

# **Dechinta Bush University: Mobilizing a knowledge economy of reciprocity, resurgence and decolonization**

**Erin Freeland Ballantyne**

*Dechinta Bush University*

## **Abstract**

This article explores Dechinta Bush University as an Indigenous place-based movement that contributes to personal and collective transformation through mobilizing land-based knowledge and learning within a comprehensive strategy of resistance to settler capital. Through the production of a knowledge economy intervention, the pedagogical and political strategies of Dechinta are explored as a proven example of multi-scalar transformational decolonization that has far-reaching personal, collective, institutional, political and economic impacts. Through a detailed exploration of the five-year process of collective imagining, mobilizing and operating Dechinta Bush University, this article gives critical insights into closing the gap between the call for mass-scale decolonization and the dismantling of settler capitalism by exploring pathways which orient the land and Indigenous knowledge as relationships and core values mobilized towards a resurgence reality. Dechinta is herein conceived as a pathway movement of arming oneself with knowledge to fight the hierarchical scales of settler politics, a movement where collective and personal transformation through learning on the land is part and parcel of a strategy of resistance to settler capital, producing an alternative knowledge economy centered around the value of land as an infinite producer of health, knowledge, and sustainable, self-determining communities.

**Keywords:** *settler colonial capitalism; Dechinta; endocolonization; land-based pedagogy; knowledge economy; Denendeh*

## Introduction

The canvas tents glow in the night. Wood smoke and strong pine trees curl up under a sky spinning with aurora, illuminating the snow surrounding us. Through the canvas you can see the shadows of those gathered around to listen. Pascal Erasmus' voice paints the words of Leroy Little Bear over the camp, "Tribal territory is important because Earth is our Mother (this is not a metaphor: it is real)...The Earth is where the continuous and/or repetitive process of creation occurs. It is on the Earth and from the Earth that cycles, phases, patterns-in other words the constant motion of life can be observed. Creation is a continuity" (2000, p. 78). I'm lying in my tent, cuddling my seven-year-old daughter against my 8-month pregnant belly. Our wood stove is burning hot against the -40 outside. We spent our morning discussing lateral violence and the links between colonization and health outcomes with Dr. Lois Edge. Our afternoon was spent setting beaver traps and sewing beaver mitts with Elder Jane Dragon; each stitch a gathering back of what the readings teach, our collective experience which has been strategically unraveled. We circle on a carpet we have woven of spruce boughs, *ouri*, drinking spruce gum tea. The spruce poles holding up our tent, burning in the stove, laying beneath us, and in our bellies speak to the infinite purpose held in the land, and the multitude of gifts coming from a single tree. The land is beneath us, surrounding us. We breathe it in; we digest it. It spoons us as we sleep. Here in Denendeh, *dè*, often translated as land, is a living, reciprocal relation of land, water, air, animals and humans. Land is not sufficient enough a word. Here at Dechinta Bush University, *dè* is our most honored teacher. Weaving and articulating a process where land based education, rooted in Indigenous values, teachings and teachers, and simultaneously accredited by the university, has been and continues to be a journey which simultaneously disrupts settlers and settler colonial enclosures of 'education' while carving out space where practices which build self-determination strengthen.

This paper aims to explore how, practically, we can make headway into the tough and complex work of dismantling settler colonial capitalism and how Dechinta has, as a process, aimed to produce new spaces for decolonization work to happen. I take seriously the injection made by Dene scholar Glen Coulthard (2014b) that although place-based practices support well being and can offer new insights and frameworks for thinking about alternatives "they still require that we have access to a mode of subsistence detached from the practices themselves" (p. 3). In other words, within our contemporary context we must participate in capitalist economies to secure the money necessary to engage in land based practices.

Given that, 1) Decolonization vis-a-vie capitalism is fundamentally antithetical and, 2) capitalism is so pervasive, infiltrating every aspect of being, which Deleuze and Guattari refer to as 'endocolonization'- the 'process by which the individual psyche is reprogrammed to desire its own exploitation' (Kubiak, 1991, p. 185), a paradoxical tension exists: if not from within capitalism, then from where? This tension poses one of the most critical questions in moving decolonization work from theory into practice. Through the example of Dechinta, I hope to explore how decolonization work can and could happen through the capture and reterritorialization of settler capital, in order to re-inscribe meaning and flows to create zones of

resistance within and against it(self). Specifically, I argue that strategic realignment of the flows of capital can create spaces where decolonizing practices can be explored and nurtured, whereby we can hasten the inevitable collapse of capital itself while protecting and training for the resurgent futures that come afterwards. This paper gives specific attention to the importance of bodies to the project of settler colonization, especially the body 'educated', and makes the argument that settler thinkers taking a shine to decolonization theory have specific commitments to consider in the disruption of colonization in tangible ways. This paper explores how Dechinta serves to create zones of resistance against ongoing settler colonial enclosure. By linking the multi-scalar practices of Dechinta within theoretical discussions of decolonization, this article furthers the imperative of *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, of moving theory into practice, and back again (Sium, Desai & Ritskes, 2012). My hope is that this paper will start a much-needed conversation into the messy work of undermining settler colonial capitalism, which to my mind has thus far been over theorized and under actioned.

## **Settler colloquial**

First and foremost is my declaration of settlersip. Born, raised and living on unceded Yellowknives Dene Territory, I am the fourth generation of my family to settle in Denendeh. I've traced my roots back pretty damn far and I don't have any Indigenous Grandmas. Raised alongside Dene siblings (both blood related and through marriage) and within a largely Indigenous community, my formative teachings of values and spiritual practice are rooted in the Dene-settler mash-up definitive of my childhood. I grew up being taught by Dene Elders to both pay the land and say my Hail Mary's in Dene. Growing up, the fight for land-claims and self-determination were living realities. "Settled" and "Un-settled" land claims and Indigenous Nationhood are widely discussed; the language itself has become normative. My childhood was spent around formative figures from the Dene Nation and Indian Brotherhood, running amok in the legislative halls, sitting in the booths with the translators speaking the nine Indigenous languages in the Northwest Territories (NWT). I learned early what white privilege was by watching how my friends and family were treated differently than I was, in a store, in school, and I continue to live that privilege daily. My familial connections do not in anyway make me 'less' of a settler. In fact, they make the ugly demarcations of class, white supremacy, heteropatriarchy - and the role of the settler in continuing to build these realities - urgently present and personal. No matter what your efforts have been, settlers do not have an alibi. I am a settler and settler colonialism hurts people I love. Given this truth, how I, as part of settler colonialism, direct my energy and efforts into dismantling settler capitalism is critical. It is though this context that I write and that I act.

## Where we are matters

Petrocapitalism and the history of education in Denendeh are inextricably linked.<sup>1</sup> Petrocapitalism has become, de facto, the lifeblood of capitalism in Denendeh. Petrocapitalism is the historical paradigm that has defined Indigenous-colonial capitalist state relations in Denendeh and, therefore, is crucial to understanding how capitalism and colonialism work hand-in-hand to transform human-dè relationships. The social and environmental relationships born of this industry have created specific regimes of governmentality and state-Indigenous relationships that work both explicitly and subtly to alienate Dene from their relationships with dè. Teasing out this history and linking social suffering and dispossession in Denendeh to petrocapi-talism, as I have argued elsewhere (2005, 2013), is critical at a juncture where petrocapi-talism now alters the earth's balance through climate change. The place based nature of this natural resource, and the specific constellations of infrastructure and practices related to extraction, create very specific relationships between people, places and 'product'.

The Berger Inquiry, a national response to the proposed Mackenzie Gas Pipeline of the 1970s, produced a critical response and a living record of Dene philosophy and ontology for settler consumption. During this time period, Indigenous people of the north were cultivating 'the fundamental perception that their struggle is for the most universal of human rights, the right to be a self-determining people' (Watkins, 1977). Following community dissatisfaction with having an inadequate voice within northern politics and development, the Federal government funded what was then called the Indian Brotherhood. The influence of the Native American Indian Movement (AIM) and the civil rights movement during this time, as well as the ongoing impact and interaction the Indian Brotherhood of the NWT had with AIM, cannot be underestimated when considering the long-term political outcomes which resulted. Organizing across Denendeh, the Indian Brotherhood projected Indigenous rights onto the national and international scene, and resulted in The Dene Declaration, passed at the 2nd joint assembly of the Indian Brotherhood of the NWT (now Dene Nation) and the Métis Alliance of the NWT at Fort Simpson in 1975. The declaration states: 'We the Dene of the Northwest Territories insist on the right to be regarded by ourselves and the world as a Nation.' The document proclaims that the 'Dene find themselves as part of a country. That country is Canada. But the Government of Canada is not the government of the Dene. The Government of the Northwest Territories is not the Government of the Dene. These governments were not the choice of the Dene, they were imposed upon the Dene.' The document concludes with a declaration for independence: 'What we seek is self- determination within the country of Canada. This is what we mean when we call for a just land settlement for the Dene Nation' (Watkins, 1977). The Berger Inquiry was carried

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<sup>1</sup> A foundational challenge to Dene articulations of sustainability is capitalism, and, very specifically, petrocapi-talism. Petrocapitalism is the global financial system within which the exploration, extraction, refinement, production, and consumption of fossil fuels and its by-products make up over 90% of the world's energy use. Petroleum is truly the 'engine of the world's economy' (Rahman, 2004). Oil currently provides 52.1% of the world's energy supply, with oil consumption growing by 890,000 barrels per day in 2013. (BP, 2013) The world's largest corporations are fossil fuel companies, whose combined yearly profits make up more than most small countries' Gross Domestic Product combined (Whilbey, 2013).

out during the height of the Dene political movement and produced thousands of pages of Dene testimony in which the desire for freedom, self-determination, the protection of the land for future generations, and protection from companies and people who do not hold shared values of respect and protection are clearly and repeatedly expressed. The impact of Berger's report on the national conscious and the shaping of the land claims movement was unprecedented and revolutionary. I developed a young and continued obsession with the typed transcripts of the Berger inquiry, where the Dene critique of capitalism, colonization and the deep love for land sing strong and resounding over thousands of pages. Denendeh is unique in its context of settler colonization for many factors, which, I argue below, can produce conditions for decolonization that are unique.

At the time of Berger inquiry, the Northwest Territories was the size of the Indian subcontinent, a landmass covering 3,265,108 square kilometers, inhabited by 42,609 people living on the land or in one of 62 government settlements. Nearly 40 years later, Indigenous people remain the majority in the NWT - the only enclave in Canada, along with Nunavut, where the balance has not tipped towards a settler majority. While Berger's report articulated the questions of rights and treaty obligations to the minds of Canadian readers, and the recommendation that no pipeline could proceed until and claims were settled, land claims were slow to be signed. The Inuvialuit Comprehensive region, a territory which holds the first land access to off-shore oil and gas reserves, was signed in 1984: The Committee for Original Peoples Entitlement Agreement (COPE). The Inuvialuit were, in 1984, the first to sign their claim. The Gwich'in and Sahtu regions followed in 1992 and 1993, the Tli cho in 2003. The Deh Cho and Akaitcho regions have not yet 'settled' claims to their land. In 1999, The NWT split, with the eastern half, mostly made up of an Inuit population, forming the new territory of Nunavut. The remainder of the NWT has kept the same name and now holds a population of 41,462 people in 32 communities. While the people of these territories have seen the signing and implementation of the largest Indigenous self-government and land claims agreements in the world, there remains a distinct tension between the desires of the state and multinational oil companies, and the rights and regimes birthed by the land claim agreements. Also unique is our consensus form of territorial legislative government, which boasts a large majority of Indigenous (albeit all male) legislative members.

In the 1990s, the NWT was entering a diamond boom and many of the revolutionaries of the 60s now spoke a more moderate and conciliatory tone, where industrial development could be 'sustainable' and communities needed jobs and the economy needed to grow. As Coulthard (2014b) has aptly described, over time the renewable cooperative economy that had been articulated by the Dene Nation was side-tracked to make way for neoliberal economic development plans steered by normative settler-liberal values. During this time, the Mackenzie Valley Pipeline again entered the conversation (2003), and political sentiment became that the pipeline was an inevitability. Many leaders presented the Mackenzie Gas Pipeline as a this-or-nothing economic future. The former premier of the NWT, Joe Handley, in an interview stated: "don't believe you can try to stop a big multi-national. If they want to be here, they are bigger

than we are. The best thing to do is to find a way of buying into that” (Far North Oil and Gas Review, Winter 2004, p. 54). Such a stance expresses that the north is ‘making the best’ of inevitable industrialization. However, this industrialization is not inevitable; it is a carefully planned strategy of settler capitalism. It is also not new; it is simply dressed up and made shiny again. This strategy of ‘inevitability’ and wholesale transformation of land and life are part of a carefully deployed plan, and this plan begins, always, with the seemingly good hearted and innocuous space of ‘education’.

### **Education: Learning what, for what future?**

It is within the space of education where the motivations of on-going settler colonization can be clearly understood. In a speech to the Canadian senate in 1887, Merrill E. Gates, representing the U.S lobby group *Friends of the Indians*, clearly articulates the goal of settler colonialism for Indigenous bodies:

We have, to begin with the absolute need of awakening in the savage Indian broader desires and ampler wants. To bring him out of savagery into citizenship, we must make the Indian more intelligently selfish before we can make him unselfishly intelligent. We need to awaken in him wants. In his dull savagery, he must be touched by the wings of the divine angel of discontent. The desire for property of his own may become an intense educating force. The wish for a home of his own awakens him to new efforts. Discontent with the tipi and the starving rations of the Indian camp in winter is needed to get the Indian out of the blanket and into trousers—and trousers with pockets in them, and with a pocket that aches to be filled with dollars.

His statement captures the deepest desire of the settler nation state, the transformation of ‘Indian’ bodies into consumers - into capitalists. The most efficient way, of course, to embark on a wholesale cosmological, spiritual and social transformation of the ways people think about and interact with the land is to take them off the land, (re)educate them so that, even if they live on the land, they have been completely deterritorialized from their practices and ways of being on the land. In this way, the settler state has and continues to exercise its attempted erasure of Indian-ness, while still retaining the Indigenous body to be exploited for labor. If settlers are successful in the colonization of the mind *and* being of the Indigenous body, not only does the settler state have an exploitable body, but a being who is willing to exploit the land in order to achieve status/survival within settler reality.

In the Northwest Territories, the settler cocktail of petro-capitalism and the collapse of the fur trade paved the way for the incursion of the New Education Programme. The fur trade had produced a method through which cash and trade goods entered into the northern political economy, thus making the trappers open to the volatilities of capital. Then, the fur trade collapsed.

The Territorial Council (made up of civil servants based in Ottawa) resolved in 1956 that, due to the collapse of the fur trade, the government of Canada needed to act quickly to support the price of fur or to “take all possible measures at the earliest date to stimulate the economic development of the Northwest Territories so that alternative means of employment and income can be provided for these people” (Asch, 1977, p. 53). The result was the “New Education Programme” which mandated the construction of schools to provide universal education, a state complement to the religious residential school, which had been operating in the region since 1902 (ECE, 1991). The New Education Programme resulted in state schools being built, usually beside existing trading posts. In order to receive family allowances, school attendance was compulsory. Asch notes that within a year, around the trading posts of Wrigley and Simpson, most people moved into ‘town’. This spatial shift resulted in fundamental transformations of the Dene economy and social organization. There was pressure on Dene families to no longer work in small groups, but become sedentary and housed in nuclear units. The amount of small game, typically collected by women and children, quickly diminished around town sites, which led to the degradation of diverse nutritional bush harvest, as well as the economic contribution of small game to family and group security, and the cultural practices with which small game were associated. The payment of family allowances to the heads of nuclear families and the distribution of housing fundamentally undermined the values and previous organization of social groups, the collective and cooperative sharing of resources, and equitable distribution of labor. Not only did this mandatory move mean that parents and children could be subject to punishment for not attending schools, it also effectively removed people from the land, severing relationships and the underpinning cultural and social identities, which had made the Dene such strong and resilient powers in the face of external forces. Meanwhile, within school walls, children were instilled with the values of settler colonial society, which taught Indian children that they, their culture, and language were worthless and primitive. This move into settlements meant that in order to be around ones children, one spent less time in the bush harvesting. This time period is marked by a significant shift in settler–Dene relationships, one where “external agents introduced programs over which native people had no control and then forced native people to cooperate with them” (Asch, 1977, p. 56). The following decades marked the widespread indoctrination of Indigenous children into the values and worldviews of settler society.

The last residential school in the NWT closed in 1996. The incredibly rapid transition from mobile, small family groups to sedentary enclosed ‘citizens’ spans just over 100 years. While the era and explicitly forced nature of residential schools has ended, the dominant normalized settler colonial values instilled into Dene children through school remains. Educational institutions, kindergarten through to post-secondary, exist to indoctrinate Dene children with a colonial understanding of the world, and, in particular, human-land-dè relationships.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> It is interesting to note that the dominant language of immersion in our inclusive northern schools is French, not Dene. French grammar at its most fundamental instruction, teaches the prefixes assigned towards living and non-living entities (les êtres vivant et les nons-êtres vivants, having life force, not having life force) instilling in young children the explicit classification and differentiation between how we speak and think about the quality and nature

The settler worldview permeates not only curriculum, but the guidance and opportunities we offer children in northern schools. From exclusionist Canadian history to career fairs focusing on job narratives for children under 10, contemporary northern education preaches a well-rounded, work ready individual, reared indoors. While the Northwest Territories has invested considerable time, expertise and money in Dene Kede, a Dene-values based curriculum, this approach remains extra-curricular in nature, special-event based and inconsistent in its delivery. Culture camps are much-anticipated special events, not a pedagogical imperative. Heritage Fairs have replaced science fairs, and the many schools make considerable efforts to bridge community and Indigenous teachings - however these are always secondary to the Alberta curriculum that dominates northern learning. The long-standing high school 'northern studies' course, the NWTs longest standing efforts at 'inclusion', is often taught by the 'last teacher off the plane' – generally not someone from the community. In my own high school northern-studies class, we made tipis out of toothpicks (most people in class had real tipis) and our gym teacher from Nova Scotia taught us that Yellowknives Dene (who made up the majority of our class) were extinct.

The current revitalization of northern studies, in a multi-grade streamed program (with aims to be equivalent to social studies), covers in-depth residential school history while simultaneously framing resource exploitation as a critical part of sustainable development. The curriculum utilizes settler political frameworks such as 'voting with your feet' and 'dot democracy' to make decisions for group work and is symptomatic of a time where reconciliation means inclusion of Indigenous people and our common history, while struggling to change the ongoing structural violences that continue to propagate and normalize settler colonization in the first instance (ECE, 2012).

## **Dechinta: Pushing against colonial education and capital for Indigenous resurgence**

As a young community organizer and academic, I initially treated the enclosures of schools without much attention. As a political ecologist, I was concerned with how our micro relationships with land and place shaped a larger political reality. It was during my time living in Radili'ko (Fort Good Hope) in the Sahtu homeland on the Arctic Circle that education, both substantively and practically, began to centre in my experience. My PhD work was a community-directed investigation into the colliding impacts of petro-capitalism, climate change and health. Though a process of working with high-school aged youth, we carried out video research with youth about community articulated topics. We first interviewed Elders and hunters, then mothers, and each other. I worked with youth the high school had identified as 'high risk' and in some instances 'written off'. While they might not like to be lectured at in class, making videos and learning from Elders appealed to these youth. During early efforts with the team, at

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of the relationships we can have with humans, trees and water - to name only a few. Such teachings lead to an understanding that living and non-living things can be treated in different ways (Little Bear, 2000).

an Elder's house, a group of us were sitting beside the stove, watching the youth sit with Elder Charlie Tobac. While the conversation with the youth unfolded, those around the fire began to talk about what learning used to look like – that it was much like this setting, with everyone sitting together sharing stories to help the youth think. Dene pedagogy relies upon close relationships to the land, thinking within and embodying Dene stories, and acting out various Dene values such as sharing (Legat, 2009). The Alberta-designed curriculum taught in NWT classrooms was built on the assumption that knowledge can be removed from the context of its production (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p. 40). State sanctioned 'formal' education has always been a direct affront to the Dene way of gaining knowledge and taking action through relationships within *dè*. My experiences in Fort Good Hope clearly articulated two lessons: that the schools were dampening rather than igniting the inherent burning desire of youth to learn, and that when Elders and youth gathered to learn together, the conversation always led to grappling with settler colonization and sharing ways to become stronger, to become more Dene and more healthy in resistance to these complex intrusions.

Arriving in Fort Good Hope, I presented my research to local high school students. When I said I was from the University of Oxford, I was asked if I knew the guidance counsellor's son, who had gone down south to 'university'. The idea that 'university' could be a singular place resonated. It was a place, though replicated, that carried the same intention of housing high theory and learning, a place to be attained, a place ripe with hierarchies and class - and this space was far away from Denendeh. This brought me back to a time years ago, around the campfire at Blachford - my father's eco-tourism lease that had come to him from a Dene/Métis trapping family, built on unceded Yellowknives Dene Territory - where I sat with Albert Doctor. Albert was Yellowknives Dene and was born at Enodah on Tindee (Great Slave Lake). He had helped build much of the incredible log work on site and was an expert drum maker, a skill passed on to him from his father, Gabriel. He had never graduated high school, but was one of the most skilled people I had ever met. Deeply proud of his culture, his extensive knowledge of territory, stories and practices had earned him the nickname Dr. Doctor. Under the Northern lights, with a fresh jackfish roasting on the fire and an old tape deck playing Elvis, I was lamenting to him about being homesick when I was at University down south. Albert gestured out at the incredible place we were in. *This*, he said *this* is your university.

Following the collusions of these moments and teachings, I took what Albert said to heart and began to cobble together a vision document for a land-based university, rooted in the territory I grew up in, and committed to the shift of our family owned property - on a federal land-lease on unceded and unsettled Dene territory - into a community controlled space where the important theoretical work that was happening within the confines of the mainstream university could breathe new life, and perhaps new ideas, out on the land. A place where the things I heard youth longing to learn and Elders longing to teach could actually happen uninterrupted by clocks, bells and bars. The vision was a land-based university that would address critical northern issues rooted in Indigenous knowledge and values. The word university was used specifically to speak back to the settler notion of 'higher' learning, as an assertion that

learning on and with the land held the significance, that it ‘packed weight’. I asked for guidance and support from a circle of Elders, Indigenous leaders and academics. What had initially been imagined soon became a complex realm of desires and dreams. A gathering of community leaders, elders, academics, northern students and possible funders gathered to explore what a land-based university could look like. Foundational principles emerged, such as collaborative teaching between academics and Elders, and core areas critical to community well-being in the north: self-determination, sustainability, health and well-being and the processes of colonization and decolonization. Facilitated by Elder and healer Be’sha Blondin, direction was given to begin developing the program, securing funding, as well as developing curriculum and pedagogy (Dechinta, 2009). The vision for a northern university was renamed Dechinta, the Dene word for bush or being in the bush. It is a word shared by the Dene languages, although pronounced differently in different dialects, signifying the shared space Dechinta hoped to carve. Specific commitments which emerged from this gathering were: the continued guidance and appointment from the host nation, Yellowknives Dene, to have members of the community sit on the advisory circle; for the development of curriculum from Yellowknives Dene scholar Glen Coulthard; and from then Dean of Native studies at the university of Alberta, Ellen Bielawski, a commitment to work towards the accreditation of land-based courses, which would be designed and developed in the north, guided by the need of communities and collaboratively with academics, community leaders and Elders.

As the conversation of Dechinta grew, the ugly politics of education on a broad political scale quickly surfaced. It became clear that education is a domain of power and privilege that is fiercely protected. Questions relating to pedagogy, control over its content, production and process were, apparently, not open for discussion. Curricula were deeply homogenized, deterritorialized and standardized. Post-secondary in the territory was overtly geared toward training people for industry and the endless promise of mining, pipeline and oil and gas booms (and busts). People were either emphatically supportive of the notion of ‘Elders as professors’ being recognized as equals and collaborating with university professors, or incensed by its disruption of typical academic power. The creation of Dechinta was polarizing, and reactions were telling of the deeply embedded sense of entitlement and power that the state, and existing institutions, had over determining what did and did not count as ‘education’. Rather than support spaces where academic and Indigenous knowledge would overlap, Indigenous knowledge was viewed as curriculum that should be relegated to ‘culture camps’. That processes like hunting and moose-hide tanning could draw parallels, or even inform governance, consensus building and self-determination, continue to elude most mainstream reporters, critics and institutions.

Coming back to the land is a battle. ‘Education’ on the land is a direct hit to the exoskeleton of continued colonial power. By specifically disrupting education as a domain of settler colonial control to be deconstructed and re-imagined, Dechinta has challenged the most comprehensive, yet skilfully cloaked machine of settler colonial capitalism - the prescriptive education process, which produces more settler colonial bodies, thinkers, and believers. Building strong relationships of reciprocity with the land results in the crumbling of settler capitalism

because it fundamentally shifts the relationships people experience and what they believe about who they are, how they are in relation to and with land, and what they believe to be true. Being together on the land, learning with the land, and having a strong relationship with the land is antithetical to settler capitalism itself. The power of settler colonization relies on the total deterritorialization of people's relationship with land. Deleuze and Guattari's (1972) work on deterritorialization, 'the process whereby colonization leads not just to the loss of territory but also to the destruction of the ontological conditions of the colonized culture's territoriality,' is a fitting philosophical conjecture to Dene expressions of how they are dislocated from their relationships with land due to process of nation-building and capitalism, and how this deterritorialization separates people from practices with the land that keeps them healthy, even if they still live on the land (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p. 192; Hipwell, 2004, p. 304). As Said (1993) has stated: land, in the final instance, is what empire is about. In this way, our relationships with land are central to the great unsettling.

Reconnection, and the exchange of skills, knowledge and practice with land, thus directly threaten the settler colonial project. It removes bodies from the forces designed to encode the body *as* capital. The foremost space of enclosure, of encoding, is the 'school'. The ongoing trend in Indigenous and Northern settler education since its earliest colonial intrusion has been to train Indigenous bodies to serve the needs of industry. Education has happened in Denendeh since time immemorial. It has been the settler prerogative to dismantle Indigenous ways of knowing and being, of education. Returning learning to an intergenerational exchange, on the land - which has at its very core the fundamental teachings that, if we take care of the land, the land takes care of us - will shake the foundation of settler colonization by breaking the dependency that has been created on capitalism through deterritorialization. Transformational learning supports intergenerational learners and teachers to think critically and re-imagine what the purpose of learning is. Learning on the land is healing and being in community on the land is challenging, pulling our attention to the hard work of decolonization.

The year after our initial gathering, Dechinta launched a pilot semester with three courses nested within an interdisciplinary approach. Student evaluations of the program indicated it was profoundly 'transformative', and was for some the first 'safe space' of education that they had encountered (Luig et al, 2011). Interdisciplinary and collaborative, the pilot set the stage for the following four years. Dechinta now has 8 original courses, and a two semester-long program growing into a full degree that operates from -50 winters to the steamy height of summer. The challenges have been substantial. Conflict between academics and Indigenous students have made real the tensions of working on decolonization in concert, even with those who identify, or who are identified as allies. Solving conflict and difficulties through shared governance circles, while combating ingrained reactions of lateral violence and other social expressions codified in settler colonization are truly challenging, but deeply rewarding.

Through the building of relationships we have a growing cohort of faculty dedicated to not just teaching but sharing in the creation of safe spaces, where the hard mental work of decolonizing in theory is met with the even harder work of decolonizing as practice. When

students and faculty create a community where their relationships are ordered through their relationships with land, the work of decolonization move from a discussion in theory to practice of being and becoming a source of decolonial power. At Dechinta we debate this, and experiment with its meaning in tangible ways. Here, skills categorized as ‘subsistence’ or ‘arts and crafts’ are fundamental in forming and understanding theory. Such practices are themselves theory in action.

For example, hunting is herein a complex example of theory-to-practice. It has been articulated that decolonizing the diet is a worthy endeavour, and everyone agrees that bush food is better than industrial meat and that hunting is a worthy practice. Hunting, as it moves from a statement to practice becomes complex. To ‘go hunting’ requires the collaborative knowledge of generations who have signalled where moose like to be in specific times of year, how they move, and how they are impacted by snow or water conditions and temperature. At Dechinta, factors like Elders’ guidance and knowledge (both direct and passed on), climate change (this winter the snow is heavier and wetter than ever before, willows are in deeper snow for food access), the nearby invasion of a rare-earth metal exploration (the moose does not like being near the cut lines or the exploration road, nor the sound of the drill), factor into our deliberations about the hunt. Who will go on the hunt (a small group for fast mobility, no women on their moon time, etc.), what we need to bring with us (tarps, small axes, knives, rifle, etc) are group conversations, which actively teach self-governance. These deliberations are woven with reflections of books and readings but give real context and place to the academic work. Groups comprised of different Indigenous nations and settlers, Elders and children, bring forward new considerations and difficult questions which are worked through in never ending cycles – getting deeper and deeper.

While divided into separate courses to meet university requirements, as a whole the curriculum is designed to open spaces to think and be radically sustainable, healthy and self-determining. Collaborative teaching between Elder professors, university professors, leaders and community experts is fundamental, as is our KidsU program so that families remain central to intergenerational learning on-site. Establishing practices of governance through daily governance circles establishes values through Dene Law, as well as the shared traditions of the students present and their respective traditions and Nations. Though the process of establishing governance, many of the core challenges of self-determination are encountered. Coming from a colonized framework, there is often struggle over dependence and reliance on the program facilitators - what is their role, what is their inherent power and how can these be made more horizontal and shifted through processes of self-governing? The disruption of daily activities usually circumscribed into the practice of capitalism - such as the exchange of money - is at first jarring, then celebrated. The lack of a cash economy and ability to purchase can be both uncomfortable and strange. There is much discussion around how desires are tied to the ability to purchase, or feelings of worth and engagement linked to buying.

The process of Dechinta is intensive, with up to 8 weeks spent in the bush with a small, intergenerational group doing very hard physical, mental and spiritual work, day in day out.

Through this process, one of the most common feelings encountered, alongside rage and peace, is guilt. It is the guilt of having been raised in small communities and not having the land-based skills by which so many thinkers ground Indigeneity and Indigenous-ness. Some students have never actually lit a fire, let alone spent significant time in the bush. While many are raised in sedentary communities located in heart of their motherlands, they do not have access to land. Deterritorialization has been so effective that kids can grow up in Denendeh having never practiced skills which two generations ago would have been fundamental to survival. The colonial apparatus has been this effective in removing people from their land while leaving them physically on it. During the process of Dechinta, many bush skills are learned with Elders who share the collective knowledge of what has been remembered. Learning these practices evokes the anger of never having been taught, as well as provokes exploring why those teachings were severed and how learning them revitalizes and rekindles. These skills are complex in their meaning and application. They always involve reaching back to the teaching of ancestors to share what was learned, where, and from whom. Thus, bush pedagogy is always rooted in place and in relationships and stories. Through the learning of skills, what is experienced is a shift from guilt to gift. This is what has been called ‘the Dechinta Transformation’ (Sterriah, 2014), whereby the forces of Indigenous theory and practice merge and result in students who can articulate processes of decolonization on paper as well as engage in decolonization through an active process of becoming rooted in land based practices. This space of exchange is critical, especially given the increasingly popular and problematic call to ‘decolonize’ and ‘indigenize’ the academy. As Dechinta students receive credit in Native Studies courses from the University of Alberta, it is important to give pause to the role universities play in decolonization, and how we can manipulate the university as an idea to recentralize the land in learning.

Traditional universities currently play an oppositional role in decolonization. On one had, universities play a critical role in enclosing Indigenous thought and bodies within a colonially administered and capitalist funded space. They are both historically and fundamentally epicenters for both the fetishization and dehumanization of Indigenous bodies, knowledge and epistemology (Smith, 2009). It is a known tension: anyone from within a university writing about decolonization is being salaried and funded, through the pensions fund, unions and endowments these institutions are so heavily invested in, by the very extractive industries which fund settler colonization. By paying more attention to the tension of writing against colonization from within a structurally colonized space, we can begin to tease out alternatives. As theorizing is critical to decolonization, so are alternatives spaces where this theorization is possible. Universities, while increasingly supporting space for Indigenous scholars to write, teach and speak about decolonization, nationhood and other critical work, can play a role in domesticating Indigenous thought and, in particular, Indigenous practice by regulating where and when ‘academics’ can happen. Within the environment where tenure, salary and teaching obligations are the trade-offs for being able to spend time creating critical and meaningful discourse. Universities ensure that Indigenous academics are subject to the seasons and norms dictated by the academy, indeed controlling the ways in which you can engage with decolonizing work (through the production of

academic papers and presenting at academic conferences), teaching settler students to think about decolonization, etc, thus producing a limiting effect on what types of pedagogy and process these intellectuals might engage in. Academic freedom comes at what price? The question then becomes: how can these enclaves, where scholars and thinkers can untangle the complex work of decolonization, become spaces of resistance and re-emergence? What if we take the university out of the university, where we can re-spatialize, and re-root? What would Indigenous thinkers do if not constrained by the design of the academy, which can only re-birth what it was designed to do, which is reproduce an on-going settler hierarchy, albeit one that might be slightly more sympathetic to Indigenous issues. This poses a dangerous problem, to my mind, that co-existence and reconciliatory efforts can take away needed resources from the messy work of figuring out what exactly decolonization looks like in practice. How we can re-spatialize capital and resources both within and outside of the realms of 'education', and reconfiguring capital in solidarity with the growing call to 'decolonize'? This is a critical question.

### **Unsettling capital: unsettling self?**

The quickest critique often made at this juncture is that decolonization is not possible within capitalism, and since capitalism is so pervasive, decolonization is impossible. I have earlier alluded to the possibility that decolonizing enclaves within capitalism can be a way to eviscerate the complex force of capital by weakening or realigning its flows of power. I ask the reader to give serious consideration to the ways such enclaves could result in a serious disruption to the flows of capital by removing massive numbers of people from the practices of settler colonial capitalism. Deleuze and Guattari make the important invocation, where every point in social-space time is occupied by the consumer/commodity relationship, from our bedrooms to hunting grounds to classrooms, we reach a state of endocolonization. Herein, capitalism is not the State but rather is a state of mind. It is a set of relationships we are addicted to and these relationships are abusive. It is ways of being in discord, both with one another and with the land. It is the situation of relationships, whereby our relationality as bodies becomes wholly coded in the demarcation of being able to buy and sell or, in most cases, sell our bodies (time/labor) to pay debts so the capitalist body can collect more capital, increasing the pulse of unequal exchange, ad infinitum. Dene thinkers have recognized the insanity of this abstraction for decades. During Berger, Charlie Neyalle said:

When I said the universal law that connected to almost every environment, and here the elder feel that the oil company, what's happening to them? You need to let go. And the oil company is soon to be like they're really addicted to the oil and addicted to the land; what is it? These are the things we need to understand the land. We didn't understand the oil company. All we understand is that addicted to the oil; money. (Berger, 1977)

As Neyalle articulates, human addiction to money has the power to completely reorient the relationships we have with land and with each other. Capitalism is not something that just changes people's way of relating to the land, it changes how people *think* about land, and how our bodies *behave* with each other through land. It changes ways of being and, subsequently, possibilities and pathways of becoming. Because of its abstract mechanisms of transformation (capitalism is not a thing, it is a way of being), positioning capitalism as disease/addiction is helpful. Capitalism has managed, despite these deeply held beliefs about the importance of the land in Denendeh, to nonetheless infect both bodies and places and attach itself deeply - a multitude of tumors on our most vital organs. Capitalism cannot be cured with a single antidote. It is a disease that requires a multi-plane, dynamic cure. However, capitalism has done a poor job of recognizing the critical input of place. Within capitalism, the land and its corresponding resources, water, air have been neglected, in the sense that capitalism has ignored the reality of the finite nature of the seemingly endless inputs of Indigenous territories and bodies to feed its abstract machine. Endocolonization marks a critical shift in the machine of settler colonization vis-a-vie capitalism, as this state of relationality has entered the atmosphere, becoming a feedback loop of imbalance through the violence of climate change.

Colonization, then, reaches a critical point where not only has the body been colonized but the land has also been transformed in such a way that even those who want to harvest and continue land-based practices are not safe to do so, due to changing weather or the extinction of animals such as caribou, which in turn are definitive in a wide range of socio-cultural practices. With climate change, capitalism has entered the atmosphere. Endocolonization threatens the very existence of life on earth. If the exchange mechanisms of capitalism can be rearranged, reordered and recoded into exchanges of true equivalence between non-exploited bodies, what is possible? Through the recirculation of capital into conscious exchange relationships, though the production of spaces to not just think about, but to practice these relationships, what could decolonization of capital look like? How can we use capitalism against itself?

Settler colonial capitalism feeds off of people's disconnection from their territory. The settler is the ultimate signifier of the deterritorialized being. We do not, for the most part, know our own languages, ceremonies or practices. We have become so far removed from our own territories we often don't even know where we come from. Our relationships with land were replaced with our relationship to capital. Our bodies colonized by capitalism, we wander, hungry ghosts on the lands of others, frantically feeding to fill the void. It is scarier than Fanon imagined. We are not just zombies, but Settler Colonial Capitalist Zombies - hungry for land, cannibalizing the flesh of land and bodies, never satisfied, and never home. In a psychotic dislocation, we work endlessly to subject other bodies to the same fate, infecting them and offering an empty place within the abstract machine of capital salvation. This is how colonization re-infects and multiplies, by severing relationships with land so that bodies become mechanized to buy and sell themselves and their labor. How do we resist this ongoing settler zombie colonist apocalypse? I suggest that one of the most disastrous and disabling moves against settler colonization that can be made is realigning mass amounts of settler capital to both

remove Indigenous bodies from the sick interplays of enclosure and debt, while building territorial enclaves of resistance to push back against the metaphysical flows of endocolonization.

## **How to resist settler colonization 101**

At the crux of this decolonization and anti-capitalism process, is the ongoing tension that in order to access the bush we are now dependent on ski-doo, bush planes and rifles that require us to participate in capitalist economies to acquire. This signals a necessary involvement and tension with capitalism. With this tension clearly in our sights, Dechinta exists at the edge of flexibility. We borrow tools that are useful from academic institutions, and leave those which do not serve our mandate. We are making new tools and using them in new ways, breathing into spaces which did not exist before, breathing into spaces that have not been nurtured for too long. At this time, Dechinta exists and operates within the spheres of settler capitalism, realigning, repurposing and reasserting capital to get in the way of and to disrupt settler colonization. We are not just getting in between settlers and their money (Coulthard, 2014a), we are taking settler money and reorganizing the purpose and distribution of capital to disrupt its flow. The new circulations are part of processes, a dance to build up force, to accumulate power in transformed articulations resulting in different expressions. Investment of capital through Dechinta perverts capitalism. In Massumi's (1992) eloquent dissection, "Capitalism infinitizes a body's debt to society: all but the richest must slave away being "productive members of society," everyone must "pay back her debt to society", day in and day out, or starve. The unequal equivalence that is set up operates on a continual basis rather than punctually (rites of passage) or serially (punishments for particular crimes): it is institutionalized as the everyday equation between habitual suffering and regular paychecks (work)" (p. 189). In this way, the abstract machine of capitalism both encodes and operationalizes the original sin the priests so aptly prepared us for. The mission of transformation of souls by the Church was simply a precursor strategy to prepare the colonized body for the infection of capital. In Denendeh (and certainly elsewhere) The State-Church strategy was thus: children forcibly removed from families on the land into schools. Parents were gifted the option to come live 'for free' near the schools in settlements (where you could see your child through the fence). Upon arrival, bills for both rent and heating fuel quickly arrived, thus trapping families in the indentured servitude of debt (Asch, 1977). The small game around settlements quickly disappeared, as did the reciprocal wealth of land-based harvesting and sharing, as men were poached by petro-capitalists, offering easy access to cash (to pay debts), another 'gift' offered by the settler to the Indigenous body politic in a syphillitic cloak of Christian duty. This loan-debt power relation exemplifies an important transition from spaces of enclosure to Deleuze's societies of control, where 'man is no longer man enclosed but man in debt' (1992, p. 6). Thus, networks of support (are) mutated(ing) from family to commercial insurance. We no longer owe our souls to the church for salvation - we owe our life's work to the

bank, and somewhere along the line freedom, health and well-being have become inextricably linked with profit (or at minimum, access to short-term cash deepening debt).

Thus, when we speak of resistance to settler capitalism we then must speak about how to remove bodies from both enclosure and debt. Operating within capitalism while simultaneously articulating anti-colonial and decolonization goals is a given, but we must also imagine how we *push back* the enclosures of capital to take back places and spaces, both materially and beyond. This mission is critical given the growing numbers of Indigenous partnerships with industry, particularly in extractive-resource mineral rich territories like Denendeh. These relationships signal that both settler capitalism and Indigenous self-determination can exist copasetically. Indeed many First Nations articulate the Helinian ideal that emancipation from colonization will come through the freedoms promised by capital gain, that somehow magically, through the attainment of wealth, the fundamental inequalities of settler colonialism dissipate (even if just from view, onto another Nation's territory).

Given the hard realities of endocapitalism, it is thus critical to assert and imagine spaces, from within capital, that push back, and reclaim what is pulsing powerfully, resiliently and always within and around us - the land - and to reclaim relationality with each other through the land with the articulated purpose of exploring and deepening practices of decolonization. Dechinta pushes back against settler capital by creating spaces where bodies can exist with the land, on the land, and sharing and learning skills, which enhance ability to reproduce exchange and value outside of the enclosures of capital. Being 150km from any road not only signals a distinct physical separation from the network of capital, it also makes the incursions and flows of capital in (the float plane delivering flour and fuel for the back-up generator) visible. Once visible, felt, and seen they are up for discussion. We ask: do we really need bannock, or do we just *desire* bannock? Which leads to asking one of our Elders, Therese, about traditional flours, which leads to an afternoon collecting cat tails to make flour. Making space for intentioned actions and practice is not only critical for imagining, it is critical for the transformational effects that land has on groups of people who are returning to her teachings. We can read decolonization theory, but when we read decolonization theory while living in groups on the land, experimenting daily with self-governance and self-determination and what that means in a real way, in a safe space, decolonization can move from metaphor into something we can taste and that we can feel.

The realignment of capital, to create spaces where bodies can 'get an education' without going into debt, is a useful step. By aligning funds to ensure lack of debt for education, or accessing capital to align, learn and unsettle education, we can produce knowledges and practices that further remove bodies from dependencies on settler-capital and enhance spaces of critical exchange. At Dechinta we have secured the capital so that Indigenous learners do not have to accrue student loans or debt to participate. We make seemingly radical policies, like not turning anyone away Indigenous students for reasons of financial access, and follow them. We challenge potential partners and proclaimed allies to give time, money, efforts and networks to building a sustainable knowledge economy that can speak back to the narrative of 'resource

extraction or nothing'. Through this we demonstrate the power of learning exchange and how capacities cast 'outside the labour market' can actually redefine what the market is and how it functions. This process is powerful because of the impacts it has, both individually and collectively.

Returning from Dechinta, participants share this power in public – in the news media, on Facebook, on radio, and most importantly at home with their children. This is not just speaking truth to power, it is what Rollo (2014) calls *being* truth to power: “*Being* truth to power is reflected in those embodied practices of love for community and for the land, diverse practices that undermine the homogenizing violence that sustains colonial privilege.” During the community celebration in Yellowknife, politicians and Chiefs hear from the students the power of the land, of sharing and learning in a self-governing community. These words are powerful. They contradict the dominant narrative that youth don't want to be on the land. The threat that this poses to the dominant 'emancipation through resource extraction' narrative is that it circumvents the needs for the colonial state as emancipator (destroyer) and offers an alternative economy and lifeways and, in the existence of alternatives, strangles the source of power that such ventures offer. Programs such as Dechinta challenge colonial extraction, first by removing exploitable and dependable bodies to labor for wages, and second by supporting a generation armed with knowledge to both articulate and practice an alternative economic philosophy and practice. Not only do these youth articulate why ongoing colonial practices harm Dene ways of being healthy and self-determining, but these youth are skilled at the practices that build this alternative reality. In the winter of 2014, students returned to their home communities and led hide tanning workshops, planted community gardens, and made films exploring why learning on the land and in community matters to decolonization. They are not just speaking truth to power, they are being truth to power and nurturing a growing force of people in Denendeh who are being the future we want for our children. This is powerful, and no one can take it away.

At Dechinta, learning outcomes (as they are called, to engage the language of the university) are measured by how students are transformed and transforming colonial and capitalist realities in themselves and around them. This process midwives a rhizomatic network of Indigenous and settler learners who have a language, framework and tools, not just to speak against colonization, but the skills to go beyond, to vision and create a different future - a future that is woven tightly to the fundamental belief that our land is our life and that Indigenous thought and being are not only strong enough to overcome settler colonization, but strong enough to live what lies beyond, and what can begin now, and what has never ended. These spaces and places are beautiful and our children know it. What Dechinta produces is love. And it is with this love that a space is pushed back against endocolonization. It is within these spaces of resurgence that what we are fighting for is clear.

*Dechinta hanile dè, hoti Ets'enda hale!*  
*Bush or Death!*

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