

## **Restful Resistance**

### **How I Use Rest to Dream Métis Futures**

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Vol. 1, Issue 1 (2023)

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**Key words:** rest, art, biopower, community, resistance

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#### **Introduction**

My mom has given me an odd nickname—she often calls me Edith. This nickname comes from an old show in the seventies where a woman, named Edith, would natter on and on, never getting to the point of her story. I have gained this nickname because I really like to go off on tangents, having twelve precursors before I get to the main point. For my entire life, my family has interrupted me with a gentle and loving “short version, Edith,” to remind me of the point I am trying to reach. I tell you this because, despite my best efforts to avoid preamble, I am feeling like Edith. I have a million things to introduce you to before we can get to the good part.

For a second sort of introduction to me, I am Métis and settler (mostly Ukrainian) from Treaty 8 territory. Both my Métis and settler parents and grandparents were born and raised on denedeh in a town colonially known as Fort Nelson, BC. My Métis grandma, my dad’s mom, is from the Harrold family, and her mom is from the Gairdner family. The Gairdner family is from the Métis community in Fort Simpson Northwest Territories, while the Harrold family came from the Métis communities in Spirit River and Dunvegan areas in Northern Alberta. I was born and raised on the territories of the Beaver, Cree, Métis peoples in a city colonially known as Grande Prairie, AB. Despite our robust family relations, I did not grow up with cultural knowledge. My dad and his aunts did their best to preserve and share little bits and pieces of their knowledge when they could, and as an adult, I have been very dedicated to slowly reconnecting to family and community to repair the missing links in my knowledge.

Growing up Métis and Ukrainian meant that we had a lot of family gatherings to attend. As a kid, I was dragged along to so many early morning family breakfasts. I spent a lot of time baking with my grandma and joining her as she delivered these treats to family and friends across town. My family went on long, long drives back up north to spend days eavesdropping on my great-aunts and -uncles’ conversations as my siblings and cousins were routinely kicked

outside to go play. These are the moments of community familial rest that shaped my childhood. No matter how much work it was to do the drives, make all the food, and take care of the often-grouchy grandmas, I saw in my family the necessity of these collective spaces to just be together. As I got older, and people got busier, these big family moments lessened, and I have longed to build it back up again as an adult.

This centring of family in my life means that the most important roles in my life are being an auntie, a sister, a daughter, a granddaughter. These days, everything I do in my life is done with the knowledge that I have two little baby nieces who will inherit the world that I have a part in taking care of—so all of my hobbies, activism, and education are for them. Another role I inhabit is that of a master’s student in University of British Columbia Okanagan’s (UBCO) interdisciplinary power conflict and ideas program. My research at UBCO intends to articulate a Métis-feminist theory of rest as resistance. This research centres the notion that our sleeping, our dreaming, and our playing is not a distraction from our justice work, but it is our justice work.

### **Story Origins:**

This piece of writing emerges from a class I had to take for my master’s program that centred around Foucault’s concept of biopower. I’m going to be honest; I care deeply about who I am in conversation within my work, and Foucault is definitely not on the top of the list of people I want to engage with. This class made me quite angry, often, as I encountered the horrifying realities of the settler mindset that place Indigenous peoples entirely outside of the state’s concern. Western philosophers use terms like biopower and bare life to describe the state processes that strip people of social and political rights yet continue to expose them to violent authority. As Scott Morgensen explains, though, these Western philosophers failed to theorize how settler colonialism shapes these concepts and consider how we are all caught differently and distinctly in the structures of them (55). Attempting to counter the settler perspectives that shaped our syllabus became frustrating and exhausting, so I needed an alternative way to approach this work.

Therefore, I wanted my engagements in this class to be focused on the possibilities of taking care of each other in spite of these structures. Many anti-colonial scholars who consider biopower in their work suggest turning toward community to resist biopower. These analyses came from many Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars from a variety of communities. While I am careful not to assert pan-Indigeneity, I find affinity between how I conceptualize turning toward community and how the variety of anti-colonial analyses I cite do so as well. In building bigger webs of relations, we can find new ways to attend to our responsibilities that take into consideration what we learn from others all of the time.

Scholars like Glen Coulthard, Juanita Sundberg, and Suzanne von der Porten have questioned the effectiveness of appealing to the state for recognition if the settler state is predicated on our erasure and elimination as understandings of biopower illuminate. As Glen Coulthard notes, there is an “assumption that the flourishing of Indigenous peoples as distinct and self-determining entities is dependent on their being afforded cultural recognition and institutional accommodation by the surrounding state” (448). Sundberg reflects this point in stating, “mobilizing on the basis of citizenship in settler societies serves to uphold state

sovereignty as if it precedes dispossession and genocide” (223). As Suzanne von der Porten explains, positioning recognition as an essential goal of Indigenous mobilization creates a power imbalance that reasserts the hold that the settler state has on Indigenous communities—it suggests that we must wait for the state to recognize us (6). I do not mean to devalue the important and essential political work that deals directly with the Canadian state. This work has done immense amounts of good for Indigenous communities, but we also have to attend to the ways that encountering these biopolitical systems is deeply emotional and exhausting.

### **Turning toward Community:**

Tending to this exhaustion may take shape as we follow these scholars’ calls to turn toward community to recentre our culture and traditions and move toward decolonization. As von der Porten states, “if indeed state-granted sovereignty necessarily comes with strings attached, then the perspective that the state should be disregarded by Indigenous peoples has good rationale” (4). Decolonization, then, is an essential avenue for mobilization. Sundberg argues that turning toward decolonization asks us to rethink our relationships and responsibilities to the land and all the beings we co-exist with (223). Coulthard similarly argues that looking inwards at our community’s knowledge and culture provide “a radical alternative to the structural and psycho-affective facets of colonial domination” (456).

The *Owning Ourselves* zine from the Mamawi Project and *Red River Echoes* is an example of this kind of work that unapologetically prioritizes and highlights community voices—especially those that are often overlooked. In their introduction, they write, “We have been thinking a lot about what it means to build a desirable future for our people, and we believe that a healthy and prosperous Métis Nation requires input from people of many different perspectives and politics” (DuPré et al. 3). The reflections that the contributors offer in this zine send a clear message: critical conversations around Métis governance must be in and for community. For example, Conor Kerr’s submission takes this up really well as he writes:

Do you believe in those who aren’t born yet? Those who will come after us. Those who will take back the land and give it away to the grasses. Eradicate the machinery, tear it down, build it up. Believe in the words and the way that pride is written all over the faces of those who learn what it means to own ourselves. To never bow under hell on earth. To never step back but always move forward knowing that within this landscape we are reborn, awoken, brought back by the artists and the writers, the poets, and the dancers, the musicians, and the lovers, the beaders, and the hunters. (in DuPré et al. 10)

This work, among others, reflects Audra Simpson’s point that “there’s no acceptance out there that that’s going to feed our souls and make us who we are” (4). So, our work must be done in community and for community.

### **Resting:**

These emotional and personal accounts of our political work are very grounding, but we have to be sure to build strong networks of care so that these narratives do not become extractive and exhausting. These days, I think most of us have a much more intimate relationship with burnout than we’d prefer. Exhaustion feels unshakable and personal. Settler scholar Jonathan Crary

contends that all of us can no longer engage in careless sleep because of the ways that the state has failed to keep us safe – we have had to adopt a constant practice of vigilance that keeps us both spiritually and physically awake to the horrors and injustice that surround us (18-19). I argue that the intensity of this sleeplessness varies according to our social positioning and is particularly strong for Indigenous peoples.

Therefore, our mobilizations must attend to everyday acts of care. Harsha Walia notes the necessity of creating organizations and mobilizations that not only see our everyday responsibilities and emotions as important, but also see them as a basis to organize on (10–11). This is reflected in Jennifer Alzate González’s statement that we need to build movements “which uplifts not only our rallies and marches, but also our Snapchat selfies, our drag balls and House trophies, and our after-hours grad lounge bachata parties as acts of resistance” (12). This sort of framing is necessary because, as Dean Spade argues, biopolitical structures force us to “think about short-term gains, not building the long-term capacity for all of our well-being” (66). Rest, then, is an act of resistance to the biopolitical state.

### **Expansive Rest:**

When I speak about rest, I call upon an expansive understanding of rest that, yes, includes sleep, but also sees itself as anything that operates as a break from everyday stressors or routines that soothe and rejuvenate our physical, spiritual, mental, and emotional selves. Jenny Odell utilizes the concept of “doing nothing” to emphasize the necessity of having time to process what we experience in the day. She writes, “‘doing nothing’ – in the sense of refusing productivity and stopping to listen – entails an active process of listening that seeks out the effects of racial, environmental, and economic injustice and brings about real change” (22). So, in this instance, rest as resistance requires taking an intentional moment away from what is traditionally seen as the more “active” modes of political organizing.

In my life, one way these moments emerge is when I spend time with my grandma. When I am in Grande Prairie, I make an intentional choice to spend a few hours with my grandma doing nothing. I take this time despite my ever-growing to-do lists and the assertion that this sort of relationship building is not political or decolonizing. I come to my grandma with no agenda but to listen to whatever she feels like sharing that day. This listening is political because it prioritizes relationship over production, and she shares stories with me that colonial projects desperately tried to destroy. It is easy to get caught up in colonial capitalism, which suggests relationships are not as important as work, so it takes a deliberate plan to counter this. These moments are not a break from my activism, but they *are* my activism.

To reiterate—in these moments two forms of resistance are operating together:

1. It refuses productivity, which colonial capitalism bases our entire value on.
2. It reconnects us to relationships and stories that colonial capitalism attempts to destroy.

Here, I find it essential to highlight that this concept of rest as resistance emerges from Black feminist and womanist scholars like bell hooks, Audre Lorde, and Tricia Hersey. Audre Lorde’s “A Burst of Light: Living with Cancer” contends that giving and receiving care together is an act of resistance when the systems around us demand that our only value is in individual

productivity. Similarly, bell hooks states that: “Since society rewards us most, indicates that we are valuable, when we are willing to push ourselves to the limit and beyond, we need a life-affirming practice, a counter-system of valuation in order to resist this agenda” (42). Tricia Hersey’s project, The Nap Ministry, popularized the idea that rest is an essential part of liberation and freedom. Hersey also reminds us that, “Anyone attempting to create and expand on our rest message must reach deep into the cracks to study and uplift Black liberation. It is the North Star for an exhausted world” (78). When we think about rest as resistance, we must always come back to these roots in Black feminism and womanism so that we can strengthen the solidarity between Indigenous and Black activism.

Rest as resistance demands an intentionality in a rest practice that does not uphold white supremacist notions of pace and perfection. Therefore, rest is not a place to pretend that the stressors and violence around us do not exist, but it is a place to tend to the wounds and injuries of this violence. It also sees this tending to ourselves as inherently political because it is prioritizing our community over settler needs and expectations. Rest gives us the room to dream up our futures and work through what must be done to reach them. However, rest cannot be one-sided. We must attend to the ways that we rely on the labour of others for our own rest and ensure that we do not overburden one another. It is not about ensuring an equal amount of accepting and giving care but recognizing the differing capacities that we each have depending on our responsibilities and privileges.

### **Rest in Métis Communities:**

As I mentioned in my introductions, collective spaces to rest, to hangout and be together, have always been a part of my family life. Despite the structures that demand 24/7 labour and productivity, we continue to place importance on spending time together to do nothing. I don’t think this is unique to my family. Bailey Oster and Marilyn Lizee’s book *Stories of Metis Women: Tales My Kookum Told Me* offers many stories that suggest Métis communities have always prioritized rest and relaxation. Oster and Lizee explain that Métis communities “always take time to gather, share food, play music, sing, dance, laugh and tell stories” (30). Participant Doreen Bergum describes weekly celebratory gatherings as part of their relaxing (qtd in Oster & Lizee 61). Similarly, Métis scholar Kim Anderson writes in her book *A Recognition of Being* that “we have a responsibility to regenerate and replenish ourselves and to allow others to assist us in that process” (230). I bring up these examples to assert that rest was already a significant part of our communities. So, centring our rest in our justice work is decolonizing because it is refusing the colonial systems that have placed different values on our productivity and rest. The rest that has always been a part of our communities is expansive, is artistic, is collaborative.

### **Collaborative Arts-Based Rest:**

One way that I love to bring this kind of expansive rest to others is through low-stakes collective art projects. Making art together that is not trying to be perfect or even “good” gives us the room to work through what we learn and experience. Especially in places of learning, this mode of engaging with content asks us to rethink what is required of us to participate. In stepping away from the colonial and capitalistic pressure to always formulate the best question or response, we open space for reflection. Kim Anderson contends that “the need for creative expression as a

means of healing and identity recovery is crucial in many Native women's lives” (142). The collaborative portion of these art projects is essential, as Métis scholar Michelle Murphy notes we need to prioritize “building strategies of community, not just individual, survival and flourishing” (109).

The first version of a collaborative art project that I developed on this theme was an act of resistance to learning environments that routinely exposed me to traumatizing settler perspectives and philosophy. I was exhausted from having to defend myself against this work and needed a way to present work to my classmates that did not require me to delve into how biopolitical systems obviously harm Indigenous communities. I wanted to focus on our joy, on our art, on our dreaming, on our rest. So, I asked my classmates to colour. We spent my presentation time colouring different segments of flowers while reflecting on the meaning of rest. In presenting them with a collaborative art project, I enacted two forms of restful resistance:

1. I gave myself and others a rest from colonial expectations of knowledge dissemination.
2. We spent that time building community.

We needed an intervention into all of the heavy material we were dealing with. Bringing in low-stakes, reflective art practices to our spaces of learning gave us the room to reckon with the ways that we inherit and enact harm and tend to the exhausting and complex emotions that reckoning brings without needing settler recognition or intervention.

## **Dreaming Forward:**

We have to prioritize ways of caring for one another outside of settler desires and recognition. This caring will always be an act of resistance because it is in defiance of the ways that the settler state seeks to disrupt our communities. Creating this space to rest allows us to dream healthier Métis futures that do not ask for constant productivity like colonial capitalism does. When I think about the importance of dreaming Métis futures through rest, I think mostly about my nieces. I think about the responsibility I feel to co-create a world that values life beyond productivity. I muse on how I can actively model a life that prioritizes rest and care. I ruminate on the ways that encouraging their creativity and curiosity can build protection for lifelong contemplative space. And I also think about how my nieces have profoundly impacted the way I view my own rest and reverie. My nieces are little theorists who constantly ask why and demand a meaningful response. To be invested in a relationship with them insists on an entirely different pace than colonial capitalism expects—it takes time to build relationships with them and all their curiosities. It urges you to slow down, to take a break, to mull over all that we encounter. As an auntie, I see it as my responsibility to create space for all the ways that life may exhaust us. Creating this space to rest ensures that we have the capacity to merge our dreams for the future with our everyday lives. Collaborative, arts-based projects provide one method to creatively reckon with the world around us. It gives us different modes to work through and bring to fruition the dreams we have for our communities.

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## Biography

Dani Pierson (she/her) is a master's student at UBC Okanagan in the Interdisciplinary Power, Conflict, and Ideas program. She is Métis-Settler from Treaty 8 territory (northern Alberta), but currently lives, works, and learns on unceded Syilx territory. Her research intends to articulate a Métis-feminist theory of rest as resistance that sees rest not as succumbing to oppressive powers but as a method to actively resist them. This year, she has led Rest as Resistance workshops in collaboration with UBC Okanagan's Sexual Violence Prevention and Response Office, the Graduate Student Committee of the Student's Union, and the FEELed Lab and presented this research at the Indigenous Graduate Student Symposium in Vancouver. Most importantly, though, she is an auntie to two lovely nieces who inspire her to take breaks to play, often.

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