p.181). Furthermore, the government’s desires to apologize and move forward, as though colonialism is ‘in the past,’ dampens Indigenous Peoples’ needs to “have the truth of Canada’s genocidal legacy brought to the fore and [to] advocate for reparations” (Palmater, 2017, p.74). Apologies for the residential school system are necessary but without ongoing reparations and actions towards building respectful relationships, reconciliation cannot be actualized. Palmater (2017) highlights that public officials

offer superficial forms of reconciliation, such as name changes on buildings, without addressing the contemporary crises facing many Indigenous communities, like non-potable water on many reserves or the high rates of homelessness and poverty. Therefore I ask, can speech acts without material changes truly alter or improve the fractured relationships between Indigenous Peoples and the Canadian state contemporarily?

The Reconciliation is Dead movement emphasizes that Indigenous Peoples and non-Indigenous supporters are tired of the Canadian government's hollow attempts at reconciliation. Reconciliation processes led by the Canadian government and the state have proven to be empty. Dene scholar Glen Coulthard names these processes as a liberal "politics of recognition" and that "this orientation to the reconciliation of Indigenous nationhood with state sovereignty is still *colonial* insofar as it remains structurally committed to the dispossession of Indigenous peoples of [their] lands and self-determining authority" (2014, p.151). It is easy to recognize Indigenous Peoples, but recognition and reconciliation without change ultimately prove meaningless. Often, these state forms of recognition are merely continuations of colonialism by new means (Yellowhead Institute, 2019, p.36). Michif-Cree activist Tawinikay asserts that "the concept [of reconciliation] is a state-led smoke screen used to advance a more sophisticated policy of assimilation" (2018, para. 10). Reconciliation, without material changes, is about rescuing settler colonialism and securing a settler futurity (Tuck and Yang, 2012, p. 35). Additionally, Martinican scholar Frantz Fanon argues that in situations of domination, the terms of recognition are often determined by the hegemonic group and their interests, and the oppressed group can come to depend on these affective attachments (1963); these attachments are essential to the hierarchization and exploitative conditions of the relationship.

Although many promises are made, the “goal of Indigenous assimilation and integration into ‘Canadian society’ remains as the foundation of reconciliation platitudes underlying the new partnership moving forward” (Palmater, 2017, p.74); this upholds the colonial status quo and continues the economic exploitation of Indigenous lands. These state-offered governing relations do not challenge settler colonialism or capitalism in what is now known as Canada, and merely work to uphold many of the ongoing paternalistic relationships between the state and Indigenous communities. Recognition has often been framed through the lens of the state’s colonial desires, rather than through a framework of reciprocity and mutual benefit. This and the lack of actions by the Canadian government have led many people to understand state forms of reconciliation to be ineffective and, thereby, *dead*. Reconciliation, according to Ojibwe activist Jesse Wente,

was never really alive. It was a campaign slogan, a way to get elected to appear progressive, while advancing the same colonial agenda that has fueled Canada since its inception. And its death should not be mourned. What it should do is free us to do the actual work. What metrics of success were actually set out in this era of reconciliation? Whose agenda has it served? What progress has actually been made? What behaviors... have actually changed? ...There are 94 calls to action in the final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. A scant few of them can be considered accomplished, if any at all. Reconciliation deserved to die, as the truth remains too much for this country to bear. Now that we know reconciliation is dead, for all to see, we can stop pretending that this is a relationship to be saved. It is one to discard and start over...Give us back what was taken (2020, 2:31-3:47).

The statement ‘Reconciliation is Dead’ confronts the non-performative (Ahmed, 2006) and empty actions of the Canadian government and rejects their weak attempts of recognition. Inversely, “Indigenous demands for *cultural recognition* have often been expressed in ways that have explicitly called into question the dominating nature of capitalist social relations and the state-form” (Coulthard, 2007, p.447). Therefore, Indigenous Nations must self-affirm and decolonize on their own terms, away from the approval of the nation state (Coulthard, 2014, p.154). This rejection of the state and its colonial framework of reconciliation can generate anti-

colonial resistance within Indigenous communities and a re-building of kinship networks between humans and the environment. Leanne Simpson, an Anishinaabe scholar-activist, advocates for Indigenous resurgence through long-standing place-based practices and relationships with one another and the land;

Building diverse, nation-culture-based resurgences means significantly reinvesting in our own ways of being: regenerating our political and intellectual traditions; articulating and living our legal traditions; language learning; creating and using our artistic and performance based traditions. [Decolonization] requires [Indigenous Peoples] to reclaim the very best practices of our traditional cultures, knowledge systems and lifeways in the dynamic, fluid, compassionate, respectful context in which they were originally generated (Simpson, as cited in Coulthard, 2014, p. 155).

Wet'suwet'en

This is what the Wet'suwet'en people at the Unist'ot'en Camp are asserting – a reclamation of their communities towards justice, self-determination and resurgence that rejects the colonial logics of the settler state. The state has historically and contemporarily utilized modes of dispossession to exploit Indigenous lands and resources, which together with more recent performative acts of reconciliation work to further entrench colonialism, albeit more subversively. These colonial acts have led to the current Reconciliation is Dead movement, which fueled global solidarity in the winter of 2020 with the Wet'suwet'en People's fight against the Coastal GasLink pipeline, a \$6.6 billion project that would carry fracked natural gas to the west coast of what is now known as British Columbia.

Background

“By its continued denial of Wet'suwet'en title, the Province [of British Columbia] avoids the hard work of reconciling its longstanding failure to respect Indigenous land rights with the continued existence and resurgence of Wet'suwet'en law and governance”

- Gunn & McIvor, 2020, p.11

“They want to talk about reconciliation? Well, I don’t know if I ever want to use that word again. My definition: to reconcile must be two guilty parties coming together. What the hell did we do except be Wet’suwet’en? Not once did we break our law”

- Wet’suwet’en Hereditary Chief Na’moks, as cited in Morin, 2019

Most of British Columbia has never been signed by treaty. There were 14 Douglas treaties signed on Vancouver Island and Treaty 8 extends over portions of Northeastern BC. The rest of the province is unceded. The Wet’suwet’en Nation has never signed a treaty and their long standing Indigenous laws should legally be upheld. However, the province of BC has imposed authority over Indigenous lands since the 1860s unjustly and unlawfully (Gunn & McIvor, 2020, p.10). Furthermore, even when Indigenous Nations haven’t signed treaties, they are still treated as living on Crown lands under Canadian law; “this is the legacy of the Crown’s assumed discovery and pre-emptive rights. On treaty and non-treaty lands, Indigenous territorial authority has been extremely compromised” (Yellowhead Institute, 2019, p.17). Although the majority of British Columbia is unceded, currently 94% of the province has been claimed as Crown land (Yellowhead Institute, 2019, p.24). Colonial state impositions over Indigenous territories have significantly impacted Indigenous Peoples’ modes of self-determination over their lands, regardless of treaty or not. However, many Indigenous Peoples in what is known as British Columbia, including members of the Unist’ot’en Clan, are demanding self-determining authority over their lands that have *never* been ceded to the Canadian state.

According to the BC Treaty Commission, Indigenous Nations in BC were first able to pursue Aboriginal rights in 1970, but most nations – with the exception of the Nisga’a Nation – had to wait until 1993. In 1997, the Delgamuukw case, led by the Gitksan and Wet’suwet’en Peoples, set several important legal precedents: that oral histories could be recognized as evidence in court, and that Aboriginal title had never been relinquished in what is now known as

British Columbia (Jang, 2017). Therefore, the Wet'suwet'en and the Gitksan Nations have never ceded their Aboriginal rights to over two million hectares of their traditional territories. After this decision, the Supreme Court attempted to arrange a negotiated settlement, with the provincial government only offering the Nations control over 4-6% of their territories. The Chiefs refused this arrangement, and because of that, currently the boundaries of the Wet'suwet'en and Gitksan Nations have not been recognized in Canadian law (Forester, 2020). Since there is no formal agreement with the state, the Hereditary Chiefs have to give consent before any projects begin construction on their territories. However, there are often disagreements between the traditional Hereditary Chiefs and the elected band councils over resource projects and land titles.

Wet'suwet'en Matriarch and Elder Yagalahl asserts that

when you tell the truth you have no fear. One hundred and fifty some years ago, it started: the greed. It's the greed that has come in and that is what is splitting up a lot of the [Wet'suwet'en] people, where they've been paid dollars – dangling dollars in front of them, and I know that for a fact because I was one of the elected chiefs for quite a number of years, and money was dangled in front of me...They wanted me to agree to the pipeline going through and I said no. I said that's not why we went to court. We went to court to protect our land and our territories, and I said this is not protecting it (Forester, 2020).

Contemporarily, the Coastal GasLink project does not have consent from the Hereditary Chiefs (Carrigg, 2020) who are responsible for decision-making related to ancestral Wet'suwet'en lands beyond the reserve boundaries.

The Coastal GasLink pipeline and the RCMP presence on unceded Wet'suwet'en territories recently has brought the Delgamuukw decision to the forefront of national conversations. In December 2018, the BC Supreme Court issued an injunction prohibiting land protectors from interfering with construction on the Coastal GasLink pipeline. This led to heavily armed RCMP on the territories in January 2019, working in tandem with Coastal GasLink and the provincial government to push through the pipeline and 'sterilize the site'. Reports came out

later that the RCMP was prepared to use lethal force against Wet'suwet'en land defenders. In December 2019, the injunction was extended until the end of construction, leading to further RCMP presence throughout the winter of 2019-2020 and the arrests of Indigenous Matriarchs and supporters. With the RCMP forcibly removing Indigenous land defenders on their ancestral and unceded lands in this era of the TRC, it became clear that violence against Indigenous Peoples has become the "hallmark of reconciliation" (McIvor, 2020, p.33). Reconciliation has become meaningless, empty, and corrupt. As Hereditary Chief Na'moks stated, "reconciliation is not at the barrel of a gun" (Morin, 2019).

On March 1, 2020, the Minister of Crown-Indigenous Relations Carolyn Bennett – who has been called the minister of reconciliation ("5 questions", 2016) - and her British Columbia counterpart Scott Fraser signed a "draft arrangement" on Aboriginal rights and title with a number of the Wet'suwet'en Chiefs. Bennett stated that this arrangement will "breathe life" into the 1997 Delgamuukw decision and that they hope this agreement can help to establish protocols on negotiations ("Tentative Deal", 2020). However, Fraser concurrently stated that the Coastal GasLink project has been approved and is moving forward. Also, Coastal GasLink has stated that the company "appreciates" that Wet'suwet'en rights and titles have been acknowledged but they have passed permits and will continue construction on the project ("Wet'suwet'en Chiefs", 2020). This arrangement was spurred by disagreements about the Coastal GasLink project, but it appears to have not changed anything regarding the project beyond recognition and acknowledgement of the Wet'suwet'en Nation. While agreements like this can result in 'recognized' rights, "they do not breathe life back into fulsome Indigenous jurisdiction" (Yellowhead Institute, 2019, p.48). Recognition and acknowledgment are not enough. The Hereditary Chiefs have rejected the Coastal GasLink project and referenced the Delgamuukw

case when asserting their title over their lands, as the proposed pipeline route would cut through portions of their territory.

Regarding the draft arrangement, the details from March 1st were not made public at the time. However, on May 14th, 2020, an agreement entitled “Memorandum of Understanding [MOU] between Canada, British Columbia and Wet’suwet’en as agreed on February 29, 2020”, was signed by the Hereditary Chiefs and made public. The goal is to “come to an agreement recognizing Wet’suwet’en rights and title” (Bellrichard, 2020, para. 22). Again, we see the word ‘recognition’. As Coulthard eloquently highlights, “in situations where colonial rule does not depend solely on the exercise of state violence, its reproduction instead rests on the ability to entice Indigenous peoples to *identify*, either implicitly or explicitly, with the profoundly *asymmetrical* and *nonreciprocal* forms of recognition either imposed on or granted to them by the settler state and society” (2014, p.25).

Although this agreement could be understood as quite meaningful, it is important to be critical of state interventions. Knedebeas, a Unist’ot’en Hereditary Chief stated that “signing this thing doesn't mean it's a done deal” and that there is much work to be done (Bellrichard, 2020, para.23 & 24). Also, this MOU does not affect construction on the Coastal GasLink pipeline at all. It is critical to highlight that reconciliation and recognition agreements initiated by the state, such as this, have not proved fruitful, and as Coulthard outlines, in the Delgamuukw case, Indigenous rights could be infringed upon by the government if the government’s projects furthered “‘a compelling and substantial legislative objective’ that is ‘consistent with the special fiduciary relationship between the Crown and the [A]boriginal peoples’” (Tully, as quoted in Coulthard, 2007, p.451). This includes exploitative and extractive industries and projects, such as forestry, mining, and pipelines, that could bolster the economic development of the province and

settler society (Coulthard, 2007, p. 451). These arrangements by the state merely recognize Indigenous rights and titles, but only as long as they do not impact the economic motives of the state, corporations and the colonial relationship.

It is clear that many of the Wet'suwet'en Hereditary Chiefs and supporters are critical of the colonial government and their attempts to engage in dialogue and create agreements. One example that strongly highlights the lack of respect from the state is the February 10th, 2020, arrests of Indigenous Matriarchs at the Unist'ot'en Camp, which followed weeks of RCMP standoffs on Wet'suwet'en lands dictated by the colonial government and extractive industries. RCMP officers invaded the Unist'ot'en territory, arresting and removing Freda Huson (Chief Howilhkat), Brenda Michell (Chief Geltiy), Dr. Karla Tait, and four other Indigenous land defenders. A wooden sign with the word "reconciliation" painted on it was sawed in half by the RCMP as they broke the gate and approached the women in ceremony. A Canadian flag with "Reconciliation Is Dead" written on it was thrown in the fire by camp members. According to the Unist'ot'en Camp website,

they were arrested in the middle of a ceremony to honour the ancestors. Police tore down the red dresses that were hung to hold the spirits of missing and murdered Indigenous women, girls, and two spirit people. They extinguished [their] sacred fire. [They] have had enough. Enough dialogue, discussion, negotiation at the barrel of a gun. Canada comes to colonize. Reconciliation is dead. It is time to fight for [their] land, [their] lives, [their] children, [their] future. Revolution lives ("Reconciliation is dead. Revolution is alive", n.d.).

Unist'ot'en Camp

I would like to briefly situate the Camp and give context to their resistance against the state and colonial impositions. The Unist'ot'en Camp is an Indigenous camp that was founded in 2010 by members of the Wet'suwet'en Nation in what is now known as Central British Columbia. The Unist'ot'en Camp was initially created to stand in the way of the proposed

Northern Gateway Enbridge pipeline, but they have also been resisting other extractive projects and companies, such as Lions Gate Metals, the Tar Sands Gigaproject and LNG proposals from the Horn River Basin Fracturing Projects company (“Wet’suwet’en People”, n.d.) and more recently, Coastal GasLink. Members of the Unist’ot’en Camp are asserting authority and self-determination over their unceded territories as they have done since time immemorial.

On the Unist’ot’en Camp website, they proclaim that they are not a protest or a demonstration, but that they are asserting sovereignty over their traditional and ancestral territory. Under Governance Structure (n.d), they state that their “homestead is a peaceful expression of [their] connection to [their] territory [and]..is also an example of the continuous use and occupation of [their] territory by [their] clan. [Their] traditional structures of governance continue to dictate the proper use of and access to [their] lands and water.” They are actively resisting colonial impositions by living in deep reciprocity and accountability with the land, water, humans, non-humans, and the physical, spiritual and ancestral worlds. They often post photos and videos online of members hunting, fishing, trapping, harvesting berries and roots, and building communal structures and shelters, highlighting their deep connections and relationships with the land. It becomes clear to see the ways in which the people at Unist’ot’en Camp are embodying practices of “grounded normativity” - coined by Glen Coulthard – which uphold “ethical frameworks generated by these place-based practices and associated knowledges” (2014, p.60). Members of the Unist’ot’en Camp are moving away from the “structure of settler colonialism and into the processes and relationships of freedom and self-determination” (Simpson, 2017, p.17). These longstanding practices highlight how deeply embedded and generative the land is within Indigenous knowledges, languages and societies. These practices

and ways of being on and with the land come from “Indigenous thought systems, intelligence systems that are continually generated in relationship to place” (Simpson, 2017, p.16).

Resurgence

Because of their unflinching determination in the face of corporate colonialism and capitalism, as well as their utilizing of “radical Indigenous resurgence as a mechanism for [their] continuance as Indigenous peoples” (Simpson, 2017, p.25), the Unist’ot’en Camp and their supporters have become an active embodiment of resistance. By disrupting the capitalist industrial complex, the rapacious greed of corporations, and opposing the colonial nation-state and its oppressive attempts to control Indigenous lands and territories, Unist’ot’en Camp members are actively living their resurgent futurities into being. Wet’suwet’en leaders Freda Huson and Dini Ze Smolgelgem (Toghestiy), along with Gitxsan and Wet’suwet’en activist Mel Bazil, have asserted that:

thankfully, beneath the layers of Westernized rule there remain many grassroots people who remember their old teachings; they remember the stories, songs, and dances; they remember the hopes and dreams of those who fell victim to the first diseases; they remember that they are still warriors. In Wet’suwet’en country, the grassroots warriors are the “Lhe Lin Liyin.” We are committed to stopping all pipelines, and working closely with others who fight the injustices of illegitimate governments and multinational corporations. The Lhe Lin Liyin will win, like so many of our ancestors before us. (Walia, 2013, p.89)

Unist’ot’en members know that they do not need to be recognized by the Canadian state and that forms of reconciliation by the state are meaningless. “Given that reconciliation is not an Indigenous concept, [their] overarching goal as Indigenous peoples should not be to restore an asymmetrical relationship with the state but to restory² [their] communities towards justice”

² Sucker Creek First Nation leader Brian Caillou (2015) asserts that restorying is about upholding Indigenous wisdoms, traditions and strengths, and incorporating these into everyday life and communities. He states that “so much of social scientific literature up to this point highlights the problems in Indigenous communities. We’re telling

(Corntassel, 2012, p.145). These leaders are restorying their communities, utilizing their traditional and ancestral legal systems to govern their peoples and their lands, and upholding the authority and legitimacy of these systems. Simpson proclaims that members of the Unist'ot'en Camp are partaking in a "taking back of space in that the communities that maintain the blockades are often reinvigorating Indigenous governance, ceremony, economic systems, education, and systems of caring" (2017, p.242). Additionally, these leaders and land protectors recognize the emptiness of the state's actions, such as the prime minister of Canada purchasing a pipeline or the premier of British Columbia not implementing material changes towards the United Nations Declaration of Indigenous Peoples. Matriarch Freda Huson affirms that Indigenous laws supersede any law outside of their territory and that these colonial governments have no authority over what happens on their Indigenous lands. Further, Cherokee scholar Jeff Corntassel notes that decolonial praxis must move beyond colonial political structures and empty symbols towards everyday actions of resistance and solidarity. He proclaims that "this shift means rejecting the performativity of a rights discourse geared toward state affirmation and recognition, and embracing a daily existence conditioned by place-based cultural practices" (2012, p.89). In response to the proposed Coastal GasLink project on unceded Wet'suwet'en lands and the violence by the RCMP, Huson has stated that she blames the state: "This is not reconciliation. [They are] treating [her] chiefs and [them] as criminals. [They are] not criminals. This is [their] land" (Ducklow, 2019).

Huson and supporters at the Camp recognize how important it is to protect the land for future generations, as well as how important it is to live in reciprocity with the land and practice their Indigenous ways of knowing and being. Colonialism has attempted to disrupt the

a different story here – we're talking about the strengths and successes in these communities. The premise being that there's a lot of wisdom in Indigenous communities that we can learn from" (para.11).

connections that Indigenous Peoples have had with their lands since contact. Watts proclaims that “colonial interpretations of nature/creation... act to centre the human and peripherate nature into an exclusionary relationship. Land becomes scaled and modified in terms of progress and advancement” (2013, p.26). But many Indigenous Peoples’ modes of governance and ways of being are based on relationships *with* the land. Progress and advancement are colonial impositions that hierarchize profit over lands and communities. Indigenous sovereignty is related to Indigenous “connections to the earth and is inherent. The idea of a nation did not simply apply to human beings. [Many Indigenous Nations] call the buffalo or, the wolves, the fish, the trees, and all are nations. Each is sovereign, an equal part of the creation, interdependent, interwoven, and all related” (Venne, as cited in Watts, 2013, p. 23).

Upholding relationships with the land and each other on a daily basis are direct acts of resistance by Indigenous Peoples against settler colonialism. Unist’ot’en leaders and supporters have moved away from the politics of state reconciliation towards an embodiment of Indigenous resurgence, one that is rejecting settler colonialism and one that is deeply connected to self-determination and kinship networks built of consent and reciprocity with the land and one another. The 2020 global solidarity movement with the Unist’ot’en highlights how the emptiness of reconciliation politics is coming to the forefront of conversations around Indigenous rights and titles, as well as settler responsibilities.

Personal Experiences & Responsibilities

As a settler, what are my responsibilities? How can I be more accountable and stand with Indigenous Peoples in their struggles for self-determination and sovereignty? Settlers are “colonial beneficiaries who bear a responsibility to address the inequities and injustices from which they have profited” (Regan, 2010, p.47). Thinking through these questions led me to travel

to the Camp in 2015 and 2020³. I witnessed many moments of community building, solidarity, reciprocity, responsibility, joy and love. Thinking through my positionality, it is important to realize that “how the non-Native majority of the population responds to Indigenous activism will have a fundamental impact in shaping the success or failure of twenty-first-century anti-colonial resistance movements” (Keefer, 2010, p.78).

In early 2015, I was feeling hopeless in the face of climate change, neoliberalism and late capitalism. After posting my frustrations online, a friend informed me about the Unist’ot’en Camp and their need for support and volunteers. My friend and I decided to host a fundraiser in our community on unceded Sinixt territory (Nelson, BC). Later that year, we traveled to the camp to give them the cheque and other requested supplies, such as bulk food and kitchenware, and to use our bodies, hands and hearts to resist pipelines and extractive projects. As Grassy Narrows First Nations activist Judy Da Silva highlights, education is important but the “biggest education is hands-on” (2010, p.76) and from the heart. Prior to leaving, we emailed Huson to ask her permission. This was important for us, as we did not want to arrive unannounced. She gave us her consent. When we arrived at the bridge, we met with other Wet’suwet’en Elders who decided whether or not they wanted us on their territory. This process represented Indigenous self-determination, as well as building relationships of reciprocity, trust and accountability. I did not expect or assume to be given consent and I recognized my positionality as a settler on their lands and that the consent was ongoing and could be revoked at any time. These practices are

³ Days after I finished this research paper, the Unist’ot’en Camp leaders and organizers put a call out for volunteers to come and help them prepare for winter. My partner and I signed up and went to the camp from August 25th - September 4th, 2020. We chopped wood, carried wood, organized spaces, did construction work, and laid and levelled the foundations for a trailer shed and a smokehouse. We worked with our bodies and hands for 6+ hours a day. This was one of the most enriching experiences of my life. The research and theorizing in this paper encouraged me to use my body and my heart to stand with Indigenous self-determination and resistance and to practice decolonization. I am so grateful for the Unist’ot’en people for allowing my partner and I to come to their territory and I hope to return again soon.

necessary, and in certain situations, the answer will be no. This has to extend to governments and corporations in regards to extractive projects.

One of the main projects we worked on during our visit was the construction of the three-part healing centre. Huson wanted to open this space so that more Indigenous Peoples could visit and become more connected to the land. The healing centre has since been completed and the camp now offers gatherings for Indigenous youth, women, Two-Spirit people and men. On the Unist'ot'en Camp's website, Karla Tait, a Wet'suwet'en Matriarch, proclaims that many Indigenous Peoples who have come to the camp have found it to be a healing experience because of the deep connections to the land. The healing lodge and workshops offer an extension of that experience, as they can provide more space for people to stay, as well as "a chance to return to some of [their] traditional teachings and land-based wellness practices of [their] ancestors" (Tait, "Healing Centre", n.d.).

Unist'ot'en leaders are upholding Indigenous traditions, practices and cultures, as well as their responsibilities to the land, to the water and to the community. They are not basing their lives around capital or excess, but instead, around building "networks of meaningful, deep, fluid, intimate collective and individual relationships of trust" (Simpson, 2017, p.77). Self-determination is not about control or dominance over the land, but it is about recognizing responsibilities and building relations. These relationships of trust and healing fan out to include not only humans, but all creatures and non-human beings and matter within a place. By rejecting state reconciliatory politics and living on their lands - as they have always done - the Unist'ot'en Camp members are actively living what the movement, Reconciliation is Dead, works to achieve. "Just as the only guarantee of freedom is the practice of freedom, so too with reconciliation and resurgence" (Borrows & Tully, 2018, p.14). These are practice-based and

action-based. Members of the Unist'ot'en Camp are embodying their longstanding practices of Indigenous self-determination over their lands and reclaiming what is rightfully theirs.

Indigenous-Settler Relationships

“Understand what struggles are about and know who is participating in them. Get to know those people. Build relationships. Build meaningful relationships outside of the occupation, as friends. It can't start from a place of white guilt. Don't get swept up in your own settler redemption story...Remember that fighting for a future that sees justice for Indigenous communities is not just done as comrades in their struggles. It should be a politic you live every day. You can do this without speaking on their behalf. Be thoughtful. And creative. And, whenever possible, just work to undermine and attack the Canadian state in all of your work. That is the work of decolonization. And it's where you will find your own liberation too. This is your government, not theirs, and it shouldn't be [Indigenous Peoples'] responsibility to tear it down”

- Tawinikay, 2018

“Settler colonialism and its decolonization implicates and unsettles everyone”

– Tuck and Yang, 2012, p. 7

My experiences at the camp deeply informed me on how to become responsible and that this is ongoing, life-long work. Confrontations like this begin with an awareness of what happened in the past, but also must include a recognition that settler colonialism is not something ‘of the past’. South Asian activist Harsha Walia (2012) highlights the importance of “cultivating an ethics of responsibility within the Indigenous solidarity movement [that] begins with non-natives understanding ourselves to be beneficiaries of the illegal settlement of Indigenous peoples’ land and unjust appropriation of Indigenous peoples’ resources and jurisdiction” (p.28). These reflections and realizations can be deeply uncomfortable, but can be important sites for change and growth (Hunt & Holmes, 2015), particularly for people who occupy overlapping positions of privilege. Moving beyond thinking of reconciliation and decolonization as metaphorical (Tuck & Yang, 2012), can propel settlers to act and stand in solidarity with

Indigenous Peoples and embody a politics of accountability; “allyship requires *accountability* on the part of members of the dominant group and is not predicated on reciprocity by those who are marginalized” (Hunt & Holmes, 2015, p.162). According to the Catalyst Project (n.d.), some pertinent questions to ask are: “What are Indigenous organizers calling for - their visions or demands? What would achieving those visions mean for the place you call home? How can you work towards supporting those visions or demands?” (“~Homework”, n.d.). This questioning must be an ongoing process, and begins by being critical and searching for the truth about the lands where we live. Long-term educational work is necessary for settlers in order to build solidarity with Indigenous communities towards Indigenous self-determination. Furthermore, “these personal responses, if reflected upon self-critically, are a springboard for social-political action” (Regan, 2010, p.32); social-political actions that are place-specific and collaborative, depending on communities’ capacities, capabilities and strategies. Although reconciliation is being understood as dead, Indigenous youth Boston Lafferty underscores that this doesn’t mean that the relationships between Indigenous Peoples and settlers are unsalvageable. He states:

Support [Indigenous Peoples] where we need support. Work with [Indigenous Peoples] to expose and denounce the crimes committed by Canada’s government. We can all succeed at creating something entirely different and better than the husk of a word that is reconciliation. All that we need is to work together, closely, and follow the direction and guidance of Indigenous youth. Reconciliation is dead, but its death does not bode the end. Rather, it has left space for all of us, together, to do it right this time (2020, para. 7).

Decolonial work cannot just remain theoretical, but must be connected to the “place-based nature of ongoing colonialism in the lands and communities in which we live” (Hunt & Holmes, 2015, p.157). It is imperative to critically examine the places and lands we live and pass through, as well as think through everyday actions of solidarity with Indigenous communities in their struggles for recognition, land repatriation, and self-determination. According to the Indigenous

Action Network (2014), in order to begin the work of an accomplice and learn more about the lands you occupy, it is important to do ground work, do research and pay attention.

Land Back

“The land issue must be addressed before reconciliation can begin”
 – Arthur Manuel, 2017

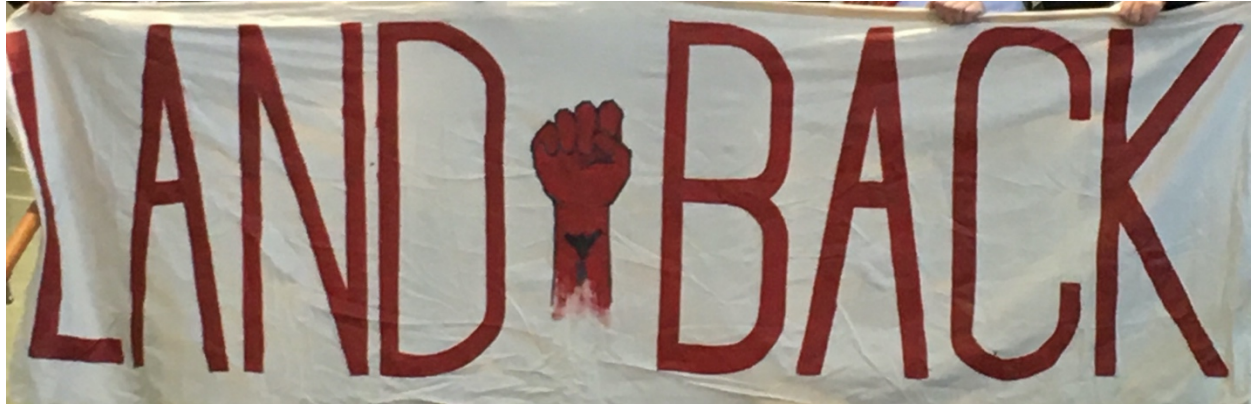


Fig. 6., Feb 2020, M-A Murphy, protest downtown Amiskwaciwâskahikan

Although reconciliatory education and awareness is absolutely important, there have to be actions based around land and self-determining authority, otherwise, reconciliation efforts are beginning to be understood as empty or dead. Alfred underscores that “a notion of reconciliation that rearranges political orders, reforms legalities and promotes economics is still colonial unless and until it centres [Indigenous] relationship to land” (Alfred, 2017, p.13). Recently, Land Back has emerged as a demand regarding Indigenous self-determination, land reclamation and decolonial material acts.

The Reconciliation is Dead movement and the Land Back movement gained popularity in what seemed like similar time frames in what is now known as Canada. Both movements highlight the ongoing, tenuous, and unjust relationships that Indigenous Peoples have with the settler colonial state and its structures. According to the Yellowhead Institute, “one of the loudest and most frequent demands of Indigenous peoples in the relationship with settlers is for the

return of the land” (2019, p.8). Currently, Indigenous reserves make up 0.2% of the Canadian land base.

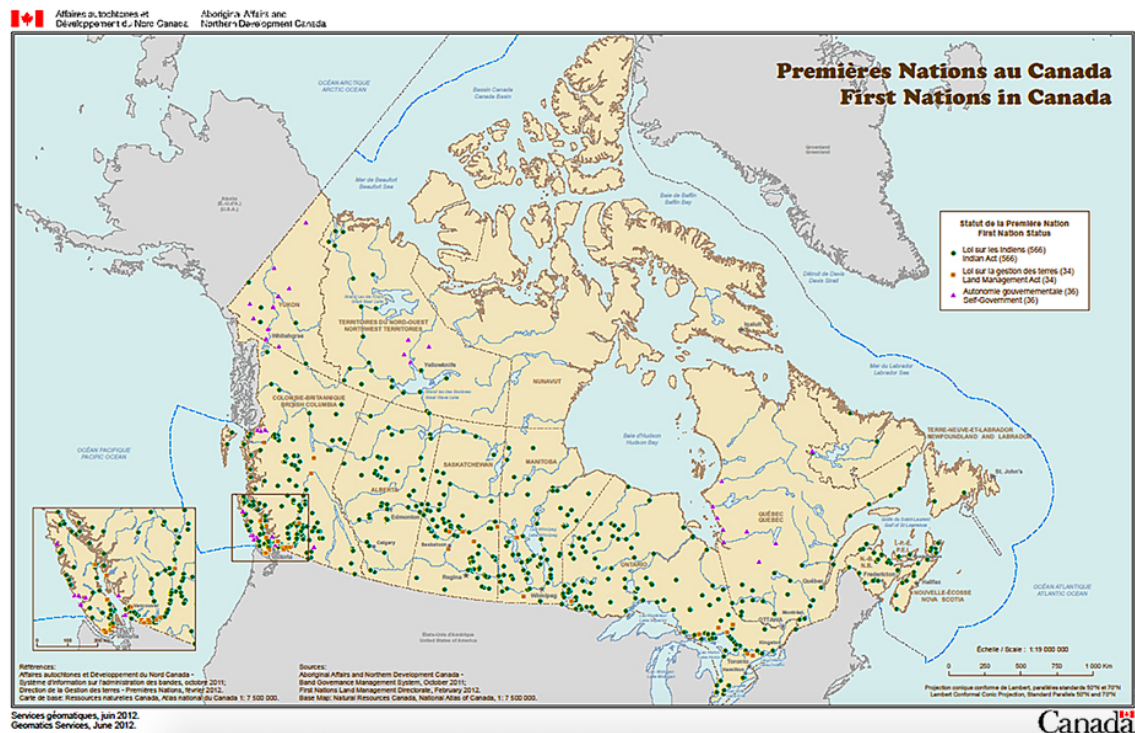


Fig. 7., June 2012, Geomatics Services. A map showing where First Nations reserves are located (green dots). They highlight how much the Indigenous land base has decreased since colonization.

The late Ktunaxa and Secwepemc activist and academic Arthur Manuel states that Canada should expand the Indigenous land base beyond 0.2% to an appropriate size that could accommodate Indigenous Peoples’ rights to self-determination and sovereignty, based on the international human rights of Indigenous Peoples as self-governing nations. He proclaims that “every Indigenous nation in Canada has underlying title to their entire territory” and should have “exclusive rights to a land base starting from 3-to-5 million acres so [they] can protect [their] language, culture, laws and economy” (2017, para.19). He further asserts that it is impossible to achieve reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples until land is given back. In this era of reconciliation, it may seem as though there is progress: negotiations, agreements, recognition,

etc. But for many Indigenous Peoples who are asserting self-determination and land rights outside of reserve lands, these do not go far enough (Yellowhead Institute, 2019, p.8). “ ‘Give it back’ means to restore the livelihood, demonstrate respect for what is shared – the land – by making things right through compensation, restoration of freedom, dignity, and livelihood” (Saysewahum, as cited in Yellowhead Institute, 2019, p.53). Alfred (2009) highlights that this isn’t necessarily about settlers moving back to where their ancestors came from, but about settlers being respectful and returning enough of the land so that Indigenous Peoples can be self-sufficient and thrive. He continues by stating that colonialism cannot be addressed without recognizing the theft of land and eventually returning some of it. Land Back highlights the importance of Indigenous Peoples having autonomy over their lands and caring for their lands. Further, Manuel recognizes that it is crucial for Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples to work together to create a better future for younger generations. Land Back is not solely about rights or justice; it is also about Indigenous self-determination, leadership and stewardship of the land, which can support and protect all people from climate change disasters, loss of biodiversity, destruction and environmental crises (Schabus, 2017).

Furthermore, Tuck and Yang assert that the cultivation of critical consciousness, literature and pedagogy is important, but unless there are material changes based around land, there cannot be an actuality of decolonization. They articulate that although “the details are not fixed or agreed upon, decolonization in the settler colonial context must involve the repatriation of land simultaneous to the recognition of how land and relations to land have always already been differently understood and enacted; that is, *all* of the land and not just symbolically” (2012, p.8). This can begin with settlers learning about the actual history of the lands they are on, and then working to build relationships with Indigenous communities in their struggles for land

reclamations and reparations. Day asserts that the best option is for settlers to “buy land from the Canadians and offer a substantial, non-swampy chunk to the Indigenous nation(s) from whom it was taken, no strings attached” (2010, p.268). He further proclaims that - after giving land back - Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples could commit to live as neighbors respectfully, equally and peacefully, nation-to-nation, as the Two Row Wampum belt treaty⁴ outlines. Along with the returning of land, there should be other reparations depending on each nation’s needs and desires, such as environmental cleanup, educational centres, healing initiatives, sustainable housing, clean water, etc. (Waziyatawin, 2009, p.196).

The time of empty governmental and institutional efforts is over. There cannot be actual reconciliation until there is a returning of land (Manuel, 2017). Alfred further reminds us that

genuine reconciliation is impossible without recognizing Indigenous peoples’ right to freedom and self-determination, instituting restitution by returning enough of [their] lands so that [they] can regain economic self-sufficiency, and honoring our treaty relationships. Without these commitments reconciliation will remain a “pacifying discourse” that functions to assuage settler guilt, on the one hand, and absolute the federal government’s responsibility to transform the colonial relationship between Canada and Indigenous nations, on the other (cited in Coulthard, 2014, p.127).

Many Indigenous Peoples are demanding material reparations and meaningful connections with their lands. How can we, Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, create a future based on respect, reciprocity, and *alive* and ongoing relationship-building? Part of this requires settlers to learn about the lands where they stand, to support Indigenous Peoples and to demand change

⁴ The Two-Row Wampum Treaty Belt was an agreement made in 1613 between the Haudenosaunee and the Dutch that was based on three principles: friendship, peace and forever. It shows two canoes side by side, flowing down a river together, never interfering with one another and always respecting each groups’ ways of being and governance. The treaty states that “Together we will travel in Friendship and in Peace Forever; as long as the grass is green, as long as the water runs downhill, as long as the sun rises in the East and sets in the West, and as long as our Mother Earth will last” (“Two Row Wampum”, n.d.)

from the government. According to Dakota academic Waziyatawin, “reparations are not simply a potential option, they are a settler obligation and an Indigenous right” (2009, p.198).

Current Situation

“The winter of 2020 has revealed the deep commitment on the part of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in Canada to work together to achieve justice for the Wet’suwet’en”
– Gunn, 2020, p.40

In June 2020, three RCMP officers with assault rifles conducted foot patrols around a smokehouse at the Gidimt’en Checkpoint near the Unist’ot’en Camp. Shortly after, Coastal GasLink workers left a notice stating that the structure must be relocated (Simmons, 2020). In July 2020, the province of BC ordered Coastal GasLink to halt pipeline construction because they had not undertaken the proper environmental assessment reviews and their construction could severely impact around 300 sensitive ecological areas along the proposed pipeline route (Simmons, 2020). Although Coastal GasLink has agreed to comply with the order, this breach of trust shows the company’s lack of interest in obtaining consent from Indigenous Nations and their drive for profit. Wet’suwet’en Chief Gisday’wa and his family members were recently allowed onto parts of their territory and they wept at how much land had been cleared and the amount of construction that had taken place to build a massive Coastal GasLink man camp (Morin, 2020). Even though the world is experiencing the global pandemic of COVID-19, construction on the pipeline has been deemed essential, further endangering Indigenous communities with increasing numbers of people travelling to their territories, potentially bringing disease. Along with the risk of COVID-19, man camps⁵ have been linked to increasing violence

⁵ Man camps are “temporary housing facilities constructed for predominantly male workers on resource development projects in the oil, pipeline, mining, hydroelectric, and forestry industries. Reports show a direct correlation between these encampments and violence against women”, children and Two Spirit people (“What are man camps”, Secwepemcul’ecw Assembly, n.d.).

against Indigenous women, girls and Two Spirit people (Morin, 2020). Further research could be done on Wet'suwet'en resistance against these two ongoing pandemics: COVID-19 and gendered violence exacerbated by extractive industries and man camps.

The Unist'ot'en Camp and their supporters will continue to fight against Coastal GasLink and other extractive companies. We must stand with them and with other Indigenous Nations fighting for self-determination over their lands, such as the Squamish, Tsleil-Waututh and the Coldwater nations who were denied the right in July 2020 to appeal the federal government's second approval of the Trans Mountain pipeline project that would travel from the oil sands to the West Coast. This is one of many examples of the colonial government failing Indigenous Peoples and failing reconciliation. Wet'suwet'en Matriarch Molly Wickham states that "this is a really important time in our history. This isn't just going to go away. I feel like this is going to be increasingly tense. I don't think people are willing to be pacified anymore with all of the cumulative injustices that are happening, and they're coming to a head" (Simmons, 2020). The Unist'ot'en People, along with their supporters and accomplices, are continuing to fight for their lands and their communities. Their lands have never been ceded and the struggles against colonial impositions will continue until they have self-determination over their lands. Their struggle is one example of many struggles on Turtle Island against empty promises, resource exploitation and government and corporate greed. "The hollow word "reconciliation" is being confronted by real resistance and rebellion – and that is profound and powerful" (Yesno, 2020).

#ReconciliationIsDead

#RevolutionIsAlive

Conclusion

"It's all of us... We're all working together"
 – Donald, as cited in Lee, 2012, para. 9

This paper highlights the Reconciliation is Dead movement and the context from which it appears to have gained popularity: the 2020 raids on the Wet'suwet'en lands at the Unist'ot'en Camp. The Unist'ot'en Camp has moved away from the politics of state reconciliation towards an embodiment of Indigenous resurgence, one that is deeply connected to Indigenous lands, self-determination and kinship networks built out of consent and reciprocity. My experiences at the camp demonstrated the importance of reflexivity, relationship-building and the possibilities of Indigenous and non-Indigenous solidarities. The Reconciliation is Dead movement highlights the current insufficiencies of colonial responses and the crucial shifts we need to make, demanding material changes and a returning of land.

An important step in this process is settlers becoming aware about their ongoing responsibilities to Indigenous Peoples and the lands they live on, as well as the life-long work that is involved in building an actuality of what reconciliation could work to achieve - relationships that are *alive*, not dead. A recent post from the Gidimt'en Checkpoint Instagram states that "change comes through solidarity. A big part of solidarity is taking the initiative to stand for others, and carrying some of the weight." My hope is that this paper can be helpful in highlighting some of the ongoing work that needs to be done and the weight that non-Indigenous peoples can carry. Contemplating a future built of respectful relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples demands extensive reflection and action. The contemporary Indigenous-led Reconciliation is Dead movement can help us to understand Indigenous demands beyond governmental platitudes towards an active and *alive* solidarity. The Land Back movement struggles in conjunction with the Reconciliation is Dead movement, demanding material actions and real change. Reconciliatory efforts without actions are not enough. As my settler friend and colleague Cay Burton (2020) states, "while reconciliation might be dead,

allyship and collective resistance against colonization is alive” (para.12). The Reconciliation Is Dead movement is relevant across all of what is now known as Canada. And it can teach us a lot, if we are willing to listen.

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