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**Heritages of (De)colonialism: Reflections from the Pacific Northwest Coast, Canada.**

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Heritages of (De)colonialism: Reflections from the Pacific Northwest Coast, Canada.

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### **Land acknowledgement**

I write as a woman with British heritage and familial ties to the colonial-settler commonwealth country of Canada; as a guest on the unceded ancestral territories of the Pentlatch, E'ik<sup>w</sup>sən, and K'ōmox First Nations on Vancouver Island; and as an academic partner in research with Kumugwe Cultural Society (Onciul 2021, 2023). Land acknowledgements mark an important change in the wider recognition of ongoing colonial legacies of inequality and land alienation in Canada. This is a positive change in public awareness of Canada's difficult heritage; however, for this to be a shift from rhetoric to action requires making meaningful change to how environments, places, and practices (i.e. heritage), are cared for in ways that uphold local Indigenous rights and priorities.

### **Introduction**

Heritage is power. To realise the potential of heritage in decolonization, it is necessary to first decolonize and broaden the conception of heritage to enable meaningful, action-based connections between past, present and future, that further anticolonial efforts.

Heritage is powerful because it is used as a way to define and identify. It is about who we as humans think we are, based upon where we believe we have come from, and where we intend to go. It is what is maintained from the past, by the present, for the next generation to inherit (in-heritage): from objects, to buildings, land, resources, status, power, values, ontologies, epistemologies, axiologies, environments, and ecosystems. Current conceptions of heritage are imbued with human agency, as a “discursive construction” with material consequences’,

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3 'constituted and constructed (and at the same time, constitutive and constructing)' (Smith  
4 2006; Harvey 2008:19; Zongjie Wu and Song Hou 2015:39). As such, heritage has the  
5 potential for reworlding and refuturing (Haraway 2016; Harrison 2020; Holtorf and Högberg  
6 2020; Onciul 2015; Smith 2006, 2022; Tlostanova 2022). It can highlight the brief duration in  
7 planetary or species time of colonialism and capitalism, while illustrating its failing prospects  
8 - evidenced by increasing global inequalities and the accelerating inhabitability of the Earth.  
9 This future-orientated power places heritage at the centre of efforts to enact and affirm  
10 Indigenous rights and address colonial legacies and responsibilities in the ancestral territories  
11 now collectively known as Canada.  
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26 In 2015, the Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission report announced 'Calls to  
27 Action' to address Canada's difficult heritage. In response, the Province of British Columbia  
28 became the first in Canada to enshrine the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of  
29 Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) into law in November 2019 through the Declaration Act  
30 (DRIPA 2019). This established UNDRIP as the foundational framework for reconciliation in  
31 British Columbia, placing Indigenous cultural heritage rights at the centre, via Articles 11,  
32 12, 13, and 31.  
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42 Moving these calls to action into practice is not straightforward. In British Columbia there are  
43 over 200 distinct First Nations recognised by government, and many unrecognised, with over  
44 30 different First Nations languages and around 60 dialects spoken in the Province. This  
45 means that efforts to decolonize heritage must work with local Indigenous community  
46 priorities, cultural protocols, languages, and governance structures. Nations are prioritising  
47 different aspects of reclaiming culture, stewarding heritage, and affirming their rights, at  
48 different times depending upon their local circumstances. For example, some Nations are  
49 prioritising building Big Houses to support the renewal of previously banned cultural  
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3 practices, ceremony, and systems of governance (Thompson 2020). In 2019, the Heiltsuk  
4 Nation opened their first Big House in 120 years (Smart 2019). Many Nations are actively  
5 repatriating belongings: the Nisga'a Nation recently announced that 'a long-stolen memorial  
6 totem pole will be returned to the Nisga'a Nation [...], following a historic decision by  
7 National Museums Scotland' (SFU 2022). While some Nations have well-established cultural  
8 centres like U'mista, Nuyumbalees, Skwxwú7mesh Liłwat7ul; others are planning and  
9 developing them, including the Gitxaala Nation (2023). Guardian Watchmen programmes  
10 have been established by many Nations on the coast to culturally and environmentally  
11 steward ancestral territories and waters (Parks Canada, n.d.; Coastal First Nations Great Bear  
12 Initiative 2022) and pre-colonization Hereditary Ancestral Governance systems are being  
13 revitalised (Nuxalk Nation 2021). Relations between Canada and First Nations are also  
14 changing at the nation-to-nation level: on 9<sup>th</sup> May 2023 *Haida Nation Recognition Act*  
15 recognised the Council of the Haida Nation as the government of the Haida Nation in  
16 Provincial Law (BC Gov News 2023). At a national level, the Canadian Museums  
17 Association published a response to the TRC's Call to Action #67 that called for a National  
18 Review of museum policies and practices to 'determine the level of compliance' with  
19 UNDRIP and make recommendations (CMA 2022). With such richness and diversity across  
20 the Northwest Coast, this article shares examples that are far from exhaustive, but designed to  
21 be vignettes into different forms of practice and ways of thinking.

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Decolonizing heritage is a long and complex process, and is especially challenging in Settler-  
Colonial Nations where Indigenous homelands were (and continue to be) claimed by  
newcomers, and national narratives and settler identities were established and are still based  
on the painful practices and legacies of land alienation and cultural genocide (TRC 2015).  
Tuck and Yang argue that:

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3 'Land is what is most valuable, contested, required. This is both because the settlers  
4 make Indigenous land their new home and source of capital, and also because the  
5 disruption of Indigenous relationships to land represents a profound epistemic,  
6 ontological, cosmological violence. This violence is not temporally contained in the  
7 arrival of the settler but is reasserted each day of occupation. This is why Patrick  
8 Wolfe (1999) emphasizes that settler colonialism is a structure and not an event'  
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17 (2012:5).

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19 Changing the structural approach to heritage in Canada requires multi-layered unsettling.  
20 Unsettling how heritage is understood, unsettling who holds expertise and authority to decide  
21 use and designation of heritage, unsettling heritage practices, and changing what heritage  
22 does, for whom, when, and why. Thinking about heritage in relation to Indigenous rights is  
23 an important first step towards change, by recognising the naturalised and often unseen logics  
24 that maintain the Settler-Colonial status quo.  
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### 35 **What does 'heritage' mean in this context?**

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37 Heritage is a term that is used interchangeably to mean many different things, from a  
38 discipline to built heritage, to museum collections, archival records, intangible heritage  
39 practices, genealogy, families, land, rights, and responsibilities. The term changes meaning  
40 depending on the speaker and context. It would be reasonable to assume that the term  
41 'heritage' may be disfavoured by Indigenous Peoples, in the same way the word 'museum' is  
42 often rejected by museum-like Indigenous institutions as a word that is inseparable from  
43 colonialism (Cooper 2008:155, Onciul 2015:39). However, First Nations communities on the  
44 Northwest Coast use the term heritage extensively to describe many different relational ties,  
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3 from family connections within and across communities, to treasures and belongings,<sup>1</sup>  
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5 practices, important places within the landscape, and connections with more-than-human kin,  
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7 and to past and future ancestors. Artist Andy Everson's artwork 'Heritage' depicts a glacier  
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9 in the unceded ancestral territories of the Pentlatch, E'ik<sup>w</sup>sən, and K'ōmox, known as  
10  
11 Queneesh, a white whale that saved the people from a great flood thousands of years ago  
12  
13 (Everson 2004). Across the different Peoples and Nations on the Northwest Coast, there is a  
14  
15 commonality of heritage being understood as expansive, (w)holistic, intertwined, and  
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17 relational.  
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### 24 **Intended and Unintended Inheritances**

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26 Heritage can be intended and unintended, with human and more-than-human agency, such as  
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28 the unintended inheritance of accelerated climate change, and the new geological epoch of  
29  
30 the Anthropocene. Heritage functions at planetary, national, collective, and personal levels.  
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32 At a micro-cellular level, our DNA makes both visible and invisible our genealogical  
33  
34 inheritances. Recent research indicates DNA may contain evidence of historical and  
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36 intergenerational trauma passed down through generations by epigenetics (Gapp et al. 2020;  
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38 Jawaid and Mansuy 2021; Thumfart et al. 2022). In this way heritage is personal, and the  
39  
40 personal is political.  
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45 As personal and political, heritage has affective power (Tolia-Kelly, Waterton, and Watson,  
46  
47 2016; Smith and Campbell 2015). Much of what we collectively inherit is not positive – a  
48  
49 damaged environment, a changing climate, trauma, displacement, poverty, and inequalities.  
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51 These heritages are connected to the legacies of colonialism, empire, slavery, and capitalist  
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53 extraction (Yusoff 2019). The actions of past ancestors inform current heritage priorities and  
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58 <sup>1</sup> Treasures and belongings, including masks, regalia, big houses, posts, poles, songs, names, dances, and stories,  
59 are records of origin stories, genealogies, territory, rights, and responsibilities and are key to customary laws and  
60 governance. Each Nation expresses these in their own language, highlighting differences and similarities in  
approaches and concepts.

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3 conflicts, and leave emotional inheritances of pain, joy, pride, guilt, rights, responsibility, and  
4 calls for same and different futures. In this way there can be many diverse, contradictory, and  
5 conflicting heritages. Heritage is not static but ongoing, continually identified, maintained,  
6 discarded, reconsidered, and reconstituted.  
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12 In this way heritage is highly political, heavily contested, contentious, and a pluriverse of  
13 imagined, enacted, and evidenced past-present-futures. There is not one history of everything,  
14 and there is not one heritage, but a multitude of competing heritages that each lay claim to  
15 power over how the past is used today to forge the future. This is why heritage matters today,  
16 and why it was used as a tool of colonialism in the past, creating a complex and painful  
17 legacy on the Northwest Coast.  
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### 28 **Heritage as a weapon of colonial oppression**

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30 Franz Fanon stated: colonialism ‘turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts it,  
31 disfigures and destroys it’ (1961:210). During the colonization of what became known as  
32 Western Canada, Indigenous heritage was targeted because it was (and remains) a source of  
33 identity, knowledge, power, and wellbeing. Treasures and belongings, now often termed  
34 objects and heritage, inform and maintain ancestral governance and rights and responsibilities  
35 in ancestral territories.  
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44 These material and intangible treasures and belongings were collected and removed  
45 (generally without prior informed consent of the Nation) from Northwest Coast communities  
46 by traders, explorers, missionaries, settlers, Anthropologists, tourists, and collectors, from  
47 1774 onwards. As a result, masks, poles, regalia, stories, songs, dances, and even people,<sup>2</sup> can  
48 be found in public and private collections and archives across the world (Krpmotich 2014).  
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59 <sup>2</sup> Living and deceased people were collected, creating the volume of human remains currently needing to be  
60 addressed by museums today.

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3 The visibility of Indigeneity on the coast was purposefully diminished, and even erased. The  
4  
5 1862 smallpox epidemic that was knowingly spread up the Northwest Coast from Victoria,  
6  
7 decimated whole families and villages and forced survivors to relocate, leaving behind their  
8  
9 ancestral territories and villages, their heritage, that provided cultural and social stability  
10  
11 (Van Rijn 2006). With the influx of missionaries and settlers moving in to live permanently  
12  
13 on Indigenous lands, treasures, belongings, and monumental architecture including the Big  
14  
15 Houses that are the loci of ancestral governance systems and Poles that mark territory, were  
16  
17 torn down, burned, destroyed, or removed from community access (Kramer 2006:36). At the  
18  
19 same time, the land and environments that sustained people were forcibly taken, as First  
20  
21 Nations Peoples were moved onto reserves from the 1850s onwards. Unceded Indigenous  
22  
23 land was redistributed to settlers, and resources and areas deemed to be of economic value,  
24  
25 outstanding beauty, scientific significance, and historical importance, were placed under  
26  
27 government management, such as Parks Canada and the Department of Fisheries and Oceans,  
28  
29 which determined access, use, and ownership. This land alienation overturned Indigenous  
30  
31 stewardship of the lands, waterways, and more-than-human kinships, and prevented the  
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33 harvesting of food and resources – making the peoples reliant upon and subject to colonial  
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35 governance, laws, and systems.  
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42 In 1884 the Indian Act (1876) was amended to forcibly remove children from their families  
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44 to residential schools where Indigenous languages and cultures were banned, and the TRC  
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46 has documented the abuse, neglect, and high death rate of children in Church and  
47  
48 Government ‘care’ (TRC 2015). There has been public outpouring since 2021 when  
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50 unmarked children’s graves began to be identified on the grounds of former Residential  
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52 schools. There is ongoing work in communities to find missing and murdered family  
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54 members. In recognition of these finds and the TRC Calls to Action, the Canadian  
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56 Government declared the 30<sup>th</sup> Sept the National Day for Truth and Reconciliation. It is  
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3 informally known as Orange Shirt Day, as people are encouraged to wear orange in  
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5 recognition of this traumatic heritage that is yet to be fully recognised or addressed.  
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8 A further amendment to the Indian Act in 1884, outlawed ceremonies that uphold Indigenous  
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10 laws and governance. This targeted attack on children, culture, heritage, language,  
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12 governance, and identity was an attempt to erase Indigeneity and assimilate everyone into the  
13  
14 new nation of Canada. Kenyan author and academic Ngugi wa Thiong'o argues, in a different  
15  
16 colonial context, that 'the effect of the cultural bomb is to annihilate a people's belief in their  
17  
18 names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in  
19  
20 their capacities and ultimately in themselves' (1986:3). While the ban ended in 1951, many  
21  
22 treasures remain in museum collections. Hereditary Chief Gixkastallasame-gi, Cecil Dawson,  
23  
24 stated that 'visiting our regalia in Museums is like visiting a relative in prison' (*Standing in*  
25  
26 *the Gap*: 2022).  
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30 The ongoing impacts of colonial legacies resonate painfully in everyday lived experiences of  
31  
32 Indigenous Peoples in Canada. They are evident in the logics of modernity and capitalism,  
33  
34 and the structures and concepts that maintain the status quo. As Blackfoot Kainai Elder  
35  
36 Narcisse Blood argued, 'it's not the physical boundaries of colonization that matter. It's the  
37  
38 outposts they left in the mind' (quoted in Heavy Head 2021:3).<sup>3</sup> Colonization caused  
39  
40 intergeneration trauma, yet it failed to destroy Indigenous peoples, nor their cultures,  
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42 languages, connection to ancestral territories, identities, or heritage.  
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### 49 **The positive potential of change**

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58 <sup>3</sup> This is echoed by Sanathanan Thamotherspillai who states: 'We may be independent of colonial rule but  
59 our knowledge system is still colonized' - see *Heritage and Decoloniality: Reflections from Sri Lanka – a*  
60 *conversation*.

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3 With Canada's recent adoption of UNDRIP, it is possible to see how heritage can be used as  
4 a two-sided tool that can both inform and dismantle colonial logics.<sup>4</sup> For Indigenous peoples  
5 of the Northwest Coast, heritage is a key source of power, and a conveyor of rights and  
6 responsibilities that, with the legal weight of DRIPA, could help to restore ancestral  
7 governance, cultural practices and pride, land, and kinship relations. This in turn could help  
8 reduce inequalities, increase food and cultural security, and uphold Indigenous rights.  
9

10 Cultural resurgence and increasing state recognition of Indigenous ontologies has enabled the  
11 start of a significant shift to the concepts of what should be cared for and protected for the  
12 next generation. In Aotearoa New Zealand, the 2017 recognition of the Whanganui River as  
13 holding legal personhood as a Māori ancestor, acknowledged Mātauranga (Māori knowledge)  
14 and the agency of more-than-human kin (Kramm 2020). On the Northwest Coast, there are  
15 places, rivers, mountains, islands, and glaciers with personhood that is not yet formally  
16 recognised by the state (Cruikshank 2012). If UNDRIP enables a return of Indigenous  
17 stewardship of ancestral territories, it is possible that the way heritage is defined and cared for  
18 will not only preserve what has passed, but sustain what is yet to come in a way that is more  
19 beneficial to the majority, including more-than-human kin.  
20

21 At the local level, heritage held in museums and archives is a resource for reconnection,  
22 renewal and revitalization. Heritage professions who care for collections, archives, parks, and  
23 sites, are increasingly receptive to upholding Indigenous rights. This change has come  
24 through the unending efforts of Indigenous activists, and is now in a moment of time where  
25 there is government and legal backing (TRC 2015; DRIPA 2019). It is increasingly being  
26 recognised that collections without histories, genealogies, or understandings of who made  
27 them, used them, for what, when, how or why, are little more than curiosities while they are  
28 held captive in museums, disconnected from their relations. In British Columbia, the Museum  
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<sup>4</sup> See Leïla Baracchini & Julien Monney's discussion of how 'the same action can proceed from a decolonial intention while reinforcing structures and concepts inherited from colonialism' in Guadeloupe.

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3 of Anthropology has led the field in terms of changing practice, providing access,  
4 repatriating, and loaning collections for use in ceremonies (MOA 2019). The local Museum  
5  
6 at Campbell River supports storing and loaning treasures for use by Indigenous community  
7  
8 members; and at the family's request they followed end-of-life cultural protocol for a  
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10 Thunder Bear Pole carved by Sam Henderson, which was burnt in a ceremony on the  
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12 Campbell River Spit in 2016, then replaced with a new pole in 2017 (Museum at Campbell  
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14 River 2018:129). While these changes are promising, Tuck and Yang's remind us that  
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16 'Solidarity is an uneasy, reserved, and unsettled matter that neither reconciles present  
17  
18 grievances nor forecloses future conflict' (2012:3).  
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23 Although often painful, reconnecting with historic material held in museums is important to  
24  
25 revitalising culture. Visiting and holding ancestral treasures can help reconnect knowledge  
26  
27 and raise cultural pride; items can be read for information about the artists who made them  
28  
29 and the leaders who commissioned them, providing clues to genealogies, and movement of  
30  
31 materials through marriages, adoptions, trade, exchanges, and conflicts (Duffek, McLennan,  
32  
33 Wilson 2021). Close inspection can reveal customary methods and techniques, and test  
34  
35 ergonomics and movement, which can enable new regalia and cultural treasures to be created  
36  
37 and placed into use. The ability to make new regalia informed by historical forms creates  
38  
39 cultural vitality, supports emerging artists, and provides treasures for the next generation,  
40  
41 refuturing the present. The renewal and return of items held hostage in museums can spark  
42  
43 the reawakening of customs like kadzitla and coming-of-age ceremonies that were  
44  
45 temporarily suspended by colonial force under the Indian Act. Dormant clans and hereditary  
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47 titles are being reinstated, with descendants stepping back into leadership roles and  
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49 responsibilities for families, clans, territories, and ecosystems.  
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56 Ndlovu-Gatsheni argues coloniality 'is a death project. Decolonization is what I call a theory  
57  
58 of life' (in Omanga 2020). The recognition of life and the positive potential of heritage, even  
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3 in places of deep trauma, is evident in many Indigenous communities. Residential Schools  
4 have been both dismantled and reclaimed as places to share Indigenous knowledge, language  
5 revitalization, and cultural practices (Onciul 2014). These are powerful acts of survivance  
6 (Vizenor 1999). Indigenous methodologies such as attending and ‘relational accountability’  
7 (Wilson and Hughes 2019) have enabled the reawakening of connections and knowledge  
8 made dormant by colonial oppression. It requires a (w)holistic approach to heritage for the  
9 next generation.

### 20 21 **Rethinking Heritage**

22  
23 Heritage is the present summation of the complex enfolded relationships that connect past to  
24 future; humans to more-than-humans in the living and non-living world; and the envisioned  
25 responsibilities to past and future ancestors. It brings the relationship between past, present  
26 and future into tight fold, and can be considered a future-orientated, even future-making  
27 endeavour (Harrison 2020; Holtorf and Högberg, 2020). The need to ‘re-future the present’  
28 (Tlostanova 2018) and create space for non-Western possibilities that disrupt the status quo  
29 of inequality and delink ‘the rhetoric of modernity and the logic of coloniality’ (Mignolo  
30 2007), is central to decolonial theory, thinking and practice (Knudsen, et al, 2021:5).  
31 ‘Postcolonial thinking writes itself into the future’ (Mbembe 2010:85 translated by Knudsen,  
32 et al. 2021), thus there is the potential for heritage to be utilised to create a future that is  
33 different to what is now. What is kept or let go, protected or degraded, directly informs what  
34 the next generations will inherit as their heritage, their belongings, and their burdens.

35  
36 As a future manifesting endeavour, heritage is key to both colonial and anticolonial efforts,  
37 and futures beyond such binaries. Decolonization is not a metaphor for improvement within  
38 the confines of the status quo, it is about ‘the repatriation of Indigenous land and life’ (Tuck  
39 and Yang 2012:1).

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3           ‘Decolonization is the meaningful and active resistance to the forces of colonialism  
4  
5           that perpetuate the subjugation and/or exploitation of our minds, bodies and lands.  
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7           Decolonization is engaged for the ultimate purpose of overturning the colonial  
8  
9           structure and realizing Indigenous liberation’ (Waziyatawin and Yellow Bird 2012:3).

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12 It requires changing everything informed by systems created through colonial thought,  
13  
14 actions, and processes.<sup>5</sup> It is not about returning to an imagined past, but about tracing the  
15  
16 roots and routes of understandings, and presumptions normalised by their ubiquity and  
17  
18 systemic embeddedness, to assess how they came to be, the history of their legitimacy, and  
19  
20 their relevance today and for tomorrow. It is about changing the way we think, speak, live,  
21  
22 act, and relate to one another and the environments we reside in.  
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26  
27 Critical engagement with heritage has moved understanding beyond simplistic definitions of  
28  
29 heritage as historic material and recognises the role heritage can play ‘as practices or  
30  
31 performances’ that mobilize the past ‘to address contemporary social and political issues’  
32  
33 (Smith 2022:624, Dicks, 2000; Harvey, 2001; Macdonald, 2013; Smith, 2006).<sup>6</sup> Mobilised  
34  
35 heritage can support anticolonial work by evidencing other ways of being and living with our  
36  
37 planet that can inspire the creation of futures that are profoundly different to the present.  
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41 As Emma Waterton has argued, it is necessary to ‘become more attentive to different  
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43 possibilities for knowing and doing heritage: the ways in which it makes sense or answers  
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45 back to a fuller range of people (after Thrift 2008)’ (Waterton, Emma, 2014: 823).<sup>7</sup> Heritage  
46  
47 is a tool to think with, to reflect and shape the world we live in. As such, heritage has power:  
48  
49 the power to hurt and to heal; to maintain the status quo or support (k)new ways of being  
50  
51 (Edwards 2009); to define and inform; to fragment and connect.  
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56 <sup>5</sup> See Lucas Lixinski’s piece for discussion of ‘The Legal Limits of Decolonizing Heritage: Emancipation, the  
57 Nation-State, and Racial Capitalism.’

58 <sup>6</sup> See Lucas Lixinski’s and Hasini Haputhanthri, Gill Juleff & Sanathanan Thamothersampillai’s essays for  
59 discussions on the importance of intangible heritage.

60 <sup>7</sup> See Alejandra Korstanje & the CIIVAC’s discussion of more attentive ways of working in heritage in Argentina.

## Conclusion

The way heritage is understood and used, can be decolonized, opening space for other ways of knowing, constituting, and engaging. On the ancestral territories of the Northwest Coast heritage has been a source of power, pride, oppression, and renewal. Awakening and revitalising Indigenous heritage supports, and is supported by, increasing recognition of Indigenous rights, as part of an ongoing anticolonial decolonizing process.

Beyond the ‘things’ of heritage, it is possible to step back and survey the larger picture and consider heritage as collective inheritance. This definition opens up a much wider and relational consideration of heritage that connects the personal with the collective, and the planetary.<sup>8</sup>

If heritage can be decolonized, then it shifts from being a tool for power and domination, to an opportunity for reworlding, refuturing; to reconsider what kind of ancestors we intend to be (Cohen 2021), and what we will leave for future ancestors to inherit.

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