

Autonomously and with Conviction

A Métis Refusal of State-Led Reconciliation

Tawinikay

October 12, 2018

Zhaawanong Noodin Ikwe ndishnikaaz. Michif-Nêhiyaw endow. Gaawiin ningikenimaasii nindoodem. Kisiskatchewanisipi nindoonjibaa. Hamilton nindaa.

My name is *****. My Indian name is Southern Wind Woman. I am Michif-Cree. I do not know my clan. I am from Saskatchewan (Meadow Lake, specifically) and I now live in Dish with One Spoon Territory in Hamilton now. I announce my name in Anishinaabemowin because I received it in an Ojibwe Sundance lodge, a community here in these territories I have been accepted into. I have mixed French, Scottish and Swedish heritage. Furthermore, I identify as Queer/Two Spirit interchangeably (she/her), I'm an organizer, a proud feminist, and an anarchist.

Over the years I've been intimately involved in a wide range of movements, from animal liberation to land defense struggles, issues of Indigenous sovereignty, the fight against patriarchy, and push back against gentrification. I see all these struggles as connected.

I want to take a second to reflect on knowledge and the creation of it in our communities. What you will hear me speak on tonight is a work in progress and, you can be sure, that six months from now I'll probably have different feelings and new thoughts about it. Ideas aren't static. It is also important to acknowledge that our individual realities limit our ability to comprehend the diverse networks of knowledge that inform other people's lives. Tonight, I am up here speaking and what I say will be attributed to me. What is lost is the hundreds of hours of support, reflection, and political debate that other comrades and friends have engaged in with me.

Knowledge is not created by individuals, but by communities.

Because I believe these things, I've decided that this will be my last speaking event of the year. I've been honoured with a lot of opportunities to share my opinion lately, but it is now my time to sit, listen, and reflect. And there is no better time to practice that humility than winter.

I'd just like to preface this by saying that some of the things I'm going to say tonight are going to be challenging, maybe even upsetting, for some people. If it is, I apologize. But I was also offered tobacco to speak tonight and so I have to speak my truth.

I was asked to come and speak to you tonight about reconciliation. I think it is important for me to begin this talk by telling you that I have no interest in reconciliation (at this time) and that I think the concept is a state-led smoke screen used to advance a more sophisticated policy of assimilation. I want to talk a little bit about reconciliation, decolonization, the difference between the two, and the role of the state in all of this.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission was formed in 2007 after residential school survivors won the largest class-action lawsuit in Canadian history. They modelled it after the post-apartheid Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, which was fitting, seeing as how South Africa looked to the Canadian reservation infrastructure for inspiration in setting up their own racist and segregated system.

As most of us know, the TRC concluded with 94 actionable measures that the government, educational institutions, and individuals could take to pursue reconciliation between settler and Indigenous communities. Universities started implementing new educational curriculum about colonization. Trudeau started wearing shorter sleeves so we could all see his Haida raven tattoo. Land acknowledgements began popping up everywhere. The government of Canada recently released their 10 Points of Official Reconciliation, which is a document that I will refer back to during my talk.

I'm honoured to sit here tonight and tell you that reconciliation – as we know it – is an impossible lie.

Official Canadian reconciliation centers on accepting the past, apologizing, and moving forward together. It doesn't necessitate physical reparations for the history of colonization. In fact, it discourages that sort of rhetoric as divisive. Counterproductive. Difficult.

There exists a fundamental problem here, because settler-colonialism doesn't exist in the past. Its violence is pervasive and ongoing, right now, tonight, everywhere we look. Reconciliation is the erasure of this current settler-colonial violence.

Reconciliation – as a term – is about resolving a conflict, returning to a state of friendly relations. It can also mean the bringing together of two positions so as to make them compatible.

Decolonization – on the other hand – is about repealing the authority of the colonial state and redistributing land and resources. It also means embracing and legitimizing previously repressed Indigenous worldviews.

Decolonization isn't a light word. We have to think about what colonization is to understand it: the complete administrative and economic domination of a people and place. Repealing that is a big deal.

Nevertheless, you will often see these two words thrown around almost interchangeably, especially in the university context where folks using them aren't actually actors in struggle. I would argue that this is inappropriate.

The occupying and dominating force in our context is the state of Canada. I don't see the creation of the Canadian state as coinciding with the signing of the British North America Act in 1867, but as a slow process of institution-building that began at first settlement. Confederation was just the official recognition of that process.

The state – we use this word a lot, but we aren't always using it with an understanding of what it is. Tonight when I use the term, I mean a state is a compulsory political organization with a centralized government that maintains a monopoly on the legitimate use of force within a specific territory, mapped out within the confines of borders. This is what Canada is. Secondary are the public declarations of love for poutine and jokes about affinity for beavers.

Zoos are colonial institutions as well. And they used to hold humans. True fact, you can look it up. A lot of Indigenous humans, and Africans. Trying to shed the baggage of that racist past, they later rebranded themselves as educational and conservation organizations. But a zoo will always be a zoo.

Canada was created in order to govern, exploit, and expand the territories swindled, settled, and stolen from Indigenous peoples of this land. That wasn't a by-product, it was its primary function. It still is. It always will be. It can't escape that.

So how can the Canadian state reconcile with Indigenous peoples? They certainly can't "go back" to a state of friendly relations because there never existed such a time. Reconciliation can only mean eliminating the conflict by enmeshing Indigenous and settler communities, which is the second version of that definition that I shared, making conflicting positions compatible.

This means assimilating Indigenous peoples by having them give up their claim to sovereignty in exchange for the promise of the economic equality within Canada. And it means Canadian people get to devour Indigenous ideas and symbols into their own settler stories, their own Canadiana. This is the only path possible under the Canadian state.

The return of land and the power to govern said lands could never be possible under this structure. The resource-based frameworks that define land and water under the logic of Capitalism could never be reconciled with giving away so much money to Indigenous communities. The state-based frameworks that define territory under the nation-state system could never be reconciled with giving away so much power. It just couldn't happen.

I don't want to sit up here tonight and lecture you, I want you to be politically engaged with these ideas and thinking about your own politics. Realistically, what I'm offering you is a challenge to your own frameworks of justice and "good enough".

I posit that you have to decide which of these ideas you are pursuing politically? Are you interested in reconciliation or are you fighting for decolonization? The words aren't interchangeable. We have to stop using them that way.

I also don't see the two ideas as compatible or complimentary. They aren't part of some mythical umbrella of Left progressivism. One is calling for the continuation of the Canadian state and the other for its abolition.

This goes beyond simply saying that you are fighting for decolonization. Your politics matter. If you believe in Canadian democracy, if you believe the system works but is just broken, if you believe that voting in another electoral party candidate could truly make a difference, then you aren't interested in decolonization.

Decolonization doesn't just mean anti-capitalist, it means anti-state. The first of these opinions is relatively uncontroversial and accepted in our activist circles, it's the second that usually gets people.

To those who feel as though what I'm saying is too binary, that there is still good to be done under the system of a Canadian state, I offer you the logic of Canada's 10 Points of Official Reconciliation and ask you to ponder the question of "rights".

Let's look together at some of these points.

- 1) Canada recognizes Indigenous rights to self-determination.
- 2) Canada sees reconciliation as fundamental to Section 35 of the Constitution Act.
- 3) Canada recognizes it needs to act with integrity.
- 4) Canada sees Indigenous self-government as part of the federalism of the provinces
- 5) Canada says it needs to uphold the treaties.
(Six and seven I'll come back to.)
- 8) Canada desires to construct a new fiscal relationship.

9) Canada recognizes that reconciliation is flexible.

10) Canada recognizes that Indigenous peoples are all different.

I chose not to read out the expanded points of this list because I think it is a generally useless and boring document. A perfect example of the bureaucratic skill of using an abundance of words to say absolutely nothing. But I would encourage you to peruse it on your own, if you feel so inclined.

Pay particular attention to the careful phrasing to describe where Indigenous people fit into the imagination of this post-reconciliation utopia. For all the fancy wording, there is no promise of sovereignty, only money that will bring Indigenous people up to the standard of living of Canadians, so that they are readily available and willing to be absorbed into the project of Canada.

I give you a quote from point 2 to illustrate this:

“Reconciliation is an ongoing process through which Indigenous peoples and the Crown work cooperatively to establish and maintain a mutually respectful framework for living together, with a view to fostering strong, healthy, and sustainable Indigenous nations within a strong Canada.”

There are different incarnations of this subtle assertion of Canadian supremacy in points 2, 3, 4, 8, & 10. Now let's go back to points 6 & 7, arguably the most important in this document.

Point 6 talks about securing the free, prior, and informed consent of Indigenous peoples in regards to their land when Canada wants to take it, develop it, or exploit it. This wordy section is full of phrases like consensus and consent, collaboration and consultation: it actually has all of those in one little section.

Point 7 – a much shorter section – immediately revokes that false commitment. It says that, consultation is an aspiration, but that the control of land supposedly held by Indigenous peoples can be overridden in any situation beneficial to the state of Canada.

Indigenous peoples, even under the banner of reconciliation, do not have the right to say no to the state of Canada. The right to say no is critical to the realization of sovereignty, of consent, of freedom.

But it should come as no surprise to Canadians who are paying attention. States operate on the illusion of rights. The government has the right to seize your property too. It can expropriate any piece of land that it needs to serve its goals of economic expansion, whether that be for a dam or an airport or a highway or a pipeline.

This is because rights “given” to you by the government can be taken away by the government. These rights aren't real. This is fake freedom.

It is my belief that there can be no reconciliation that recognizes the self-determination of Indigenous peoples so long as the state of Canada exists. Once embraced, this conclusion leads you towards a radical and revolutionary politic in search of answers. Though I will admit I remain skeptical as an anarchist, I spent a good deal of time listening and trying to envision what Communist comrades meant when they spoke of revolution.

I asked them where Indigenous nations fit into their hope for a proletariat-dictated state. I asked them how this new world would make space for Indigenous worldviews or land-based spiritualities. I asked them how they intended to share power and return land.

Time and time again I was convinced – through their insufficient or nonexistent answers to those questions – that their proletariat-dictated state would be no better for the people or the earth than the liberal-capitalist one we have now.

Many times they would tell me that the return of land was paramount to upholding the justice of the new communist state, but their mechanisms for handing back that land were missing.

In this new state, where land was to be publicly seized and redistributed among working class settlers, where was the room to authoritatively give away huge sections of it to sovereign entities without sparking massive settler-entitlement-provoked unrest?

Many times they countered that argument by saying there was more than enough Crown Land to give back to Indigenous nations that they wouldn't have to give away cityscapes or farm land, but they fail to realize that much of that Crown Land is the site of massive resource wealth. An industrial communist state – which we could almost definitely expect – would need to produce prosperity to ensure a counterrevolution didn't quickly overtake its new central authority. Wouldn't it then need resources in order to keep the people happy and also to fuel the grand people's military?

These are all huge problems, and the picture they paint doesn't make me very enthusiastic for the coming red revolution, but most importantly, they don't begin to address the fundamental conflict. The same conflict that the Canadian state faces now in its own reconciliatory rhetoric.

Even if this land known as Canada were to be chopped in half and half returned to Indigenous nations, the relationship between a dense, centralized state and a diverse, heterogeneous group of communities will always remain a gross imbalance of power. There is no nation-to-nation relationship, it's one of nation-to-nations.

In address of this problem, Communists always point to the same tired solutions that Canadians do. Insisting that Indigenous people will form new federations like the AFN which will help to liaise between the parties. I am not inspired by this solution.

Since the early days of this colonial project, settlers have been trying to figure out how Indigenous governance works. And when they did figure it out, they didn't like it. It took too long. It was too fluid. And it didn't govern the principles of property and ownership in a way conducive to their mission.

With the realization of the Indian Act, settlers set up neo-colonial governments called Band Councils to replace traditional governance systems. These were elected positions, based on representative democracy mirroring the settler system. They considered this and only this legitimate and they enforced that legitimacy through coercive authority. Often at gunpoint.

Over time, with the Canadian state swelling to the unimaginable size that it has now through the pillaging of stolen resources, many Indigenous nations tried to gain legitimacy by forming associations based on euro-centric modes of government. The Allied Nations of BC, the Indian Association of Alberta, the Métis Nation of Ontario (of which I am a part), culminating in the UN-inspired Assembly of First Nations (AFN).

The AFN doesn't represent the needs and desires of Indigenous people just in the same way the Canadian government doesn't represent Canadians. Representational democracy is a far cry from "rule by the people". Pipeline Perry is busy handing over Eagle Staffs to Justin Trudeau and thanking him for his charity while the rest of the assembly works with the RCMP to out land defenders across Turtle Island.

Now, I don't blame our elders and community leaders for trying to do good for Indigenous peoples through the only system allowed by Canada – the current occupying force. But it's not a secret that these systems also breed corruption. For as many good and decent people there are in these positions, when people are kept powerless on purpose, there will always be those who crave the authority of the colonizer.

But, as long as there have been the forcefully implemented representative democracy of band council, the false nations of the MNO, and the coerced federalism of bodies like the AFN, there

have been Indigenous people and communities fighting to dismantle them and return to systems of traditional governance. Smaller in size and locally based on belonging in a community.

Which brings me to anarchism.

Anarchism is a political philosophy – some might say a beautiful idea – that believes in self-governed societies based on voluntary association with one another. It advocates for non-hierarchical decision making, direct participation in those decisions by affected communities, and autonomy for all living persons. Furthermore, it leaves space for the valuation of non-human entities beyond their monetary worth or usefulness to human beings.

My Indigenous teachings have communicated to me that our communities are important, but so are we as individuals. Traditional ways saw decision making as a participatory process, based on consensus, where communities made choices together. My teachings tell me that the land can offer us what we need, but never to take more than that. I see these ideas as fundamentally compatible.

Anarchism envisions a world where there exists a system of land stewardship, but not ownership. A world where there are territories, but not borders. Although, sticking with my conceptual tool, I could call this association between diverse communities of settlers and Indigenous people a nations-to-nations relationship, it wouldn't be quite accurate either.

Anarchists don't believe in nations. But I would argue neither do Indigenous folks. The word nation is a funny one, imposed on Indigenous communities as the most comprehensible label for their form of political organization. It's useful in some contexts, often it's not, and it has never quite fit.

Indigenous communities used to meet each spring to negotiate territories, form new agreements, and redistribute resources. Not all, of course, sometimes they just burned down their neighbors houses when they wanted them to move out. I am not here tonight to romanticize some pre-contact utopia free from oppression and conflict.

But the conception of their "nations" was far different than the Westphalian model followed and imposed by Western society. Decisions were made by communities. Resources were shared. Membership was fluid and adoption common. Leaders were seen as spokespeople or advocates more than authorities. Positions of honour were given to those with life-long demonstrations of service, wisdom, and integrity. Those positions were also revocable. It's possible to reconcile this with the anarchist idea of legitimate authority. This wasn't anarchy exactly as we know it, but it was close.

It figures then that both liberal and Marxist theories have found a story to explain away the validity of such societies. Liberals were fond of social Darwinist theories of societal evolution that saw my ancestors as stuck in a stage of savagery. Marxists preferred their theory of historical materialism to claim that Indigenous societies were just a form of primitive communism, which would need to evolve through capitalism to ever reach the more respectable industrial communism they imagine.

I'd like to challenge this framework and, instead, offer a circular view of history embraced by my Indigenous teachings. I don't think we need to "go back" along a linear timeline of so-called progression. There is no going back. But I want to return to the ideas of my ancestors and see it as moving forward, or maybe just as movement, directionless.

I'd like to see an anarchy of my people and the anarchy of settlers (also my people) enacted here together, side by side. With an equal distribution of power, each pursuing healthy relationships, acting from their own ideas and history. Just as the Two Row imagined.

I would like to see the centralized state of Canada dismantled. I'd like to see communities take up the responsibility of organizing themselves in the absence of said central authority. Community councils meeting weekly to discuss the needs of the community and the limitations of the land to provide for those needs, with a renewed emphasis on staying within those limits. Decisions made on consensus, with a more active participation from all persons. Participation made more accessible by the lessening of work necessary with the return to a subsistence economy rather than one of accumulation. I'd like to see more conversation, more cooperation, more shared production. A system that may have regional communication and collaboration, but always with an emphasis on the primacy of the community to determine its own needs and values.

I think beautiful things would follow from these changes naturally. I think that if it were up to communities to decide whether it was worth it to open a gravel pit in their territory if it meant risking their only water source, we would see less gravel pits. The violence of centralized authority means creating sacrifice zones without a thought.

Even in this lovely future, there would still be conflict because conflict is a constant and that's okay. Not all newly sovereign communities – Indigenous or settler – would immediately institute reciprocal relationships with the planet because, as we know, there are plenty of Indigenous capitalists out there alongside settler capitalists.

But the new relationship to place and focus on interdependence will give settlers a chance to genuinely form a new connection to this land themselves. To adopt their own traditions and values that deal with the ethics of consumption and growth.

Over time, I think we would see the blending together of communities of settlers and Indigenous folks who committed themselves to the same ideas. The love of land would bring some people closer. The new site of conflict would be less based on a racialized claim to land and more based on defending a worldview that calls for its defense.

This. This point is where I think the word reconciliation could be used between our communities.

I identify as Michif-Cree. And I always list my other European ancestry when I speak to people. Sometimes other Indigenous folks have asked me why I don't just claim myself as *nêhiyaw-iskwêw* (a Cree woman). But I tell them I want to find ways to honour my mother's ancestors as well. And it was important to my grandfather that we remember that we were Métis, and to be proud of it.

I am proud to be Métis. The Cree used to call us "Otipemisiwak", which means those who govern themselves. My direct ancestors and their communities waged a commendable resistance against the early Canadian state, carried in whispers as the Red River Rebellion. They lived a hard life on the margins of society and paid dearly for their resistance, surviving as squatters for almost 60 years. They called them the Road Allowance People.

To be Métis means I walk in two worlds. I consider it a gift. I didn't always think that, but I do now.

I learn so much from my political community in Hamilton, constantly expanding my ideas and challenging me to take bigger risks. I learn so much from my ceremony families at New Credit, Chippewa of the Thames, and Kipawa digging deep into my healing and my responsibilities.

Sometimes, I wish I could bring these two communities together more. I think they both have things to learn from the other. But it's hard.

It takes a constant vigilance to both urge my settler friends to reconnect with land and spirit and to guard against them assuming too much. I love the phrase, “becoming Indigenous to place”, but I still can’t bring myself to use it. It’s too dangerous, people are too irresponsible.

The thing is, I don’t think settlers need to co-opt Indigenous worldviews or to start using our forms of governance. I really think anarchism can provide us with a political system parallel and harmonious. A set of ideas that can also allow for us to acknowledge the interdependence of the earth and to form new values based on that sacred connection.

Again, it’s not about going back. It’s about taking the knowledge that has survived and using it to create a more beautiful and just future. For all of us.

The Canadian state cannot reconcile with Indigenous communities. But you can, as individuals. It starts with you making choices. Autonomously. With conviction.

Maybe you decide tonight that you still believe in supporting Canadian state-led reconciliation, regardless of what I said. Okay. But own it. Don’t make yourself out to be a revolutionary. Because your ideas aren’t.

Maybe you decide to leave here tonight and take your politics a little more seriously. Or maybe you already are an anarchist and everything I’ve said was a reminder or a validation. To you, I say remember your politics and choose your allies carefully.

Saying you support Indigenous sovereignty doesn’t mean backing every Indigenous person on every project. There are plenty of Indigenous misogynists and ladder-climbing politicians out there, and you don’t do me any favours by helping them gain power. Fight for liberatory ideas, not for nations or bloodlines.

We do this all the time. There are Indigenous people out there who oppose pipelines and those who support them, but we align ourselves with the resistance, so we are making choices already. Own it. It’s okay. It’s good to fight for the land and for freedom.

This also means you have to do your homework. 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 their responsibility to tear it down.

Maarsii. Thank you. That’s all I have to say.

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October 12, 2018

Retrieved on 25th February 2021 from north-shore.info
Transcription of a talk given by Tawinikay on October 12, 2018 at the 13th annual Decolonizing Thanksgiving Dinner in Guelph, Ontario on traditional Neutral/Chonnonton, Anishinabec, and Haudenosaunee territory.

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