

Representing colonialism in the Canadian collection of the JOTPY (Journal of the Plague Year).

By Padraic Cohen

Skyscrapers were emptied, city streets were desolate, while the cities of Canada were largely silenced by the onset of the pandemic; the mountains of British Columbia reverberated the cacophony of industrial construction. The Canada collection housed in the Journal of the Plague Year: A COVID-19 archive reveals how the infamous component intrinsic to Canadian experience ultimately went uninterrupted during the pandemic: colonialism. It has manifested itself in construction of the Coastal Link pipeline on unceded Wet'suwet'en territory, as well as provincial governments overruling First Nation's governments decisions to shut down their borders to outsiders.



For context, the Wet'suwet'en nation is located in the center of what is known as British Columbia underneath the Rocky mountains; they have lived on this land for thousands of years and have never ceded their territories to the Canadian state, as no treaties have been signed by the Wet'suwet'en nation. However, the Indian act of 1876 resulted in creation of an elected chief, splitting and overriding the pre-colonial hereditary institution. The elected chief therefore is the recognized office by the Canadian state,

the Wet'suwet'en elected chiefs after consultation, gave consent for construction to begin on the Coastal Link pipeline. However, the influential hereditary chiefs on the other hand were not consulted and are opposed to construction which would run on Wet'suwet'en land.

February 2020 saw Wet'suwet'en land defenders effectively shut down Canada's economy by blockading railways, canals and highways, in protest to the pipeline construction on unceded territory. They were then met with a militarized RCMP presence which acted violently to suppress the movement while negotiations continued between government officials and the hereditary Wet'suwet'en chiefs. However, the pandemic would halt this, as direction action and negotiations with the Canadian state would cease due to imposition of pandemic restrictions.<sup>1</sup> As the consensus-based system of the Wet'suwet'en nation would require congregating more than

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<sup>1</sup> Taylor C. Noakes, *The Pandemic is Slicing Away Indigenous Sovereignty in Canada*. "Foreign policy" April 20<sup>th</sup>, 2020. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/04/20/gas-pipeline-wetsuweten-coronavirus-pandemic-indigenous-sovereignty-canada-oil/>

50 people<sup>2</sup>; which directly is prohibited by the new social distancing guidelines.



However, the Coastal Link pipeline construction continued and was sustained by RCMP occupation. Large settlements were erected to house the transient labourers, who would often interact with the local Indigenous population, greatly increasing the risk of infection amongst these rural and isolated communities.<sup>3</sup> These work camps came to be known as ‘man-camps,’ which have been identified as contributing to the ongoing genocide<sup>4</sup> in Canada. The abduction

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Taylor C. Noakes, *The Pandemic is Slicing Away Indigenous Sovereignty in Canada*. “Foreign policy” April 20<sup>th</sup>, 2020. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/04/20/gas-pipeline-wetsuweten-coronavirus-pandemic-indigenous-sovereignty-canada-oil/>

<sup>4</sup> *A Legal Analysis of Genocide Supplementary Report of the National Inquiry Into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls*. National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls. 25

and murder of Indigenous women, girls and 2SLGBTQIA people,<sup>5</sup> Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (MMIW). Man-camps often become hotspots for sexual assault and violence directed towards women<sup>6</sup>, despite RCMP presence. Wet'suwet'en chiefs have called for the removal of these camps<sup>7</sup> and have sought to exercise their sovereignty by prohibiting outsiders from coming into the community; both of which have been largely blocked by Canadian provincial governments.<sup>8</sup> Demonstrating how Indigenous sovereignty has largely been ignored and unjustly overruled in this age of pandemic.

Canadians have been quick to call situations like this a 'reminder' of Canada's colonial legacy. Instead, this is nothing more than Canada's ongoing reality, colonialism did not disappear when we lowered the Red Ensign, and it certainly did not stop when COVID-19 froze the world. This collection hopes to illuminate that Canada was willing to concede on closing businesses, halting travel; but not on First Nations land. It was not willing to concede the inhumane machine which created and sustains this settler state, colonialism.

This post was greatly influenced by my good friend Kate Gillis, who helped shape the direction of this blog post and greatly assisted by providing several sources and brainstorming with me. This would not have been possible without her help, I am incredibly grateful for her friendship.

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<sup>5</sup> Kyle Edwards. *MMIWG's findings on 'man camps' are a good place for government to get started*. "Maclean's." June 3, 2019.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

<sup>7</sup> Jennifer Saltman. *Wet'suwet'en women urge B.C. to declare oil and gas work non-essential amid COVID*. Vancouver Sun. December 1<sup>st</sup> 2020. <https://vancouversun.com/news/wetsuweten-women-urge-b-c-to-declare-oil-and-gas-work-non-essential-amid-covid>

<sup>8</sup> Taylor C. Noakes, *The Pandemic is Slicing Away Indigenous Sovereignty in Canada*. "Foreign policy" April 20<sup>th</sup>, 2020. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/04/20/gas-pipeline-wetsuweten-coronavirus-pandemic-indigenous-sovereignty-canada-oil/>

Other websites which speak on the same subject: The survival of colonialism in ‘pandemic’ Canada.

<http://www.slaw.ca/2020/03/02/colonialism-is-alive-and-well-in-canada/>

<https://thefulcrum.ca/opinions/editorial-despite-reconciliation-colonialism-is-alive-and-well-in-canada/>

<https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/04/20/gas-pipeline-wetsuweten-coronavirus-pandemic-indigenous-sovereignty-canada-oil/>

Keywords: Colonialism, Indigenous Sovereignty, Canada, MMIW, British Columbia, Wet’suwet’en.

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