

# **Decolonizing British Columbia**

**The Importance of Settler Relationalities**

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# **Territorial Acknowledgement**

This essay was written on the unceded traditional territories of the WSANEC Nation, specifically the Tsawout and Tseycum peoples. The thoughts herein have been developed through spending time on many nations' territories, including the Pacheedaht, Ditidaht, T'souk, Songhees, Esquimalt, Cowichan, Tseshaht, Sinixt and many more. This essay is meant to be distributed far and wide and will hopefully pass through all of these territories and more, as it seeks to build relationships and understanding between settlers, Indigenous people, and the Land. I thank these nations for allowing me to learn from the Land, and all of the connections therein. I thank them for preserving these beautiful places for thousands of years. I thank them for never ceding their responsibilities to the Land and for the example they set for settlers to live up to. The debt will always be mine.

This essay is by no means a complete strategy guide to decolonization, and in fact leaves out many fundamental tenets, such as the liberation of women, prison and police abolition, questions of power dynamics and hierarchy, and many more. Rather than being a comprehensive manual for decolonization, it is meant as an attempt to begin reconciling Western revolutionary traditions with Indigenous worldviews, and to frame decolonization as not only the foundation, but also as the method and end goal of the environmental, feminist, anti-capitalist, and anti-racist struggle across Turtle Island.

## **Introduction**

The world is currently in an ecological crisis, not only in terms of climate change, but also in terms of biodiversity loss, air pollution, ocean acidification, and many other environmental issues. Ecology is the holistic study of a system and all of its relationships, not only to the natural world, but also to the social world. In this sense, the current ecological crisis is also caused by stark inequalities between rich and poor, colonialism, corporate greed, patriarchy, and other social issues. When examining our current state of affairs through an ecological lens, we can begin to see the many ways that the social and natural spheres interact with each other.

In North America, the dispossession of Indigenous land, the outlawing of ceremony and language, the kidnapping of children for residential schools, the 60's scoop, MMIWG2S, and more are among the social factors that have contributed to the devastation of the natural world. In order for the environmental crisis to be solved, the ecological crisis needs to be solved. This involves critically examining our relationship to Indigenous peoples, and identifying ways in which we can move forward together. This process is called decolonization.

In order for decolonization to be fully understood by settlers as a concrete process, and not as some abstract metaphor, there needs to be a basic understanding of Indigenous culture, social structure, and worldview. As the original inhabitants of the New World, Indigenous North American cultures have been separated from the Old World cultures for at least ten thousand years before the dawn of "civilization" in the western sense. Because of this early separation, which took place before the Neolithic revolution (or agricultural revolution), Indigenous society is fundamentally different from Old World societies. This difference in world view can be difficult for settlers to grasp, especially because the English language is poorly equipped to talk about Indigenous concepts.

One important thing to understand is that each Indigenous nation is different, not only culturally, but also politically, economically, and socially. Although we have a modern tendency to group Indigenous peoples according to their language family, this by no means guarantees cultural uniformity, or even similarity. This is not to say, however, that there are no similarities between cultures, just that they are not homogenous, and defy easy classification based on language group, geographical location, or any other single identifier.

Despite these differences, there are some broad similarities that can be drawn from just about every nation across Turtle Island (although there are always exceptions). Some of these similarities include the tendency towards matriarchy, a family-based clan structure, hereditary forms of government, and a world view that placed humans along-side animals as part of the natural world.

The hereditary government structures today are represented by “hereditary chiefs,” although this is a grossly simplified translation of hundreds of different words from hundreds of different cultures, each with their own nuanced meanings. This simplified translation is just one example of the English languages short comings when discussing Indigenous concepts. To overcome this, I will attempt to outline the general meaning of “hereditary chief,” although it should be noted that there is no singular definition; this is merely for the purpose of a better understanding of Indigenous worldviews through examining a widely misunderstood aspect of their cultures.

In the western imagination, “hereditary chief” invokes images of an all-powerful tribal leader who has the final say on any decision, and will pass his authority and power on to his son. This is very different from the many iterations of the position in Indigenous culture, and in fact stands in stark contrast to many Indigenous traditions. Hereditary chiefs are not all powerful, but in fact largely provisional, mostly making decisions regarding warfare and international relations, rarely exerting any authority over the clan. In most cultures they never make any decisions by themselves, but always seek the council of their advisors, the elders, and most importantly, the matriarchs. In addition to this, their position wasn’t so much about power and authority as it was about rights and responsibilities. They didn’t hand their power and land down to their heir, instead they handed down the hereditary name, along with the rights and responsibilities that came with it. If a chief no longer fulfilled his responsibilities to the people and to the land, they were no longer fit for the hereditary title, and the matriarchs had the right to remove the title and confer it upon someone more capable of fulfilling the duties, whether or not they were related to the previous chief.

Each clan had a hereditary chief, a clan mother, a council of elders, a council of matriarchs, and a law to live by. Although there were many variations among them and the specific responsibilities that each would hold, these positions made up the basic units of most Indigenous governments.

Just as the western view of hereditary chiefs is vastly oversimplified, so is the western view on Indigenous relationships with the land, which portrays indigenous relationality as irrational mysticism with no grounding in reality. This is not so, and in fact is a major barrier in a settler understanding of Indigenous worldviews.

Although spirituality is of major importance to Indigenous peoples, it should not be assumed that their spirituality is detached from reality. Rather, their spirituality can be better viewed as the ceremonialization of real-life events and relationships. For example, the people of the Northwest Coast believed that salmon bones had to be returned to the river, or the salmon people could not properly reincarnate themselves and provide more food for the people. On the surface, this

seems like superstition, but when the effect that salmon bones have on the forest is examined, it becomes clear that there is a scientific basis to this story. Each year, millions of salmon swim upstream to lay their eggs, and then immediately die and start to decompose. The decomposing salmon represent millions of pounds of nutrients transferred from the ocean to the forest. The trees take in the nutrients from the decomposed fish, and cycle them through the ecosystem, eventually releasing them back into the river to return to the ocean. The Northwest Coast tradition of returning salmon bones to the river reflect a deep understanding of the nutrient transfer cycle, as well as an acknowledgement of responsibility to keep that relationship in balance.

Most Indigenous laws, ceremonies and practices can be understood through the lens of relationships. This is what Indigenous ethics and law is based around; relationships to the land, which in an Indigenous conception, includes everything that's a part of the land, including plants, animals, rivers, rocks, and people. From here on out, "Land" with a capital will refer to not only the soil, but the trees, plants, mushrooms, rocks, rivers, birds, bugs, animals and people contained therein, as well as all of their interconnecting relationships with one another.

With a basic understanding of Indigenous governance and worldview, we can begin to discuss the process of decolonization.

## **Decolonization is Not a Metaphor**

Decolonization takes different shapes depending on where the process is happening, precisely for the reason that colonization took different shapes wherever it happened. In order for the process to be effective, the local historical circumstances that produced the colonial system need to be examined, as well as the mechanisms that allow that same system to continue today. In so called british columbia, this process started about two hundred and fifty years ago.

Small Pox arrived on the west coast in 1782, killing up to 95% of the population in certain communities, less than ten years later Europeans would cross the Rocky Mountains and enter the province from the east, bringing with them over two hundred years of conflict with Indigenous peoples of the prairies and the east. Despite the widespread practice of entering into land *use* agreements (treaties) with Indigenous nations, the Europeans did no such thing west of the rockies, and instead opted to take advantage of the devastation caused by the small pox virus by forcibly removing Indigenous people from their lands, stealing their children for residential school, and enforcing illegitimate settler law wherever they were able.

Over two hundred years later, in 1997, a landmark decision in the BC Supreme Court over the *Delgamuukw Gisday'wa v British Columbia* case affirmed that Indigenous peoples in british columbia have never ceded their rights and title to their land. The court, however, failed to identify a single boundary for any traditional territory, and as such, has failed to provide Indigenous people the power over the BC government that so many had hoped.

The Indigenous people who live in so called british columbia are in a unique situation in terms of potential for decolonization, as the highest court in the province has already asserted their rights to their traditional territory. The next step in this process is for Indigenous people to revitalize their traditional governance structure so that the matriarchs of each clan can make sure there is someone to hold the hereditary name and claim responsibility for the land.

I, as a settler, am unable to determine exactly what a fully revitalized, decolonized Indigenous government would look like, but I can make a case for the importance of the hereditary chiefs

and traditional governance, rather than the Band Council system. The Band Council system was created under the Indian Act for the purpose of controlling Indigenous communities and rendering their traditional forms of government without authority. The band council, by law, only has jurisdiction over reserve land, which accounts for a resounding 0.35% of the 944000km<sup>2</sup> land base of BC, as opposed to the traditional territory, which covers every square inch of the province.

The band council is also a mimicry of western democracy, and contributes to the silencing of hereditary chiefs, elders, and matriarchs, as well as enforces a uniform system upon each unique nation, regardless of their nuanced traditions of government.

To decolonize means not only to return the land, but also to relegitimize Indigenous law. This involves reviving Indigenous forms of government, including hereditary chiefs, elders, and matriarchs. The way in which these systems are revived however, remains up to Indigenous people. It is their right, just as the right of any other self-determining people, to decide how they want to be governed, and which reforms they wish to make.

To take another example from the Northwest Coast, many of these nations were fierce warrior societies who engaged in frequent raiding of their neighbours and kept many slaves. It is beyond unlikely that a revived Nuu-Chah-Nulth politic would involve slave trading or raids on neighbouring communities. Just as the Nuu-Chah-Nulth have the right to choose which cultural practices to revive and which to discard, so too do they have the right to choose which *political* traditions they wish to keep.

Again, I cannot decide for them what traditions to revive, but I can point out the necessity of hereditary leaders reclaiming their rightful stewardship over their lands. This is the only path forward under Indigenous law, all other methods rely on Canadian law, and will never result in true freedom or self-determination.

## **Settler Roles in Decolonization**

As settlers, we need to understand the process of decolonization, and we need to be actively involved in the struggle to return the land to Indigenous people. We also need to understand how the completed process of decolonization will impact our lives, and how we can begin our own cultural paradigm shift to better fit into that world.

All politics need to be grounded in the time and place in which they exist; classical Marxism, which was designed for the world of the industrial revolution, has little relevance in North America today – with a shrinking industrial proletariat and comparatively few factories left in operation, it is a relic of the past. It either needs to be revised, or rendered completely useless. So too with other classical revolutionary theories, they are only as useful as they are connected to the time and place in which they exist.

This is precisely why we need to build a new politic, from the ground up, firmly rooted in an Indigenous worldview and commitment to decolonization. We need to recognize that the New World before colonization was fundamentally different from the Old World – where all of our political theories have come from – and commit to building a new politic rooted in the history and traditions of Turtle Island.

For this project, it becomes absolutely necessary to understand politics from the Indigenous perspective, where it is not so much about laws and structure as it is about relationships. As settlers, we need to examine our relationships with every aspect of the web of life, and maintain

an ecological viewpoint. We need to comprehensively understand our myriad relations, and begin to rework them within the parameters of Indigenous law, meaning we need to build and maintain relationships with each part of the Land.

As settlers, we need to understand that we will never be Indigenous; the sun dance, potlatch, medicine wheel, and other cultural practices will never be *ours*, but that doesn't mean that we are incapable of connecting to the land in the same capacity. Those ceremonies will never be ours because we will never have the Indigenous relationship with the Land that those ceremonies were built on, but we can have our own relationships, and our own "ceremonies." As part of building this new politic, and shifting our worldview, it is important to emancipate ourselves from the traditions and institutions of the "West," and instead seek to ground ourselves in Indigenous worldviews.

We must not have a desire to "save the trees," but instead a desire to build a relationship with the forest. We must not desire to "save the oceans," but instead develop relationships with each member of the marine ecosystem. In this way, we begin to decolonize our thought patterns before the physical process of decolonization has taken place.

Building relationships between us and the natural world is the most important step we can take as settlers towards decolonization. If we fail to build these relationships, we will continue the destruction of the Land regardless of whose stewardship it is under. It is only through these relationships that we can properly conceptualize our relationship with Indigenous people, who are themselves a part of the Land.

We cannot build any meaningful relationships with them while we continue to cut down the forests, over fish the salmon and pollute the rivers. Any relationship built on these practices will be one of violence and domination, just as we have today. If we have any desire for building a lasting relationship with Indigenous communities, we need to understand how each act of violence towards the land affects them.

Perhaps the most important example of this in so called british columbia is the settler relationship to salmon. Salmon, for the Northwest Coast peoples, was not only a staple food source, but a pillar of their culture, economy, and politics. The abundance of salmon is what has led to the development of the globally unique hunter-gatherer societies of the Northwest Coast, with their rich material culture and their developed sense of private property. Just as the destabilization of salmon populations by settler activity was one of the main contributing factors for their downfall, so too, will the revitalization of salmon populations be a fundamental prerequisite for a decolonized Northwest Coast.

Starting in the late eighteenth century we began to log the old growth trees on vancouver island, by the early twentieth century we were clear cutting vast tracts of land, with no regard for riparian zones or critical animal habitat, causing soil destabilization, landslides, and pollution of river systems. Likewise, with the first goldmine on Haida Gwaii in the mid nineteenth century, we started to pollute the rivers with slag and run-off. After that we started to dam our rivers, preventing salmon from getting to their spawning grounds. By the 1970s fish farms had found their way to our coast, and by the mid-1990s they had proliferated and already began to have a serious impact on salmon populations; infestations of sea lice and other diseases were rampant in these farms, situated on the mouths of rivers as if to have the greatest possible effect on spawning salmon swimming out from their birth rivers. The vast quantities of wild salmon that we remove from the oceans each year, as well as the constant tanker traffic along the west coast also contribute greatly to the diminishing populations.

All of these actions and more need to be examined when attempting to build a relationship with the salmon. It becomes clear that in order to build a relationship with the salmon, we need to halt clear cutting – old growth and otherwise. We need to ban fish farms, reduce tanker traffic, stop building dams, stop polluting our rivers with mining waste, and much more. As a keystone species of the Northwest Coast, our relationship with the salmon will lead us to our relationship with the rest of the Land, including the Indigenous people.

By building a relationship with the salmon, we not only halt our ecologically destructive activities, but we remove the pressures and strains we placed on Indigenous relationships with the salmon, taking a massive step towards decolonization.

As these relationships are built, it becomes important to discuss the nature of the relationship between settlers and Indigenous people. From the earliest contact with Europeans, no Indigenous nation intended to dominate and rule over the European populations, rather, they sought mutual understanding and shared use of the Land. The pre-contact Haudenosaunee and Nishnaabeg tradition of Gdoo-naaganinaa, meaning “our dish,” outlines an example of Indigenous political relations, and should serve as a conceptual basis for future settler-Indigenous relations

Gdoo-naaganinaa is the understanding that both the Haudenosaunee and the Nishnaabeg were eating out of the same dish due to overlapping hunting territory and the ecological connections between their territories. As both nations ate out of the same dish, it was both of their responsibilities to take care of that dish, and to not abuse that relationship. It is important to note that sharing hunting territory did not presuppose political interference; rather, it fostered a sense of interconnectedness and harmony between the two peoples.

This is the model that settlers need to be using. Once the land is decolonized, we must make sure that we do not become a burden to the Indigenous governments or a competing force. Instead, we need to be a complimentary force, politically autonomous but still respectful of Indigenous law, as well as our “shared dish.”

It is clear that neither the Canadian government, nor the British Columbia government have any intention of becoming this complimentary autonomous government, instead they seek to complete the colonization process and keep Indigenous lands and resources for their own. For this reason, we must look beyond our current government structures when seeking to build this new politics. Because relationships with the Land are the basis of our new settler politics, the individuals and organizations who are building those relationships represent the most important political process taking place today.

By participating in logging and pipeline blockades, fish farm occupations, mining shutdowns, and other forms of disruptive direct action, we begin to transform our violent, domineering relationships with the Land into sustainable, mutually beneficial relationships. Likewise, by participating in equally revolutionary creative projects like small scale organic farms, selective logging and value added manufacturing, small scale fisheries, decentralized renewable energy research, and more, we start to build the positive aspects of those relationships, rather than just halting the negative aspects.

With these two methods, both disruptive and constructive, we can begin to build autonomous settler institutions that can operate alongside Indigenous government systems to care for the Land, which, after decolonization, will include both Indigenous peoples and settlers.



## Relational Institutions

It is important here to note that these settler relationships are a prerequisite to decolonization. Any attempt to decolonize without addressing our own relationship to the Land will not have the desired results. As we address our relationship to the Land and start to rebuild certain aspects of it, we need also to institutionalize those relationships, and ensure that there are a group of settlers, a “clan” if you will, that will always care for that relationship, and will safeguard it against the actions of other settlers.

Those who are currently dedicating their lives to the protection of the old growth would form the basis of the “Tree Clan,” those who are trying to stop the hollowing out of our mountains would form the “Rock Clan,” and those who dedicate their lives to stopping the construction of mega dams would form the “Water Clan.” These are, of course, major simplifications for illustrations sake, and the actual “clans” would need to develop out of organic action, both disruptive and creative, and be formed by those who are putting the time and effort into building relationships with each aspect of the Land.

Under this system, both the federal as well as the provincial and municipal governments will be dissolved and replaced by autonomous settler governments, or “clans.” As such, settlers will be responsible for providing themselves with food, water, healthcare, education, power, defense, transportation, justice, and every other service necessary for society to function.

To visualize how this would work in practice, we will draw on real world examples. Take Port Alberni, a moderate sized coastal city of about seventeen thousand, containing a paper mill and a few saw mills, as well as a commercial fishery and a large hospital that services many surrounding areas.

As the location of the first sawmill in BC, Port Alberni has been seeing ecological devastation for over one hundred fifty years. Fish farms in Barkley Sound as well as a commercial fishing industry caused fish stocks to crash in the 90’s, and most old growth in the valley has long since been cut down. Due to the loss of resources the city has been aggressively campaigning for an eco-tourism industry, but with no real nature left, it’s hard to imagine it would generate any real revenue without some major changes to the way the people relate to the Land.

To decolonize port alberni, the first step would be to start blockading all clear cut operations in the forest around the city, or simply the mills that process and ship the wood. At the same time, local residents need to be starting small scale mills that are designed to process selectively harvested second growth into value added products. These small scale operations begin to build relationships with the forests, and all of the people who take up the practice of sustainable, selective logging, as well as those who have built a relationship through protecting the forests, will form the “Tree Clan” and work out a relationship with the local forests. Maybe they determine that in order for the harvest to not only be sustainable, but to allow for the forests to rejuvenate and mature, they can’t harvest their full capacity each year. Perhaps they also decide that certain areas of the forest are completely off limits, even for selective logging. Under this system, if any member of the settler community wanted to cut a tree down or source some lumber, they would go to the “Tree Clan” for approval. Likewise, if a settler were to clear cut, or to take more than is sustainable, the “Tree Clan” would be the ones who decide how to rectify the transgressors relationship with the forest.

As settlers start to organize into the “Tree Clan,” other settlers need to be shutting down industrial fishing operations, and instead obtaining fish from Nuu-Chah-Nulth fishers who have

maintained a relationship with the fish for thousands of years. As these commercial fishing operations are halted, the settlers need to form the “Fish Clan” to protect their relationship to the fish, and to handle matters pertaining to settlers and fish.

Halting commercial fishing and clear cutting are important steps, but aren’t a solution by themselves. Settlers need to form “clans” around the protection of all resources – our water, air, soil, minerals, animals, plants, mycelial networks, and more. We need to have institutions safe guarding each resource and relationship, and teaching the rest of settler society how to act in accordance with those relationships.

As we systematically protect each resource and aspect of Land from the exploitation of the colonial system, we begin to chip away at its power base. No nation-state can exist without a land base to exploit, and so, we must chip away at the ways in which Canada can use its land base until finally it lacks the power to stop a complete Indigenous takeover. As Canada weakens, and as the relationships between settlers and the Land grows, we will begin to understand that we have an abundance of everything we need, so long as we aren’t shipping raw materials over-seas or engaging in wasteful behaviours.

Keeping with the example of Port Alberni, imagine the forestry industry has been transitioned to selective harvesting, which is watched over by the “Tree Clan,” the fishing industry is handled by the “Fish Clan,” who make sure no settlers harm the Indigenous harvest by over fishing, and most of the food for the community is provided by local farms overseen by the “Animal Clan” and “Plant Clan,” which are made up of locals who began to create small scale organic farms, utilizing modern technologies as well as traditional knowledge and local organic waste to create a greater yield without harming the soil. At this point the city of Port Alberni is still run by the municipal government, and still answers to the provincial government, but every time the province or the city issues a licence to a corporation to start a fishery, clear cut a forest, or harm the local ecology in any way, the people simply block the corporation, making it too expensive to operate in the area, and thus forcing them to move somewhere else, where they would hopefully be met with the same kind of opposition.

While all of these relationships and clans are being developed, it is also important to kick out state corporations like BC Hydro and PetroCan as well. In order to do this the community will need to develop alternative power grids, such as equipping each house with its own small windmill, fitting all new buildings with geothermal heating, installing tidal energy infrastructure, and more. As each house becomes more power and food self-sustainable it will become more and more expensive for the state corporations to operate in the area, thus further weakening the colonial powers.

As these new relationships start to have positive impacts on the local ecology, Indigenous communities in the area will begin to regain their economic strength, and with their hereditary leadership, will reclaim their traditional territory.

Of course it won’t happen all at once across the province, rather, it will happen nation by nation, slowly creating a checkerboard of sovereign nations across British Columbia. Once individual nations like the Tseshah of the Nuuchahnulth have claimed authority over their territory, like the Unist’oten and Gidtimden of the Wet’suwet’en are in the process of doing, others will soon follow. As these nations make ties with each other and increase their strength, so too will settler institutions need to form relationships with each other to provide some sort of government for themselves, presumably based around Indigenous models of autonomous nations “sharing a dish”

The different “clans” would form an important part of the settler government, but by themselves are an incomplete system. Rather than being a cohesive system of government, these clans instead represent a practical way towards decolonization, and will form an important basis for political organizations, for no settler government will be able to dictate to the “Tree Clan” what is an acceptable way to behave towards the forest, rather the “Tree Clan” will be an important balance of power to ensure the settler government doesn’t transgress its relationship with the forest.

The physical constitution of these settler governments will likely contain as much variation from community to community as the Indigenous nations do amongst themselves; as such is impossible to describe exactly what it would look like or how it would function. We can, however, examine western revolutionary theories in addition to Indigenous governance systems, and begin to formulate a system of governance that can operate within the parameters of the decentralized autonomous nations of the newly decolonized Indigenous people. This project, however, will need to be covered in another essay.

## **Conclusion**

Decolonization will be a long, complex process, with many steps forward and many steps back, but it is a process, with concrete physical gains. Indigenous peoples have been working at this process since contact, and will continue to work at it until their goals are realized. We as settlers have a responsibility to join in that fight and to help dismantle the oppressive colonial systems that we all benefit from. Disruptive and creative activities as described above represent real progress, and as settlers continue to participate in forestry blockades, pipeline blockades, fish farm occupations, mine shut downs and more, we begin to systematically dismantle the power structures that hang over us, replacing them with liberatory institutions that care for the natural world around us.

Together with Indigenous warriors, chiefs, women, 2 spirits, matriarchs, elders, medicine people and knowledge keepers, we will shift the paradigm, and build settler relationalities with the Land.

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