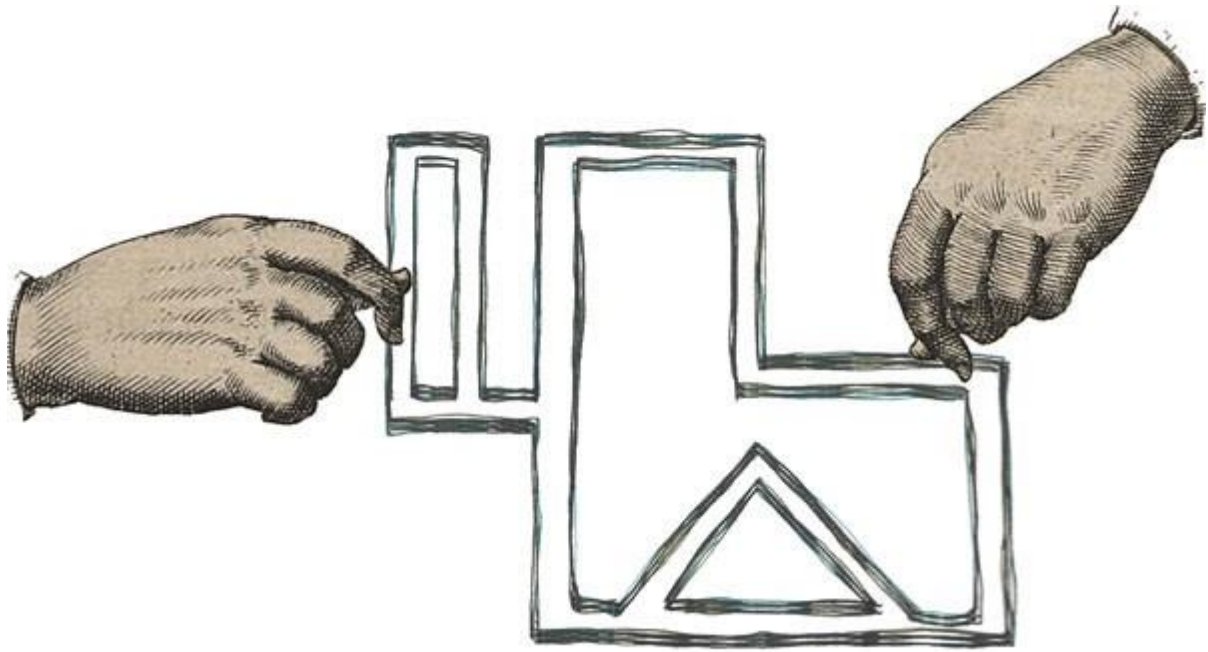


DECOLONIZING TOGETHER

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Moving beyond a politics of solidarity toward a practice of decolonization

by [Harsha Walia](#) Jan 1, 2012 Share [Twitter](#) [Facebook](#)



Illustrations by Afuwa

Canada's state and corporate wealth is largely based on subsidies gained from the theft of Indigenous lands and resources. Conquest in Canada was designed to ensure forced displacement of Indigenous peoples from their territories, the destruction of autonomy and self-determination in Indigenous self-governance and the assimilation of Indigenous peoples' cultures and traditions. Given the devastating cultural, spiritual, economic, linguistic and political impacts of colonialism on Indigenous people in Canada, any serious attempt by non-natives at allying with Indigenous struggles must entail solidarity in the fight against colonization.

Non-natives must be able to position ourselves as active and integral participants in a decolonization movement for political liberation, social transformation, renewed cultural kinships and the development of an economic system that serves rather than threatens our collective life on this planet. Decolonization is as much a process as a goal. It requires a profound recentring on Indigenous worldviews. Syed Hussan, a Toronto-based activist, states: "Decolonization is a dramatic reimagining of relationships with

land, people and the state. Much of this requires study. It requires conversation. It is a practice; it is an unlearning.”



Indigenous solidarity on its own terms

A growing number of social movements are recognizing that Indigenous self-determination must become the foundation for all our broader social justice mobilizing. Indigenous peoples in Canada are the most impacted by the pillage of lands, experience disproportionate poverty and homelessness, are overrepresented in statistics of missing and murdered women and are the primary targets of repressive policing and prosecutions in the criminal injustice system. Rather than being treated as a single issue within a laundry list of demands, Indigenous self-determination is increasingly understood as intertwined with struggles against racism, poverty, police violence, war and occupation, violence against women and environmental justice.

Incorporating Indigenous self-determination into these movements can, however, subordinate and compartmentalize Indigenous struggle within the machinery of existing Leftist narratives. Anarchists point to the antiauthoritarian tendencies within Indigenous communities, environmentalists highlight the connection to land that Indigenous communities have, anti-racists subsume Indigenous people into the broader discourse about systemic oppression in Canada, and women's organizations point to the relentless violence inflicted on Indigenous women in discussions about patriarchy.

We have to be cautious not to replicate the Canadian state's assimilationist model of liberal pluralism, forcing Indigenous identities to fit within our existing groups and narratives. The inherent right to traditional lands and to self-determination is expressed collectively and should not be subsumed within the discourse of individual or human rights. Furthermore, it is imperative to understand that being Indigenous is not just an identity but a way of life, which is intricately connected to Indigenous peoples' relationship to the land and all its inhabitants. Indigenous struggle cannot simply be accommodated within other struggles; it demands solidarity on its own terms.



The practice of solidarity

One of the basic principles of Indigenous solidarity organizing is the notion of taking leadership. According to this principle, non-natives must be accountable and responsive to the experiences, voices, needs and political perspectives of Indigenous people themselves. From an anti-oppression perspective, meaningful support for Indigenous struggles cannot be directed by non-natives. Taking leadership means being humble and honouring front-line voices of resistance as well as offering tangible solidarity as needed and requested. Specifically, this translates to taking initiative for self-education about the specific histories of the lands we reside upon, organizing support with the clear consent and guidance of an Indigenous community or group, building long-term relationships of accountability and never assuming or taking for granted the personal and political trust that non-natives may earn from Indigenous peoples over time.

In offering support to a specific community in the defence of their land, non-natives should organize with a mandate from the community and an understanding of the parameters of the support being sought. Once these guidelines are established, non-natives should be proactive in offering logistical, fundraising and campaign support. Clear lines of communication must always be maintained, and a commitment should be made for long-term support. This means not just being present for blockades or in moments of crisis, but developing an ongoing commitment to the well-being of Indigenous peoples and communities.

Organizing in accordance with these principles is not always straightforward. Respecting Indigenous leadership is not the same as doing nothing while waiting around to be told what to do. “I am waiting to be told exactly what to do” should not be an excuse for inaction, and seeking guidance must be weighed against the possibility of further burdening Indigenous people with questions. A willingness to decentre oneself and to learn and act from a place of responsibility rather than guilt are helpful in determining the line between being too interventionist and being paralyzed.

Cultivating an ethic of responsibility within the Indigenous solidarity movement begins with non-natives understanding ourselves as beneficiaries of the illegal settlement of Indigenous peoples’ land and unjust appropriation of Indigenous peoples’ resources and jurisdiction. When faced with this truth, it is common for activists to get stuck in their

feelings of guilt, which I would argue is a state of self-absorption that actually upholds privilege. While guilt is often a sign of a much-needed shift in consciousness, in itself it does nothing to motivate the responsibility necessary to actively dismantle entrenched systems of oppression. In a movement-building round table, long-time Montreal activist Jaggi Singh said: “The only way to escape complicity with settlement is active opposition to it. That only happens in the context of on-the-ground, day-to-day organizing, and creating and cultivating the spaces where we can begin dialogues and discussions as natives and non-natives.”



Sustained alliance building

Sustaining a multiplicity of meaningful and diverse relationships with Indigenous peoples is critical in building a non-native movement for Indigenous self-determination. “Solidarity is not the same as support,” says feminist writer bell hooks. “To experience solidarity, we must have a community of interests, shared beliefs and goals around which to unite, to build Sisterhood. Support can be occasional. It can be given and just as easily withdrawn. Solidarity requires sustained, ongoing commitment.”

Who exactly one takes direction from while building networks of ongoing solidarity can be complicated. As in any community, a diversity of political opinions often exists within Indigenous communities. How do we determine whose leadership to follow and which alliances to build? I take leadership from and offer tangible support to grassroots Indigenous peoples who are exercising traditional governance and customs in the face of state control and bureaucratization, who are seeking redress and reparations for acts of genocide and assimilation, such as residential schools, who are opposing corporate development on their lands. I support those who are pushing back against the oppressions of hetero-patriarchy imposed by settler society, who are struggling against poverty and systemic marginalization in urban areas, who are criticizing unjust land claims and treaty processes and who are affirming their own languages, customs, traditions, creative expression and spiritual practices.

Alliances with Indigenous communities should be based on shared values, principles and analysis. For example, during the anti-Olympics campaign in 2010, activists chose not to align with the Four Host First Nations, a pro-corporate body created in conjunction with the Vancouver Olympics organizing committee. Instead, we took leadership from and strengthened alliances with land defenders in the Secwepemc and St’át’imc nations and Indigenous people being directly impacted by homelessness and poverty in the

Downtown Eastside. In general, however, differences surrounding strategy within a community should be for community members to discuss and resolve. We should be cautious of a persistent dynamic where solidarity activists start to fixate on the internal politics of an oppressed community. Allies should avoid trying to intrude and interfere in struggles within and between communities, which perpetuates the civilizing ideology of the white man's burden and violates the basic principles of self-determination.

Building intentional alliances should also avoid devolution into tokenization. Non-natives often choose which Indigenous voices to privilege by defaulting to Indigenous activists they determine to be better known, easier-to-contact or "less hostile." This selectivity distorts the diversity present in Indigenous communities and can exacerbate tensions and colonially imposed divisions between Indigenous peoples. In opposing the colonialism of the state and settler society, non-natives must recognize our own role in perpetuating colonialism within our solidarity efforts. We can actively counter this by theorizing about and discussing the nuanced issues of solidarity, leadership, strategy and analysis – not in abstraction, but within our real and informed and sustained relationships with Indigenous peoples.



Decolonizing relationships

While centring and honouring Indigenous voices and leadership, the obligation for decolonization rests on all of us. In "Building a 'Canadian' Decolonization Movement: Fighting the Occupation at 'Home,'" Nora Burke says: "A decolonisation movement cannot be comprised solely of solidarity and support for Indigenous peoples' sovereignty and self-determination. If we are in support of self-determination, we too need to be self-determining. It is time to cut the state out of this relationship, and to replace it with a new relationship, one which is mutually negotiated, and premised on a core respect for autonomy and freedom."

Being responsible for decolonization can require us to locate ourselves within the context of colonization in complicated ways, often as simultaneously oppressed and complicit. This is true, for example, for racialized migrants in Canada. Within the anticolonial migrant justice movement of No One Is Illegal, we go beyond demanding citizenship rights for racialized migrants as that would lend false legitimacy to a settler

state. We challenge the official state discourse of multiculturalism that undermines the autonomy of Indigenous communities by granting and mediating rights through the imposed structures of the state and that seeks to assimilate diversities into a singular Canadian identity. Andrea Smith, Indigenous feminist intellectual, says: “All non-Native peoples are promised the ability to join in the colonial project of settling indigenous lands. In all of these cases, we would check our aspirations against the aspirations of other communities to ensure that our model of liberation does not become the model of oppression for others.” In B.C., immigrants and refugees have participated in several delegations to Indigenous blockades, while Indigenous communities have offered protection and refuge for migrants facing deportation.

Decolonization is the process whereby we create the conditions in which we want to live and the social relations we wish to have. We have to commit ourselves to supplanting the colonial logic of the state itself. Almost a hundred years ago, German anarchist Gustav Landauer wrote: “The State is a condition, a certain relationship between human beings, a mode of behaviour; we destroy it by contracting other relationships.” Decolonization requires us to exercise our sovereignties differently and to reconfigure our communities based on shared experiences, ideals and visions. Almost all Indigenous formulations of sovereignty – such as the Two Row Wampum agreement of peace, friendship and respect between the Haudenosaunee nations and settlers – are premised on revolutionary notions of respectful coexistence and stewardship of the land, which goes far beyond any Western liberal democratic ideal.

I have been encouraged to think of human interconnectedness and kinship in building alliances with Indigenous communities. Black-Cherokee writer Zainab Amadahy uses the term “relationship framework” to describe how our activism should be grounded. “Understanding the world through a Relationship Framework ... we don’t see ourselves, our communities, or our species as inherently superior to any other, but rather see our roles and responsibilities to each other as inherent to enjoying our life experiences,” says Amadahy. From Turtle Island to Palestine, striving toward decolonization and walking together toward transformation requires us to challenge a dehumanizing social organization that perpetuates our isolation from each other and normalizes a lack of responsibility to one another and the Earth.

This is an altered and condensed version of a chapter from the 2012 forthcoming book Organize! Building From the Local for Global Justice, edited by Aziz Choudry, Jill Hanley and Eric Shragge.



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