

The Colonizer Who Refuses: Indigenous Solidarity in Toronto

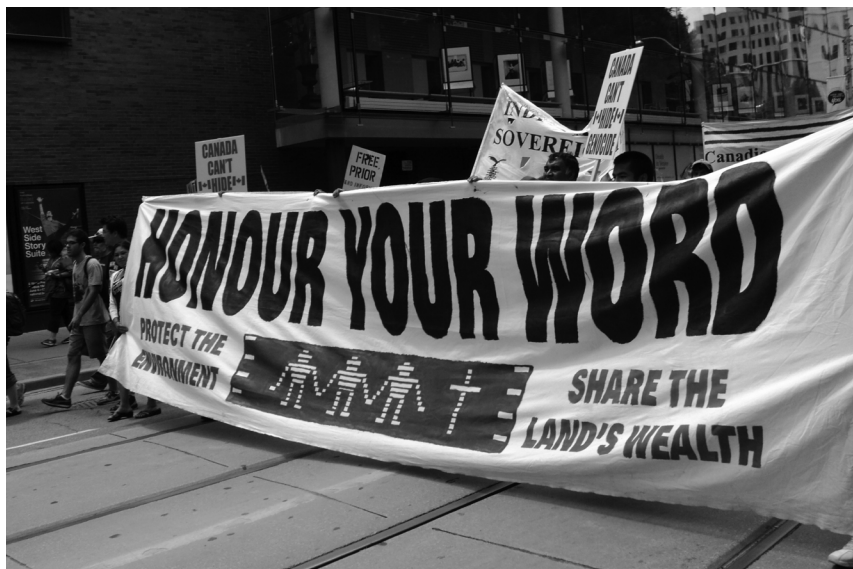
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Across the border from where the U.S. Social Forum was taking place, over two thousand Indigenous people and their allies were marching through the streets on June 24, 2010, to assert Indigenous sovereignty and to expose Canada's ongoing genocidal policies against Indigenous peoples to the international media gathered for the upcoming G20 meeting. The march wound through downtown Toronto for five hours in the sweltering heat to the beat of drums, song, speeches, and the chant "No G20 on Stolen Native Land." No one could recall a bigger march for Indigenous rights in recent memory.

I marched alongside a gigantic banner that read "HONOUR YOUR WORD" held up by half a dozen community members from the small Algonquin community of Barriere Lake. Forty-five community members in total had traveled 9 hours south from Barriere Lake to be in Toronto on that day. This piece honours their political struggle and the layers of Indigenous and allied organizing that came together to create the space for their participation on that day.

The rally on June 24th (J24) was organized in response to a cross-country day of action called for by Defenders of the Land, a national grassroots Indigenous network, to "tell the world the truth about Canada's record on Indigenous rights." The Defenders of the Land (Defenders) network is the culmination of thousands of acts of Indigenous self-determination over the course of 500 years of permanent resistance against war and occupation. Defenders was founded at an historic gathering in Winnipeg in November



Community members of the Algonquins of Barriere Lake take their message to the streets on the Indigenous Day of Action, June 24, 2010. Photo by Shiri Pasternak

2008 and is comprised of Indigenous representatives from over 45 communities across the country.¹ Many of the great Indigenous fighters of our time were in attendance at the first meeting: Milton Born With a Tooth from Blackfoot Country, Elizabeth “Tshaukuesh” Penashue from Innu lands, Irene Billy from Secwepmec Territory, Arthur Manuel from the Indigenous Network on Economies and Trade, clan mothers from the Six Nations Confederacy, Dene, Cree and Métis youth from the Athabaska and Clearwater river systems fighting tar sands destruction, and Coast Salish youth from the anti-2010 Olympics organizing convergence.

In response to the Defenders’ call for a day of action, the Indigenous Sovereignty and Solidarity Network (ISSN) in Toronto put out a call to local activists to organize a day of action on Indigenous sovereignty as part of a week of community-led events leading up to a G20 summit. The ISSN is a local network of Indigenous and non-Indigenous activists who do frontline support for land-based and urban Indigenous struggles. A coalition for J24 formed, with representatives from Defenders of the Land, ISSN, Red Power United, the Grassroots Committee, Toronto Council Fire, and other smaller groups, allies, and individuals representing themselves or their communities. Meetings were held at Toronto Council Fire, an Indigenous service agency in Toronto’s downtown east end, and were open to anyone to participate.

Like all rallies, the road to get to the Queen’s Park legislature that morning in June was much longer than the march route. What follows here is a short reflection on solidarity from a non-Native, white supporter who was involved

in the coalition to organize the day of action. These reflections are simply my own, and therefore skewed and biased to address my own lingering questions and concerns. However, they also arise out of a collectively identified need to ask, “What is solidarity?” and to commit to ongoing public debate on how to engage in this work in principled and thoughtful ways. While I hesitated to take up this space, I think the growing movement to support Indigenous sovereignty in Canada demands a vigilance from non-Indigenous allies to share strategies and self-critique. The heart of this particular story lies in the convergence of solidarities and in the divergence of lines of accountability among organizers. Hopefully, something here will trigger some ideas or problems involved in engaging with this kind of activist work.

So, who am I? My ancestors come from Russia, the Ukraine, and Poland. My mother was born in Israel and so were her parents, who founded a kibbutz in the Negev that was part of “11 points” (*Yud Aleph Nekudot*)—a wave of colonization designed to populate the desert that had been excluded from British partition plans. Their kibbutz in particular was part of the “4 points” (*Arba Nekudot*) settlements, which surrounded the Gaza Strip so that the Palestinian territory could not expand. I am a first-generation Canadian, born and raised in Toronto, on the lands of the Mississaugas of the New Credit.²

This is part of my autobiography of territory; my twice-born identity as settler. My best friend growing up was part-Israeli, part-Aboriginal. Her stepfather, a Mohawk man, has been one of my closest mentors for over a decade. He’s the person who introduced me to the Algonquins of Barriere Lake, a community he’s worked with for over 25 years and to whom he attributes all the white in his hair. The *Mitchikanibikok Inik*, or the Algonquins of Barriere Lake, live about 300 kilometers north of Ottawa in Quebec in the heart of the Upper Ottawa watershed. They are one of the last hunting societies remaining in the boreal region of Ontario and Quebec and they attribute their strong language preservation to this unbroken connection to the land. Algonquin is still the first language spoken in their territory.

In 1991, the federal and provincial governments signed a resource co-management agreement with them that covered 10,000 square kilometers of their traditional territory. It was a landmark agreement that would give them a decisive say over resource extraction, as well as a modest share in the revenues. Over twenty years later, the agreement has never been implemented. Instead, Barriere Lake is one of the poorest communities in the country, with over eighty percent unemployment rates and housing that has been condemned by Health Canada. Rather than honour their agreements, Canada has been terrorizing the community into dropping their demands to implement their co-management plan (the “Trilateral” Agreement) by consistently

interfering in their internal affairs, successfully creating distressful divisions in the small community. In March 2008, for the second time, the Canadian government refused to recognize the customary council and leadership and chose instead to fund a dissident faction that did not support the Trilateral Agreement. In response to this new wave of assault against Barriere Lake, supporters traveled to the community from Montreal and asked permission at a community assembly to begin doing direct solidarity work. A group was founded in Montreal, and soon after in Ottawa and Toronto.³ Word in the cities began to get out about what was happening in Barriere Lake.

When I first started traveling up to Barriere Lake and talking to the elders, two things became apparent. The first was that they insisted that if I were to understand the meaning of the Trilateral to them, I would have to come up and spend some time on the land. The second was that my purposes for being there had been inscribed long ago in prophesy. Now was the time when people of other nations would come to the Anishnabe and seek their knowledge.

This past summer, I traveled back and forth from Toronto to Barriere Lake territory. In Barriere Lake, I was living in the bush learning Algonquin. We spent our days hunting, fishing, harvesting roots, craft-making, and berry picking. At night we would watch movies powered by the generator. In Toronto, I was providing support for the J24 organizing. I talked to people in Barriere Lake about what was happening in Toronto and invited them to consider attending. An urgent political crisis was upon them and there was good potential for international media coverage and for networking with other Indigenous communities. The summer of 2010 marked the deadline for the imposition of an archaic section of the Indian Act onto their community. Section 74 of the Indian Act empowers the Minister of Indian Affairs to unilaterally abolish a band's customary government and impose band council elections. That meant an end to governing themselves under the *Mitchikanbikok Anishnabe Onakawekewin*—their sacred constitution that connects their governance code to their relationship to the land. Indian Affairs had announced the “nominations” meeting for this band council process that summer. It would be taking place in a matter of weeks. It was the government's last-ditch attempt to get rid of the powerful customary government in Barriere Lake once and for all. The colonial administration in Canada has always recognized the link between traditional government and strong Indigenous self-defense and self-determination. Barriere Lake is one of only a handful of communities left in the country that has never been governed under the Indian Act and their resilience to colonial policies has been undefeatable as a result.

Barriere Lake did get a lot of media attention during J24, including interviews in the national newspaper, the *Globe and Mail*. Defenders of the

Land hosted a feast and Indigenous assembly on the evening of the demonstration, where a traditional custom-holder from Barriere Lake shared a teaching of their wampum belt, and many other Indigenous leaders stood up to speak to the packed house. On the surface, everything had run smoothly.

Allies use the term “Indigenous-led” to describe a decolonized approach to participating in Indigenous self-determination struggles. A number of things tend to be inferred by the term, including (but in no way exhaustively limited to) acting only with a clear mandate from the community; acting from a place of political responsibility, not out of guilt or charity; educating yourself and not relying on the community to educate you; seeking never to speak on behalf of the community unless explicitly asked; limiting political influence on a community’s decisions or decision-making process; being prepared to do any kind of work requested, including staying in the background and raising funds; making a long-term commitment; and having a sense of humour and some patience. This “taking leadership” approach contrasts sharply with mainstream, liberal, NGO-type organizations that tend to operate on their own agendas, merely “including” Indigenous voices when it suits their needs. But despite the non-interventionist, supportive role that “taking leadership” implies, it also assumes a number of things. Mainly, a clear and undisputed line of guidance and source of agreement coming from Indigenous peoples themselves. The term “Indigenous” is itself an umbrella term, as is “Aboriginal,” “Native,” and “Indian.” The term “First Nations” in Canada covers all Aboriginal peoples who are not Métis or Inuit.

Conflict is of course constitutive of any community. Deliberate actions to sow division in the collective unity of Indigenous communities, crucial to colonial assimilation and “civilization” strategies, compounds this fact. This has been accomplished through the invention of hierarchies defined by “status,” gender, enfranchisement, the inculcation of property rights on reserves, and so on. As Marylynn Poucachiche, community spokesperson says, “I think the government has us where they want us, fighting with each other and forgetting about the real issues. And they can then keep exploiting our land and renegotiate the outstanding issues on their terms.”⁴ These divisive strategies and their outcomes can create conflict between supporters, as well.

In Barriere Lake, for example, divisions in the community are in part due to consistent interference by the Canadian government into the community’s internal affairs. These divisions in the community have led some outsiders, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, to question the “side” that Barriere Lake Solidarity supporters have taken. Without getting into the complicated

particulars of the community, there have been several occasions when supporters have been ostracized or confronted by outsiders—both Indigenous and non-Indigenous activists—who believe Barriere Lake supporters have been misled about the legitimate leadership in the community. There is little to do in these circumstances but to listen, reiterate our understanding of the situation, and try to keep the discussion open. On the other hand, one has to ask: why should these interventions be tolerated from Indigenous or non-Indigenous people who do not live in the community that is providing direction by their own terms of self-determination? In this case, to make things more complicated, supporters have also been confronted by Barriere Lake community members of opposing factions who resent our interference. Ultimately, an ally has to measure the principle of solidarity against the principle of non-interference. So, how do we take leadership from struggles where the “community” is flexibly-defined and/or internally conflicted?

In the context of J24, it’s instructive to understand how different Indigenous groups nested within each other’s structures and politics of solidarity. The mobilization for J24 challenged me to think through “taking leadership” across multiple and conflicting lines of accountability. For myself, and for many other allies, supporting Indigenous self-determination lies at the heart of solidarity work. And it is precisely the multiplicity of meanings of self-determination that must be navigated when engaging in direct solidarity with Indigenous struggles. The urban Indigenous group that came together to organize J24 was a politically heterogeneous group of people from different nations, territories, and positions of privilege within their own communities (e.g. gender, racialization, militancy, urbanism, age, education, language/cultural access). A number of disputes erupted in this context. To give one example, the J24 organizing group determined through a consensus-based process not to involve security forces in the preliminary planning of the march. Despite the fact that the group voted against police collaboration, one coalition member representing a key organization in the group met regularly, unbeknownst to the others, with a Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) officer.

Following the J24 march, a video was released on YouTube, featuring RCMP Corporal Lori Macdonald of the Community Relations Group of the Integrated Security Unit (ISU) and Constable Kim Turner of the Toronto Police Service Aboriginal Peacekeeping Unit. In the short clip, they speak about “the significance of community building initiatives to build trust and peace between the aboriginal community and police, after a peaceful Native walk at the G20 Summit June 24, 2010, in Toronto, Ontario Canada.” While an explanation was never explicitly given, it was clear from comments made throughout the organizing process what had happened. This particular organization that had chosen to collaborate with security forces felt a stronger

responsibility to their constituency, the community organization that they represented, than to members of the organizing committee. They felt that collaborating with police would keep their members safer in the end. Later, Defenders of the Land was accused of police collaboration. The organization never publicly defended itself nor denounced their organizing partner in part because Defenders' loyalty to the J24 organizing group, who they hoped to continue to work with and work through such differences, overshadowed the criticisms of an unaccountable Indigenous critic. In other words, in the overlapping lines of accountability, Defenders organizers chose to protect their organizing partner despite taking slack from Indigenous activists outside the organizing circle.

Tensions in the group around security concerns surfaced in other ways, too. The massive militarization of the city, priced at a one billion dollar security budget, created a tense climate of anticipation among organizers. One member of the J24 organizing group was visited by a Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) agent and another had been arrested a couple of days earlier in a targeted racial attack. Police used the warrior flag in his bag as evidence of suspicious activity. Later we would learn that two police informants regularly attended our meetings. A culture clash in the group became more pronounced several days before the day of action. The head of J24 "security"—an autonomously-organized civilian peacekeeping force of Indigenous men and women who were affiliated with our group—announced that the peacekeepers would be instructed to turn over to police any demonstrator wearing a mask or suspected of engaging in property destruction. Despite being a somewhat rogue proclamation, a cry went up and a heated dispute erupted.

By the end of the meeting, the issue was resolved so that security agreed they would not turn anyone over to police and peacekeepers would simply ask people to remove bandanas or else walk outside of the circle guarded by peacekeepers. But loyalties had been divided over the dispute. One ally walked out of the meeting in protest. Later that night, a young Indigenous woman visited my house and tried to convince the Barriere Lake Algonquins (who had just arrived after a day-long drive) that it wasn't safe to attend the rally because people wearing bandanas would be targeted. A youth spokesperson for Barriere Lake explained to her that they would not be wearing bandanas because they brought their elders and children and their wampum, which is like a medicine, clearly frustrating the young Indigenous organizers' attempts to solidify her militant position with community-based reserve support.

Defenders of the Land had its own internal accountability issues. They had put out the call for the J24 day of action:

To Indigenous nations and communities across Canada, including grassroots people, traditional leadership, elected leadership, elders, youth, women, and men: we call on you to engage in non-violent action in or near your communities on June 24, on issues and messages that are relevant to you and chosen by you. Actions could include blockades, occupations, rallies, or economic disruptions, in addition to spiritual ceremonies and community gatherings, all of which maximize respect for life and our rights as Indigenous Peoples. Non-violence is a guide for our hearts and our minds as we decide on appropriate actions to defend and protect our land, our communities, and our ways of life; it is not intended to do the work of the government by dividing us from one another or labelling each other. Communities should plan and engage in their own actions, and do what is comfortable and appropriate for themselves.

Over a dozen communities signed on and though few communities organized autonomously on that day, many preferred to travel to Toronto instead to join a central organizing effort. The call-out also included a paragraph addressed to non-Indigenous supporters that called on allies “to take guidance and respectful leadership on messaging and tactics from Defenders of the Land.”

Once again, lines of accountability were drawn into relief when dispute erupted over the language of “non-violence” used in the call-out. The call-out was drafted following the anti-Olympics convergence in Vancouver where black bloc protesters broke Hudson Bay windows during the Heart Attack march. Some of the youth in the network had participated in the anti-Olympics convergence and felt defensive over what was perceived in part as a dismissal of the tactics they, or their own allies, adopted or supported. Questions were raised about whether the “diversity of tactics” debate was relevant to many of the land-based movements the network was empowered to represent. Where did the lines of accountability lie?

Some allies felt the need to speak out against the language of “non-violence” or reacted to earlier drafts that included an explicit ban on property destruction. In some cases, allies took these positions because they were themselves aligned with Indigenous activists who opposed the language. In other cases, perhaps the long-standing support for “diversity of tactics” in anarchist communities (that mostly comprise the allies group of Defenders) caused a conflict of loyalties for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous opponents of the language. Other allies opted to stay out, which ironically put them in the line of fire of opponents, too. In the end, both sides walked away feeling burned—those who defended the language and tactics chosen for the

day of action and those who were vehemently opposed. Would tracing out lines of accountability have helped to resolve the issue?

For myself, solidarity work means entering into the legal and political jurisdictions and traditions of Indigenous peoples—be they Haudenosaunee, Anishnabe, Nēhiyaw, WSANEC, or any other—but it also means becoming imbricated into the social, political, and linguistic cultures of smaller bands or broader confederacies. It means understanding that you don't know *what* you don't know about the treaties, relationships, and conflicts governing the territory in which you live or visit. It means learning to understand the Indigenous protocols of hospitality that embody what Canadians might call refugee and immigration law. It means respectfully learning about the belts, teachings, and prophecies that were given to guide relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples on Turtle Island, most famously, the two-row wampum belt.

Such a belt was presented at the Treaty of Niagara in 1764 in the presence of over 2,000 Chiefs from over 24 nations who had traveled far and wide to be there, from west of the Mississippi, north of Hudson Bay, and east of Nova Scotia. Barriere Lake, for example, had a representative in Niagara. I consider myself to be committed through this treaty to fulfill my own treaty obligations to Barriere Lake and other bands: to uphold the diplomatic agreement of partnership between nations founded on peace, friendship, respect, and principles of non-interference. Canada inherited Britain's treaties when the country became a dominion in 1867 and as a Canadian citizen, I am legally party to that agreement even if my government chooses to violate its contract. As my friend Dawnis Kennedy explains, "The spirit was there that day, and that spirit will always stay strong."

But interference versus solidarity is obviously not the whole picture. The basis on which we decide to support one struggle over another is always pre-determined by our ideas about what self-determination looks like. This idea will be shaped by our knowledge of how Indigenous peoples themselves define their cultural and political freedoms. It will depend on how Indigenous peoples define a good relationship with settlers, and how allies ourselves—as individuals, but also as part of communities of solidarity—define cultural and political freedoms in corresponding ways to rebuild the trust that was broken. But it will also necessarily extend from an informed analysis of what kinds of oppression colonialism exacts on Indigenous communities today.

Mohawk policy analyst Russell Diabo calls Canadian colonialism a war against First Nations, fought with legislative policies, PR spin, and the full disposal of police and military forces. These security forces step in to coerce recalcitrant bands into the narrow, weak self-government processes the state

permits, while punishing those individuals and communities who refuse to comply. While Canada has consistently ranked near the top of the United Nations Human Development Index, living conditions on reserves place Indians at a rank of 78, according to the same criteria. The federal government's deliberate strategies of impoverishment perpetuate the dysfunction brought on by residential schools, land dispossession, and systemic racism. This contributes to an out-migration of Native people living on their traditional territories into the major urban centres across the country (if they had not been relocated already). By clearing out reserves, Canada hopes to pave the way for natural resource extraction on Native lands. In Barriere Lake's territory alone, over \$100 million leaves their lands every year in hydro, forestry, and tourism revenues and they don't see a cent. The issues out on the land are mirrored in urban landscapes: housing shortages, poverty, lack of access to education, racism, inter-generational trauma, addiction, criminalization, and suicide. All of these issues tie back to historic and ongoing losses of lands, which hold the political, cultural, spiritual, economic, and linguistic foundation for Indigenous peoples.

In 1973, in response to a Supreme Court victory by the Nisga'a tribal council, a struggle fought for over 100 years in that particular community, the federal government put out a policy statement introducing a land claims process to deal with all remaining untreated or unceded lands across the country. Thousands of claims were filed and entire provinces, such as British Columbia, Quebec, Newfoundland, and Labrador became subject finally to Indigenous territorial claims. But the government policy forces bands to surrender their Aboriginal Rights and Title upon signing final agreements to essentially transform their lands into small ethnic municipalities. Communities who have rejected this process are protecting their lands from resource exploitation and development through the court system and through direct action on their lands.

It is with these communities that I work most closely, through the Defenders steering committee and in close relationship to the Algonquins of Barriere Lake. I also work closely with ISSN, which is working to link land-based and urban struggles as one continuous fabric of the colonial blanket. Ideally, allies should stay out of internal conflicts and respect Indigenous peoples' processes for reconciling differences. But there are also times when decisive action is unavoidable. For example, between my urban Indigenous friends and Barriere Lake. I grew up in the anarchist organizing collectives that advocate for diversity of tactics and state abolitionism, but these perspectives don't line up neatly with the history of treaties in Canada or the kinds of spiritual, cultural, and political forms of resistance inherent in different Indigenous communities. The question is, how do allies remain open to and honest about making choices about who and how to support

pan-Indian organizing? How does one learn to overcome the challenges of multiple Indigenous entanglements and differences, many of which are the direct outcomes of colonialism themselves?

“The Colonizer Who Refuses” is a chapter title from Albert Memmi’s *The Colonizer and the Colonized*.⁵ Memmi was a Jewish Tunisian who opposed the French occupation. But as a Jew, he slipped one notch above the Muslim majority in the colonial pyramid of hierarchy, and recognized the contradictory patterns of subjugation that ensnare the colonized society. In this chapter, Memmi writes about the impossible paradox of the colonizer who refuses. He writes that refusal is only the first step of the unattainable journey. Her racism will be unshakable when confronted with the colonized’s ambitions for self-government and liberation, unable to ultimately imagine their freedom. She will come to their assistance, but will not be able to restrain herself from judging their civilization and society. Her prior politics and ideological convictions will be put to the ultimate test. If she supports the colonized’s struggle, she will have to abandon her own position: “In other words, either [s]he no longer recognizes the colonized, or [s]he no longer recognizes himself” (32).

At this point, some of these sympathetic colonizers will construct the colonized to suit their own myths and continue to pursue their own program. But for the sympathetic colonizer who decides to abandon her political principles and accepts the position of the colonized whole-heartedly, she will also discover, crushingly, that she cannot and will not adapt to their customs and language. She cannot share the destiny of the colonized, but rather the destiny of the colonizer: “Colonial relations do not stem from individual good will or actions; they exist before his arrival or his birth, and whether he accepts or rejects them matters little” (38). How can we avoid the fate of the sympathetic colonizer without surrendering to the systemic challenges of refusal?

The J24 organizing committee created the space for Barriere Lake members to come down and share their stories. Defenders of the Land enabled this action by putting out the call and pulling together the initial meetings. But all three organizations have very different protocols of leadership and for working with allies. As allies, we cannot be accountable to others without also being accountable to ourselves. Solidarity is not simply about obedience. Being an anti-colonialist activist is not the same as being anti-capitalist organizer because the agents of history in anti-colonial struggles are the first people of this land, not a working class. Though we may share a common view of the state as ruthless and violent or of capitalist accumulation as an endless expansion towards empty material ends and ecological destruction,

leftist activists ultimately have to grapple with self-determination based on Indigenous forms of life and relationships. Learning protocols of jurisdiction, law, and political governance is a sign of respect for the self-determination of Indigenous peoples. It will help allies make decisions about how we may identify who carries the spirit of the law in Indigenous communities, and who are our partners to sail alongside in this current moment of history and prophesy on Turtle Island.