

**REMEMBERING ISTA:  
NUXALK PERSPECTIVES ON SOVEREIGNTY  
& SOCIAL CHANGE**

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## ABSTRACT

Eventually things will come to a head here and our natural resources will be limited in time... I notice that the wood and fish are getting scarce. When I was a boy my father and the old men of the tribe told us to be very careful with the land and property here, not to give it away or sell it. We all discussed the matter a great deal among ourselves. The Creator gave us this land and we use this land and eat these fruits, which the Creator provided. We want you to know that the fish is the same as the bank. This is where we derive our income. - Nuxalk Kwlhanii (Jim Pollard)<sup>1</sup>

In the summer of 1995, the Nuxalk Nation on the central coast of British Columbia, Canada rose from relative obscurity to international recognition in their attempts to stop International Forest Products (INTERFOR) from clearcut logging the sacred area of *Ista* within their ancestral territory. Like many indigenous nations in this part of the world, the Nuxalk have never relinquished title to their lands. However, through various processes of colonization and assimilation by the state of Canada, Nuxalk Sovereignty has been subverted, causing uncertainty regarding the jurisdiction of traditional Nuxalk government and title to their ancestral lands. Traditional Nuxalk government continues to exist in the hereditary chief system at the *House of Smayusta*, in direct opposition to the colonial structures of Canadian society, including the elected Nuxalk Band Council. Circumstance of their political opposition was further complicated by the participation of the Forest Action Network (FAN), which was invited to *Ista* by Nuxalk hereditary chiefs. An acute social divide ensued between the ‘traditionalists’ and the status quo, rippling throughout the Nuxalk community and beyond. The discourse of decolonization frames a conflicted and complex understanding of the social, political, and legal perspectives of both governments and the society they serve. This documentary video project and paper endeavours to remember and re-present a collective reflection on the events, ideas and issues surrounding *Ista* and the social movement(s) it sparked.

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<sup>1</sup> Quote taken from the McKenna- McBride Royal Commission of BC, 1913-1916, House of Smayusta website, <http://www.nuxalk.org>.

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<sup>2</sup>Nuxalk: 'to begin to do something'

<sup>3</sup>Nuxalk: 'carries a blanket'

<sup>4</sup>Nuxalk: 'to tell a story'

<sup>5</sup>Nuxalk: 'to remember'

<sup>6</sup>Nuxalk: 'what was learned'

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Tluk ta manlh tax, putl'ilhsuts ulh inu alh ti sunewt.  
Stutwiniitulhx ala snknic ilh ats alh kaltcwm tulhx alh ti sunewt.

Way.

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First of all, I would like to acknowledge Tatau, the Creator, for all that has been provided since the beginning of time and is still provided today. Stutwiniitulhx<sup>7</sup>. It is with great love and thanks that I dedicate this work to my family and community, who are my inspiration and strength- the people and land of the Nuxalk Nation. This project has been a personal transformation of understanding, not only of the complex issues, people, events and ideas surrounding the Stand at Ista, but also of my own identity as a Nuxalk woman. I am thankful to have had the opportunity to become part of the Ista story through this work. I acknowledge that it is only a small piece of the Ista stories that live within the larger Nuxalk community. I offer this work as a gift to those who would learn from it, and as partial fulfillment of my duties as a privileged witness to keep these stories alive.

There are numerous people without whom this project would never have been completed: Faye Edgar, Melvina Mack, Karen Anderson, Chief Nuximlayc (Lawrence Pootlass), Chief Qwatsinas (Ed Moody), Chief Slicxwliqw' (Charlie Nelson), Lucy Mack, Amanda Siwallace, Jemima Schooner, Debbie Tallio, Tina Clellamin, Jack Edgar Jr., Connie Watkinson, Jason Moody, Banchi Hanuse, Andrea Hilland, Jesse Mack Oud, Ray Morton, Anfinn Siwallace, Archie Pootlass, Bill Tallio, Harry Schooner, Greg Higgs, Hans Granander, Donna Dixon, Gordon Keener, Marnie Sellars, Anthony Mack Jr., the band staff at Xats'ull and Diane Jenner at York University. To my mom, Bev Sellars, for your fine example and commitment to my education and well being. Also to my wonderful son, Orden Mack- for your company, infinite patience and sense of humour on the many long drives to Vancouver and Bella Coola. Finally, to my dad, Dayton Mack- for sharing with me 'other ways of knowing,' and reaffirming a *Nuxalk* understanding of the world- acw ku kwamanu, until we meet again.

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<sup>7</sup> Thank you.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The Nuxalk Nation is an isolated but very politically active indigenous community located in the Bella Coola Valley on the central coast of British Columbia, Canada<sup>8</sup>. Situated in the heart of the coastal temperate rainforest, the area is subject to aggressive resource extraction, the most predominant being industrial logging operations. Although multinational corporations such as International Forest Products (INTERFOR) have agreements with the Canadian governments to harvest millions of dollars worth of timber from Nuxalk Territory, the Nuxalk people themselves have not been consulted nor have they benefited in any way from these operations. In fact, the Nuxalk face near crippling poverty with a stable unemployment rate of over eighty percent for several generations.<sup>9</sup> The Nuxalk heavily rely on the integrity of the natural environment for subsistence and cultural cohesion, in addition to upholding their spiritual and physical responsibilities to the land itself. Unsustainable logging practices have damaged and polluted entire watersheds; depleting vital salmon stocks, natural vegetation and wildlife that feed the poverty-stricken nation. “Ista” is the name of the first Nuxalk woman, as well as the place and smayusta (creation story) that relate her to Tatau, the Creator, as well as the land and people who descend from her. She is the reason that we dance with blankets at potlatches and other ceremonial events. We actively remember where we come from each time we sing and dance her story. But we must understand the story of Ista to fully appreciate the sacred knowledge we carry.

In 1995, the *House of Smayusta* (HOS), comprised of Nuxalk hereditary chiefs, elders and their supporters, organized a direct action protest known as the “Stand at Ista” in attempts to stop the planned clearcut and raise public awareness regarding outstanding issues pertaining to their land and human rights. Proclamations of Nuxalk Sovereignty were issued over the entire Nuxalk Territory, challenging the authority of the Canadian government and the legitimacy of INTERFOR’s permits regarding harvesting on unceded Nuxalk lands. The HOS sought to make their position public and

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<sup>8</sup> Although “British Columbia” is a colonial label that is contested by sovereign indigenous nations, it is used here for simplicity to identify the geographical area in question.

<sup>9</sup> Personal interviews with Ed Moody, Bill Tallio, Archie Pootlass, others, 2005.

hoped to appeal to the international community, by enlisting the assistance of the Forest Action Network (FAN), a so-called 'radical' environmental group who utilize non-violent, direct action tactics. However, this alliance was a difficult one, stemming mostly from FAN's 'outsider' status in both the Nuxalk and wider Bella Coola communities. The legitimacy of the HOS was further compromised with the messy internal politics regarding Nuxalk leadership, weakening Nuxalk solidarity in the face of colonial imposition.

In retrospect, it is apparent that the internal political turmoil of the Nuxalk community was *exposed* by the events of Ista, although some Nuxalk members blame the events at Ista as the cause of the factionalism. Approximately half of the newly elected band council did not support the alliance between the House of Smayusta and the Forest Action Network. The elected chief councillor Archie Pootlass made public statements against the environmentalists, claiming that their presence would do more harm than good, as evidenced in other Native communities.<sup>10</sup> Internal social upheaval ensued, as Nuxalk members were divided into two general groups: 'traditionalists' who supported the action at Ista, and those who sided with the status-quo band council. Although people often did not publicly state where their support was, 'allegiance' to one group or another was often assumed, based on family ties or employment status within the band. Most families were politically divided evenly between those who supported Ista and those who did not. Despite the labels, many people claim that they didn't support either side; that the split and confrontational politics in general were misleading and unhealthy, and they did not like its effects on their family and community. Allegations of corruption and lack of authority were made against leadership in both groups, fracturing families and diverting energy and attention away from saving the land in question. Many people within the wider Bella Coola community, both Nuxalk and non-native, were incensed at the fact that 'outsider environmentalists' knew more about what was taking place at Ista than the locals did. In the end, hereditary chiefs from

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<sup>10</sup> Archie Pootlass, *Broadcast 1*, Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, Vancouver, July 8, 1997.

the House of Smayusta, along with supporting community members and environmental activists were arrested, and despite another direct action two years later, Ista was eventually logged as planned.

Eventually, INTERFOR *and* the Ministry of Forests closed their offices in Bella Coola, relocating to Port Hardy, another coastal community, while continuing to log in Nuxalk Territory. Although the battle for Ista may have been lost, the war against colonialism was re-ignited. The actions taken at Ista have continued to influence modern Nuxalk society and identity, as well as contributing to the larger landscape of environmental awareness and campaigns for protection in areas within and outside of Nuxalk Territory.

### **Project Objectives & Context**

This project serves several purposes: to document and reflect on an important historical event from a Nuxalk perspective; to examine the current social, political and cultural dynamics of the Nuxalk Nation (adding to largely ‘pre-colonial’ literature and subject matter); and to investigate the philosophical and action-based sensibilities of an indigenous nation engaged in a struggle of decolonization. As a video project, it is a visual representation of the Ista stories and Nuxalk history. Audio and visual stimuli transport the viewer to the time, place and events prior to, during and after the action taken at Ista. Until this project, most of this footage has only been viewed by a small number of people who were directly involved at Ista. As such, the documentary will be valuable to the Nuxalk as a modern cultural property and historical text, available to any Nuxalk person who would like a copy. In addition, it can be used as a learning tool at the Nuxalk College and Awcsalcta School, the House of Smayusta and the band office, which will all receive copies. The project also includes a critical analysis of mainstream Canadian media coverage of the story and events. *Remembering Ista* is an examination of the complex political, social and cultural struggles of the Nuxalk Nation to decolonize; it is an investigation of the differences between western and indigenous ideologies, viewed through the lens of indigenous activism and sovereignty in opposition to the gaze of mainstream Canadian media and

corporate interests. On a practical level, producing a video documentary for my thesis project has actively engaged me in a technology-based text for communicating, posing its own set of parameters, challenges and issues regarding representation, access and oral transmission of history and culture.

As a citizen of the Nuxalk Nation, as well as the primary researcher, my involvement in this project makes it unique as it privileges Nuxalk perspectives and sensibilities from a contemporary, ‘insider’ perspective. Although there have been other recent academic inquiries regarding the Stand at Ista<sup>11</sup>, they have been more focused on the relationship between the Nuxalk and the environmental groups involved rather than the Nuxalk issues at hand. Previous academic studies were from a non-indigenous, non-local perspective, providing little to the local community other than anonymous acknowledgements in academic papers. This project, however, is presented in a more accessible form (a video documentary in lay language) that will hopefully spark positive, reflective discussion within the Nuxalk and Bella Coola communities about these important and immediate issues. This project is not only a reflective analysis of the events, issues and conflicts that took place between 1995 and 1997, but also an examination of social change initiated since then.

This project is more than description of events and change. By the very nature of my insider/outsider involvement as both Nuxalk citizen and academic researcher, it has also been a journey of discovery *into* the issues at a very real and personal level, revealing a much deeper level of understanding of myself as both a Nuxalk woman and a survivor of colonialism. This personal connection with the project exemplifies the practical side of decolonization, as it fuses the theoretical abstraction with the person involved rather than separating them into an academic distance. This fusing is an example of decolonising methodology<sup>12</sup>, as it recognizes the internal and invested role of the indigenous researcher within a living community that is often their own. It was further the intention of

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<sup>11</sup> For example, Bill Hipwell, MA thesis, “They’ve Got No Stake In Where They’re At: Radical Ecology, the Fourth World and Local Identity in the Bella Coola Region,” Carleton University, Ottawa, 1997.

<sup>12</sup> See Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s “Decolonizing Methodology,” for a full discussion on what this entails, especially from the perspective of an indigenous researcher in her own community.



this project to utilize methodology that embraces Nuxalk protocols of learning, sharing, acknowledging and protecting knowledge. Finally, the challenges of representing such a complex and important event in Nuxalk history within the parameters of a short documentary illuminate the limitations of individual knowledge, media and representation of the larger and continually emerging Nuxalk story and identity.

## **II. TSQWAKM<sup>13</sup>**

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### Description of Methodology

When I began this project, I wrote an open letter to the Nuxalk community, describing my project about Ista. It was sent to every household via the community flyer, which is hand-delivered every two weeks by the Nuxalk band administration office. It is also posted on the Nuxalkmc Vancouver message board, where many Nuxalk abroad<sup>14</sup> ‘converge’ to discuss home and current events that affect our community. I believed the action at Ista was an important part of our history because of the strong emotional and political response I received every time I brought it up in my community. Although it was obviously very close to Nuxalk people’s hearts and experience, most Nuxalk people seemed largely uninformed about what actually happened. When I asked a close friend and relative what she thought about my project, she hesitated before replying, “I think you are very brave.” It was then that I realized the profound importance of this story- not only to inform people about the specifics of the action and its aftermath, but also to retell the story in a way that would hopefully encourage healthy and informed discussion about Nuxalk issues. Community members repeatedly informed me that I must ensure a high level of transparency prior to, during, and after this project. I made it very clear in my letter to the community that this project was not a judgement on who was right, or an effort to open old grievances, but was an attempt to understand what happened and why, and examine what we have learned from that experience. In addition, I stated that upon completion, the video would be available to any Nuxalkmc who wanted a copy. Although the story of

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<sup>13</sup> Nuxalk: ‘to begin to do something’

<sup>14</sup> ‘Abroad’ meaning outside of the nation boundaries of community and traditional territory of the Nuxalk.

Ista (both the smayusta and the social movement) ultimately remains the intellectual and cultural property of the Nuxalk Nation, there are currently no guidelines or formal committees developed to deal with this. Details are still being discussed in the community, mostly by post-secondary students who are interested in community research. The request for transparency of my actions is directly linked to the Ista Stand, where much of the action was perceived to be planned in secrecy, fostering an environment of distrust.

*Remembering Ista* was a practical effort by many people over the past ten years. When I began speaking to people and gathering materials to make the video, I was approached by a few different people in the Nuxalk community who had ideas about where I could find footage and valuable historical documents that would assist in piecing together the story. My aunt<sup>15</sup>, Faye Edgar, had a collection of unedited videotapes with footage taken prior to and during the events at Ista in both 1995 and 1997 that she generously loaned to me for this project. Without these tapes, I would not have been able to provide the important ‘on the ground’ footage at Ista. For many Nuxalk and others, the behind-the-stand footage will be viewed for the first time through this project. Another Nuxalk woman had a binder of community documents regarding Ista, collected between 1995 and 1997.<sup>16</sup> Although she has since passed on, her meticulous archiving saved me hundreds of hours of researching and copying community flyers, local, regional and national newspaper clippings, and even copies of court transcripts related to the events in question. Of course, television news footage from the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (Vancouver) was also obtained for inclusion, as it played an important role in informing not only a wider Canadian and international audience about the events at Ista, but for many Nuxalk citizens, it was their primary information source regarding the events at Ista. Whether or not mainstream reporting articulated the issues brought forward by the Nuxalk will be discussed later in this paper.

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<sup>15</sup> Although Faye is not my aunt according to western norms of being a parent’s sibling, I consider her to be my aunt in our way, because she is a close and supportive extended family member, committed to my learning of Nuxalk ways.

<sup>16</sup> Stutwiniitscw to Debbie Tallio for her foresight, and to her sister, Tina Clellamin, for providing the documents to me.

Most of the reflective material used in this documentary was obtained from many field visits and interviews with participants in Bella Coola and Vancouver, as well as one trip to Nanaimo, BC<sup>17</sup>. The fieldwork included 20 personal interviews<sup>18</sup>; memories, reflections and philosophical sensibilities of hereditary chiefs and elected band council leadership, Ista Sovereignists and dissenters, environmentalists, and a former INTERFOR employee. Not one person whom I approached for an interview refused to speak with me, and only one requested an off-camera interview. The only hesitancy I encountered was individual self-critical assessments that other people ‘knew more than they did’. This highlights the observation that the Nuxalk community at large remains uninformed about the details during the action at Ista. It also highlights the importance of this documentary, for it presents a community experience from many different perspectives in a non-confrontational way. The video offers some personal distance to the Nuxalk viewer by framing the narrative of this story in my voice, my understanding, interpretation and representation of what happened and why, without value judgements against individuals or families, or by presenting it as a singular Truth.

Prior to and during this project, I have made great efforts to speak to a variety of people about Ista, including those who supported the stand, and those who did not. In my personal life, I am also very aware of the undercurrent of the Ista divide, and consciously visit and maintain relationships with ‘both’ sides of my family in efforts to maintain a level of neutrality. However, I believe that people will probably associate me with the ‘traditionalist’ perspective after viewing the video, as the story is told within the framework of understanding Nuxalk Sovereignty. Still, the intent of this project is to *engage*, not *enrage*!

Upon beginning the daunting task of video production, I quickly realized that I was facing a difficult challenge, based on my lack of technical experience in all levels of video production. My inexperience revealed itself when I did not view the tapes immediately after shooting footage and

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<sup>17</sup> Nanaimo is located on Vancouver Island, approximately one hour west of the city of Vancouver, BC.

<sup>18</sup> In this paper, ‘personal communication’ refers to the interviews conducted by me for this project.

interviews to catch potential footage errors. In addition to not doing the video ‘dailies,’ I correspondingly did not transcribe the interviews as they were completed. This meant reviewing the entire lot of videos one by one, transcribing, and then doing a preliminary ‘paper edit’ of useable footage. This process took up many precious post-production hours that should have been utilized as part of the interview/production time allotted. Although these were difficult lessons, they offered an insight into the industry that can only be acquired through doing. I had amassed much more material than I could possibly use, and I estimate that I had acquired approximately 60 hours of video, most of it raw footage. The editing process was difficult for several reasons: I had no video editing experience; half of my video footage was in an older medium for which I had to locate the proper video equipment (Hi 8, versus digital video); I could not obtain copyright licensing for much of the music I wanted to use; and I had to exclude over ninety percent of tape that, although interesting and important, was not in usable within the time restrictions and analytical parameters of this project. Logistically, I also had to find a venue to do the actual editing at little or no cost. Therefore, the editing equipment I was using was very basic, preventing me from correcting the flawed audio track. As frustrating as this experience was, I have come to appreciate that “Good audio is good video.”

Another challenging task of video editing was creating an emotional, visual and aural experience through televisual story telling. I became aware of the artistic requirements of visually representing people, events, stories and ideas on film because it required choreographing sequences and layers of audio and visual footage to correspond with the point being made. I became aware that I was limited in the footage that I had and found myself continually looking for additional ‘B Roll.’ In some sequences, I re-used footage to illustrate reflecting back, and in other cases, it was a matter of having no other footage to use. It was an on-going process of editing to ensure the footage was portrayed with the original intent of the interviewee, without distorting or romanticizing the events or people involved. This was especially evident when I planned to overlay dramatic visuals with powerful music and lyrics in attempts to capture some of the emotions experienced by those present at Ista. Although my intent

was to *re-create* the experience, it might have ultimately *appropriated* the experience through my own personal/artistic interpretation, rather than engaging the viewer to decide on their own what that scene or issue means to them. The process of trying to evoke emotions through visuals and music reveals the constructed process of creating a text. The story I tell is influenced and framed by *how* I tell it. I found that video editing is a delicate process of representation. I was acutely aware of the power and responsibility I had as editor to represent the events as fairly as possible. I did not want to *explicitly* state my own position, but rather present the pieces of the story that I felt were most important for understanding *why* the House of Smayusta chose to make a stand at Ista, and discuss some of the complexities that contributed to the division in the community. Although my personal views regarding the events are valid as a member of the Nuxalk Nation, I was conscious to not ‘push’ them on the viewer, but present the facts as clearly and honestly as I could to let the viewers decide for themselves. I also encountered moments when I knew I could not include a piece because I believed it would not contribute to understanding, but would instead re-ignite hostilities within my community. I have a responsibility to uphold my community, not place blame on individuals in the pursuit for some sterile and objective ‘truth.’

One of the post-production protocol difficulties I faced was how to include Nuxalk songs in the project. Mask dances were explicitly avoided, as per Nuxalk cultural protocols, as they are to be witnessed live at potlatches only. I wanted to use Nuxalk ‘cry songs’ (which are traditionally only sung at funerals) as the background music for viewing the clear cuts as an artistic interpretation of the pain of the land and in the community. However, Nuxalk protocols regarding familial and personal ownership of songs, and the feeling that a funeral song out of context might offend and anger people changed my mind about using them. However, during the editing process, it became obvious that the music was already built into the documentary through singing that coincided with the action being taken. Nuxalk songs are scattered throughout the scenes, in context, as a form of validation of both the action being taken and of the people who are invoking it.

## **Developing a Decolonized Methodology**

Although currently there are no formal guidelines or protocols regarding Nuxalk research, I hope to set a precedent in this project by making public the expectation and right for Nuxalk people to maintain ownership of their own stories and experiences by employing them in my own work and explaining my research approach at public screenings of the video. Through my work, I also hope to reveal and encourage methods that are respectful of Nuxalk protocols such as intangible property such as songs and visual representations of culture (such as representing ceremonies in their original context). The difficulty, however, lies in where or with whom the authority or ownership of this cultural property will rest, as there is no communally recognized body or individual to make such decisions on behalf of the community. The undercurrent of the continued tensions between the House of Smayusta and the band council (as community authorities) complicate discussions regarding developing boards or committees whose decisions will affect the nation. One reason for this may be that perhaps committees are not appropriate at all. Perhaps we should instead be looking at how our own protocols are formed and enforced and how we can use this process to translate new situations into culturally appropriate acts, based on our own system of values and understanding. For example, when we introduce a song, we must fully acknowledge its owner *each* time before it is sung. Perhaps with research that is conducted, the indigenous knowledge that is drawn upon should be equally and explicitly acknowledged at public presentations and seminars by the researcher, rather than simply a notation in an academic reference. Another example could be the public presentation of work conducted in our own community first, prior to any outside institution or interest group, as a mandatory part of community responsibility. If each researcher had to personally and publicly present her work to the people with whom she was studying, I believe the research would be more purposeful for the community involved, while contributing to a deeper understanding of Nuxalk sensibilities by the researcher.

I utilized both a written journal and video as a medium for recording my own reflections about process, issues and my own (de)colonizing experiences during this work as a way of including my own learning. The video journal includes footage of me taking cedar bark, cutting salmon and participating in a reclamation ceremony and camp-out, all valuable aspects of my learning and in connecting theory with practice. In particular, aspects of my own (de)colonization became apparent through viewing journal footage and written entries about my experiences, thoughts and conflicts in producing a documentary about my own community. It positioned me in sometimes conflicting roles as student and authority, as well as observer and participant. For example, it sometimes created an awkward relationship with my family and community members, who were often much more knowledgeable on a topic than I was, yet felt less credible because of my western academic credentials<sup>19</sup>. This is in stark contrast to Western researchers who have historically presented their work regarding indigenous peoples as academically objective and definitive, often becoming self-appointed ‘experts’ in their field. Similarly, many researchers ‘parachute’ into communities with no long-term interests or commitments to the people with whom they are studying. Conversely for me, I live in my community and will bear real and immediate consequences if I purposefully misrepresent the experience or knowledge of the story I am retelling. This research has highlighted my limited knowledge in the ways of Nuxalk lands, language, culture and family history. To the academic world, I am one of few emerging Nuxalk scholars; to my community, I am in the infancy of Nuxalk understanding. In the scope of this project, I am accountable to both my indigenous community and my academic community.

The humbling and empowering aspects of the work I do inspires me to emerge from the darkness of the colonial mind into the awareness and fulfillment of Nuxalk womanhood and citizenship. It is an ongoing, *active* process of being and becoming. As Choctaw scholar Devon

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<sup>19</sup> I was extremely embarrassed to receive a comment by a respected elder that he wasn’t as educated as me and alluded that his knowledge might not be adequate for the purposes of this academic project. I immediately acknowledged my lack of experience and knowledge in Nuxalk ways, and explained that the research ethics form was for his protection, not a statement of my authority in the research relationship.

Mihesuah discusses in *Indigenous Women: Decolonization, Empowerment, Activism*, first-hand experience that contributes to practical and useful knowledge is what we, as indigenous people, value most in our communities, not abstractions of knowledge that do little to improve our colonial situation on a day-to-day basis<sup>20</sup>. Ward Churchill reiterated this sentiment to me during a talk he gave at York University in 2004. I asked him how important he rated activism in an academic education, and he said, “Having knowledge without acting on it is nothing more than mental masturbation.”<sup>21</sup> Although less abrasive, elders and community members have similarly asked me about my formal education, wanting to know specifically ‘what will you *do* with it?’ I believe that this video is an example of academic and community activism as it weaves the issues and story into the lives and lived experience of a community, hopefully engaging and sparking discussion amongst those it re-presents.

During the course of my field visits, I was drawn into the culture via my active participation in traditional plant gathering and salmon preparation activities. Each spring, Nuxalk men and women harvest cedar bark from local and distant stands of Pacific Red Cedar. Although I had harvested cedar before, the harvesting during the course of my fieldwork was different in that I was conscious of the underlying relationships being maintained and created by harvesting with older women of my community. The women took the time to carefully explain the details of how to select an appropriate tree, the protocols of taking the bark (which includes a prayer of thanks and a description of what the cedar bark will be used for), and the physical steps involved in properly harvesting the bark without harming the tree. The process of sitting in the damp, quiet rainforest with my aunts, harvesting cedar bark as my grandmothers before me had, was both humbling and empowering. I felt and understood the connection that I was actively maintaining with my family, the land, my ancestors, and the smayustas that embraced our actions. Our cedar bark was to be used for potlatches, our traditional government, which reaffirms our ties to each other and the land through our cultural expression of songs, dances,

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<sup>20</sup> Mihesuah, p.30.

<sup>21</sup> Ward Churchill, Aboriginal Education Committee presentation, York University, Toronto, March 2004.



and the retelling of smayustas. Despite the mistakes I made during harvesting cedar and cutting salmon (which garnered supportive smiles from my aunts), I knew that the important thing was that I was willing to learn not only *how* to do these things, but also *why* it is important to *carry* and *share* that knowledge. I experienced an epiphany after speaking to elder Amanda Siwallace. I suddenly realized the profound importance of thinking and speaking and relating in my own language, for myself and all the children after me. There is much power in language, in speech, in communicating- one that can only be utilized if there is a critical mass of speakers who can relate. Language is an expression of one's worldview, logic and frames relationships to the natural world and each other. In Nuxalk, our language translates our responsibilities and rights as a person, to our families, our ancestors, our children, and the land. Often, we cannot find the words in English to describe what we are feeling or doing or trying to teach, because it is not an English concept. Speaking in the colonizer's tongue privileges the colonizer's ideas. Language is power. It is time that we, as native people, proudly and immediately reclaim our true voices, before they are lost forever.<sup>22</sup> We are reaching a critical time in the survival of authentic Nuxalk expression and understanding. In the video, Faye Edgar states that 'without our land, we'd be a lost people.' I believe the same is true for our Nuxalk language.

Our identity as Nuxalkmc is not something you can simply acquire, or be assigned to, as with the Department of Indian Affairs "registry of status Indians". It is also not just something you can claim, but have to actively acknowledge, demonstrate and protect in an ongoing process of being and becoming Nuxalk. This active state of being is the structural base of our language and Nuxalk names, which often reflect interactive relationships versus materialism and possession over. For example, "Ista" combines person, place, smayusta, responsibility, and sacred connections all in one word. For each Nuxalk name, similar active relationships are embodied. Ista reminded us that we must act on them. The Stand at Ista may have been peaceful, but it was not passive.

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<sup>22</sup> Karen Anderson spoke of her niece who dreamt about the end of the world. Everybody was being sorted according to the language they spoke. The girl was lost and upset because she could not stand with her people or return to her homeland because she could not speak Nuxalk. In our culture, dreams such as this are important and valid messages.

It is in this layered understanding of being and becoming Nuxalk that a decolonized methodology emerges. It is not so much an explicit list of methods and approaches, but a more nuanced understanding of relationships and responsibilities, a reframing of perspectives and self-(e)valuation in relation to the whole. In this project, I became acutely aware of my lack of understanding in Nuxalk ways of knowing and understanding precisely because I was learning so much. In my attempts to understand decolonization from a rational perspective, logic tells me that it is the antithesis of colonization. Where colonization devalues and dismisses indigenous life, logic and knowledge, decolonization embraces and privileges it. Where colonization dehumanizes indigenous struggle through legalistic rhetoric and internalized politics, decolonization calls attention to our humanity and rights and the shared struggle that exists around the world. Approaching and developing a decolonized methodology is not separate or distinct from the daily, lived experience as an indigenous person.

Through the course of my work, my life as an indigenous woman played out constantly, presenting challenges and setbacks that reinforced my understanding of my own colonization, both at a personal level and within the indigenous communities that I am part of. Layered throughout the text of this paper, as well as in the video, decolonizing approaches can be as simple as using Nuxalk words and imagery or as complex as the layered understanding of my identity that emerged from this two year process. My approach and evaluation of knowledge gained emerged as *a way of being*.

### **III. ASITS'AMNIYAAK<sup>23</sup>**

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#### **Nuxalk Perspectives on Sovereignty**

My Nuxalk name is Asits'amniyaak. It means 'carries a blanket,' which was given to me in childhood. I used to carry my mom's bra around, while I sucked my thumb, and it was the closest word to it. My name has transformed itself; I carry a tapestry of Nuxalk culture. I was raised in the Nuxalk community with the elders, and I have a responsibility to uphold the tapestry, the details of Nuxalk culture, to keep the blanket for future generations.

-Andrea Hilland

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<sup>23</sup> Nuxalk: 'carries a blanket' (Andrea Hilland's Nuxalk name, used with permission, March 5, 2005.)

In the Nuxalk culture, receiving a Nuxalk name is a momentous occasion in one's life. It is received at a family potlatch with witnesses and payment for receipt through gifts and property. It signifies the acknowledgement and acceptance of a person as a citizen of our community and nation, and bestows upon that person all the rights, privileges and responsibilities of carrying that name. Each name is a signifier of a person's status and descent, chosen from the family's smayustas that may go back to creation, or be selected from a more contemporary context of their family history. In my own family, I was given the name Nusq'mata<sup>24</sup>, which identifies me with the Nusqalst Village in the Bella Coola Valley, descendent of the Grizzly Bear, granddaughter of Nusmata, my grandfather Orden Mack. As Maori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith writes, "In positioning myself as an indigenous woman, I am claiming a genealogical, cultural and political set of experiences."<sup>25</sup>

In my community, my family positions me in many ways. Based on my grandparents' lineages, I am connected to two different villages in our territory- Kwalhtna and Nusqalst. From these villages come my smayustas, family crests and inherited responsibilities to protect these lands for future generations. Due to the smallpox epidemics, many villages were completely abandoned by the few survivors remaining. These survivors converged at Qomqots (now the town site of Bella Coola), the largest and most centralized village where everyone spoke the same language. The Department of Indian Affairs forcibly relocated at least one of our villages, Kimsquit, to Bella Coola in order to simplify administration.<sup>26</sup> Therefore, the Nuxalk Nation is a confederation of villages, brought together by the shared devastation of disease and unnatural relocation by a foreign government and a common language. In our community, we still know which village we, and others, originate from because we are raised to know our family histories and lineages as an important part of our culture and identity. As described in the video, these are part of our smayustas, our histories that include genealogy, history,

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<sup>24</sup> In the Nuxalk tradition, we sometimes share names within a family, which is not the case in all Northwest Coast Indigenous communities. In Nuxalk teachings, when we share a name, as I share my name with my cousin Renee Anderson, we become spiritual siblings, responsible for upholding each other and our name for the rest of our lives.

<sup>25</sup> Smith, 12.

<sup>26</sup> Karen Anderson, personal communication, March 9, 2006.

and experiences from the time of creation to the present. Although our main village is now at Qomqots, we still bear the responsibility of knowing our history and responsibilities. For example, before a song can be sung, it must be properly introduced to its audience by stating whether it is a chief's song, a mourning song, the name of the composer, and other aspects of its smayusta. Our songs become politicized with our actions, as they translate the basis of our laws. Similarly, when a dance is performed in conjunction with a particular song (they are paired together), permission from its owner must be obtained prior to dancing it, as that dance is the cultural property of an individual or family, as described in the smayusta. When the "Ista" song is sung and danced at potlatches (hosted by a hereditary chief) and feasts, it precedes our most powerful dance, Sa7yulth- the Dance of Thunder. This order can never be changed, as the women dance Ista to clear the floor for the dancers and spiritual aspects of the dance to take place<sup>27</sup>. It is significant to note that one of the reasons the dance of thunder is so powerful and important is that it is a healing dance for our people, one that has to be prepared for by the women.

Nuxalk singing is really a form of validation, as our songs are often prayers and re-tell our smayustas, the basis of our laws. When our songs are sung, we are stating our connection to our smayustas and laws passed down to us by the Creator, through our knowledge of our family histories and acknowledgement of the responsibilities we bear as Nuxalkmc. Nuxalk laws are not made according to the wishes and manipulations of human interests, but are sacred in their descent from Tatau, the Creator. Therefore, they are non-negotiable and intimately intertwined with our land, language, smayustas and identity as Nuxalkmc. When my grandparents were children, they were taught that the laws surrounding our dances (especially mask dances, which hold spiritual significance and power) were so strict and sacred, that a person could be rightfully killed for breaching these laws, as our dances are a 'direct connection to heaven,' handed down to us by our ancestors and the Creator<sup>28</sup>.

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

Although people are no longer killed for these mistakes, errors are certainly noted and talked about in the community. The significance of keeping our cultural memory and dances strong cannot be overstated. As Connie Watkinson stated in the video, “That’s the good thing about being First Nations, we always remember. It’s how we survive and keep our culture alive.” *Remembering Ista* is such an attempt to keep a Nuxalk perspective alive. When we dance, when we receive a Nuxalk name, when we harvest from the land, when we stand up against the colonial government- we are drawing upon *our* laws, our smayustas, to legitimate our actions and acknowledge our responsibilities to protect who we are and where we come from; we are invoking the *active* relationship we hold with our past, present and future *as a sovereign citizen of Nuxalk*.

### **Whose Law? Power and Jurisdiction in Nuxalk**

The sovereignty of the Nuxalk Nation comes from Tatau, the Creator. It is not granted nor subject to the approval of any other nation. As the Nuxalk Nation, we have the sovereign right to jurisdictional rule within our own territory. Our lands are a sacred gift. The land is provided for the continued use, benefit and enjoyment of our people, the Nuxalkmc, and it is our ultimate obligation to Tatau, the Creator, to care for and protect it. - House of Smayusta<sup>29</sup>

At the centre of the dispute regarding land and rights between the Canadian governments (federal and provincial) and indigenous nations is the issue of sovereignty. **Nuxalk Sovereignty is an active *responsibility* that intertwines our history, language, families, and connection to the land through complex and strict laws as related through our smayustas, songs, dances, and potlatches.** However, according to western legal definitions, sovereignty is about ‘certainty’ and title to lands, as defined on maps and other material documentation. It also includes the associated economic benefits of title to these lands. This is especially important in Nuxalk Territory, as it is rich in natural resources of all kinds, especially forests. Canada and the province of BC have long reaped the benefits of resource harvesting, at the impoverishment of the indigenous nations from whose territories these resources were illegally taken. Although Nuxalk chiefs asked the provincial courts to provide proof of Crown

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<sup>29</sup> House of Smayusta website, press release, 1995 (n.d. other than year). <<http://www.nuxalk.org>> (November 2, 2005).

title to Nuxalk lands, they were unable to do so, reiterating the *assumed* authority and validity of western institutions and imposed legal systems.

Nuxalk Sovereignty has never been relinquished through war or treaty. According to international and Canadian laws, to which Canadians are bound, Nuxalk jurisdiction remains. International law supports the Nuxalk sovereign stance through the *Royal Proclamation of 1763*, which states that no unceded Indian lands in North America should be surveyed or granted to settlers. Therefore, a ‘doctrine of continuity’ exists, meaning that unpurchased Aboriginal tenure has not been extinguished or superseded by Canadian law.<sup>30</sup> Therefore, indigenous laws continue to exist until they are extinguished through a treaty or the people are conquered through war. Further, the *Canadian Constitution (1982)* affirms and protects aboriginal rights, and Canadian case law such as the *Sparrow*<sup>31</sup> and *Delgamuukw*<sup>32</sup> decisions further interpret and affirm indigenous rights to the land and resources. Since the Nuxalk have never signed a treaty or been defeated in war, Nuxalk laws and jurisdiction remain. As Nuxalk lawyer Andrea Hilland said, “Our laws have been subverted, not extinguished.”<sup>33</sup>

In what has been described as a ‘total institution,’ one that encompasses every aspect of native life, the *Indian Act*<sup>34</sup> is the Canadian government’s most powerful legal tool against us as indigenous people. Through the ‘spirit’ of this act, dating back to colonial times, native people have been subject to repeated human rights violations in the name of ‘progress’ and the ‘civilization’ of native nations. This includes forced separation from our lands, villages, families, languages, culture and traditional government. The long lasting psychological, social, emotional, physical, cultural and economic traumas relating to Indian reservations, potlatch bans, systemic racism and *especially* residential schools, play out in the daily struggle for survival that mark our lives as indigenous people. Only within the last ten

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<sup>30</sup> Andrea Hilland, personal communication, Vancouver, BC, March 5, 2005.

<sup>31</sup> For further discussion, see Chris Tennant, "Justification and Cultural Authority in s 35(1) of the *Constitution Act, 1982*: *R. v. Sparrow*," *Dalhousie Law Journal*, Vol. 14, No. 2, 1991, p. 372-386.

<sup>32</sup> See *Colonialism on Trial* by Monet and Wilson for further discussion and explanation of this case’s implications.

<sup>33</sup> Andrea Hilland, personal communication, Vancouver, BC, March 5, 2005.

<sup>34</sup> See the *Department of Justice Canada* website <http://lois.justice.gc.ca/en/I-5/247900.html> for details.

years has the Nuxalk community begun to openly deal with the trauma and loss caused by the residential schools and the lingering syndrome of abuse in our community.

The *Indian Act* is most insidious in its ability to confuse, conflict and coerce native people into believing that band and tribal councils are indeed their own instruments of governance and leadership. Although community members may elect local chiefs and councils, its structure is designed and controlled under federal authority with the intent to administer assimilation policy, not to empower native communities. This leads to confusion in native communities who are led to believe that they are indeed choosing leaders to deal with their local issues, when in reality, band councils are limited to the administration and boundaries of the *Indian Act* and reserve lands. The Department of Indian Affairs makes final decisions regarding programs and their benefits, not Chief and Council. For most people in Canada, indigenous or not, there is considerable confusion regarding the legitimacy of elected band councils as leadership, as opposed to traditional governments in native communities. Native people are coerced into believing that the band council system is legitimate through its democratic elections, without questioning the premise that the Canadian democratic process is legitimate. Therefore, band councils are inherently compromised due to their connection and dependency on the federal government. This was demonstrated during the Stand at Ista, when some elected band council members did not support the House of Smayusta's actions, partly in fear of having program dollars and salaries suspended from the Department of Indian Affairs.<sup>35</sup>

Colonialism is a system based on empire expansion and coercive rule. The same 'civil' concepts of assimilation, domination and the inevitable defeat of native people continues to frame the legal, social, economic, religious and cultural agendas of Canadian society, to the exclusion and expense of native concepts, knowledge, and sensibilities regarding their place in their lands. It is not difficult to understand then, that basic human rights abuses are being routinely conducted in the name of western, capitalistic ideals of progress and 'civil'-ization. Evidence of the continued systematic

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<sup>35</sup> Karen Anderson, personal communication, March 9, 2006.

devaluation of our nations is articulated by the retelling of the court proceedings between our Head Hereditary Chief Nuximlayc, and the provincial court judge regarding Nuxalk rights by Jason Moody<sup>36</sup>:

Nuximlayc asked that judge, “Am I a human being? Am I a human being?” He kept asking that judge that. Now some people might not understand why it was so hard for that judge to answer him. He wasn’t allowed... If Nuxalk people are human, well then, they have to change the whole system. They’d have to recognize our rights and title to our lands, you can’t just go in there and log... He couldn’t say, ‘Those Nuxalk people are human beings,’ that’s giving them too much. That’s what we’re up against. Just to be recognized with human rights.

Human rights issues are masked by political agendas to silence and subdue indigenous people, through reframing of issues and outright criminalization in order to suppress recognition of the injustices that are occurring on a daily basis.

The events at Ista were complicated by the conflicting roles of traditional and elected leadership revealed in the internal political confrontations over who had the right to speak on behalf of the Nuxalk people. The troubles began during the 1995 band council election when Archie Pootlass succeeded Ed Moody as elected chief by a margin of less than 5 votes. Public accusations were made against Archie that he shut the power off in order to win the election, as well as against Ed for misappropriation of funds during *his* term as chief councillor. Half of the elected Nuxalk council did not support or trust Archie, based on his past dealings with governmental organizations and involvement with the treaty process with other nations, ultimately asking for his resignation with a band council vote of non-confidence. These six councillors were significantly involved with the House of Smayusta, including hereditary chief Charlie Nelson, who was one of the leading spokespeople for the Stand at Ista. However, according to the *Indian Act*, a vote of non-confidence is not valid for Indian bands, and the final votes stood. Although Ed was no longer an elected chief, he was still a hereditary chief, and he invoked his authority as such to speak on behalf of the Nuxalk Nation in the midst of the financial and political crisis that was unfolding at the band level. For this reason, many people felt his actions were inauthentic, and Archie went so far as to call his involvement at Ista a ‘smokescreen’ to distract people

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<sup>36</sup> Jason Moody, personal communication, Bella Coola, BC, April 28, 2005.



from his involvement with the failing fish plant and huge debt incurred by its closure. However, Ed denies the accusations, stating that the issues surrounding Ista were not about ‘elections or popularity contests’ but the essence of Nuxalk Sovereignty.

Compounding the explosive situation at the community level was the arrival of outsider, so-called radical environmentalists who assisted the House of Smayusta in halting logging operations for several weeks, angering local logging families, few of whom are Nuxalk. Elected chief Archie Pootlass openly stated his negative opinion of FAN, stating Nuxalk people never gave them a mandate to conduct a political campaign on behalf of Nuxalk lands and people. FAN maintains that they were invited to Ista as an ally of the House of Smayusta, and worked under a protocol with the hereditary chiefs.<sup>37</sup> However, not all hereditary chiefs and elders supported the Stand at Ista, further dividing the community over who was a ‘real chief,’ and who had the legitimate right to speak for Nuxalk interests. The Stand at Ista would tear at the blended, and arguably, co-opted, traditional leadership of the people who were both elected band councillors *and* hereditary chiefs. True to the cliché, it was a case of ‘too many chiefs and not enough Indians.’

In the ‘post-colonial’ era, there is a blending of colonial administration with community leadership through the band council system, ultimately displacing traditional forms of indigenous governance. Although many indigenous nations have stated their right to live in an anti-colonial environment, the realities of colonization continue for our people. Gina Adolph powerfully states this in the video at the 1995 political rally to free our hereditary chiefs, outside the provincial law courts in Vancouver, “Some of our own people tell us it’s too late. It will never be too late. We have to stand strong, to protect what little we have left.” The act of decolonising is perpetual; our homeland is occupied through physical, psychological, economic, social and cultural forces that we, as a nation, must consistently confront and contend with. Nuxalk people do not wish to continue in the desperate state of survival that we find ourselves. It is especially offensive to have to live under such conditions

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<sup>37</sup> Greg Higgs, personal communication, July 15, 2005.

in a country that proudly but erroneously hails itself as a multi-cultural society that embraces diversity as its foundation. I would correct that it embraces diversity that is controlled and does not pose a threat to Canadian interests or sovereignty. The confrontational environment that framed the experiences of the Stand at Ista can be understood within the discourse of decolonization; a conflict between world views, beliefs and lived experiences of colonizer and colonized. The aftermath of the Stand at Ista revealed a crisis situation, that of a continued colonial imposition. It also created a social divide in my community, based on the conflicting structures of colonial authority over the traditional governance and beliefs of my people.

#### IV. SMSMA<sup>38</sup>

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##### Framing the Issues: The Media & Public Opinion

A long time ago . . . we had a number of settlements up and down the valley and on the salt water, but the white man took possession of them, and also the timber. I hear the white man is making a great deal of money out of the land that formerly belonged to the Indians. If I were to go to USA, England or any part of Canada and go on anyone's land like that I would be put in jail right away, and we should like to know why our lands have been taken from us in this way. We don't want to lose any more land than we have already lost.

-Nuxalk Chief Suncwmay (Tom Henry)<sup>39</sup>

For many Nuxalk people, as well as the Canadian public, the Stand at Ista was made known to them through the mainstream media. The news broadcast that opens the *Remembering Ista* documentary was, for many Nuxalk, the first time they had ever heard of a direct action taking place by their own people, in their own territory. Understandably, this was very upsetting to many Nuxalk people, who saw their hereditary chiefs and elders being arrested like common criminals on the evening news. In addition to that, their traditional leadership was being portrayed as pawns in a growing environmental movement that was being reported by the government and media to be troublesome,

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<sup>38</sup> Nuxalk: 'to tell a story'

<sup>39</sup> Quote is taken from the McKenna-McBride Royal Commission in BC, 1913-1916. See the House of Smayusta website for more Nuxalk quotes <<http://www.nuxalk.org>> or for a more comprehensive source on the Royal Commission, see the Union of BC Indian Chiefs website at <[http://www.ubcic.bc.ca/Resources/final\\_report.htm](http://www.ubcic.bc.ca/Resources/final_report.htm)>.

hippy-culture, tree-huggers with nothing better to do than stand on roads and put loggers out of jobs. Then premier Glen Clark even went so far as to declare Greenpeace as an enemy of the province.

Although the Stand at Ista in 1995 was portrayed by the media as simply another logging protest within the larger discourse of direct-action environmentalism, the Nuxalk issues of sovereignty and human rights issues that were at the heart of the stand were not reported by the mainstream media at all. Instead, the focus was on the confrontational nature of the actions, with graphic displays of heavily armed police protecting the public from fringe members of society. Although they were enforcing a court order to remove non-violent, unarmed, peaceful protesters from a logging road, they arrived in full strength with more police than protestors, boats, floatplanes, bulletproof vests, police dogs and helicopters. It can only be described as a spectacle for media consumption and reinforcement of state power. The police and province of BC legitimized the excessive force at Ista, based on the armed confrontation at Gustafsen Lake in the interior, which was happening concurrently with Ista. However, I would argue that it was little more than spectacle for a waiting and alerted media to capture on film the legitimacy of Canadian sovereignty and the might of the state to physically enforce it. In the news broadcasts, Nuxalk hereditary chiefs were given no voice or opportunity to state or discuss the issues that brought them to Ista. As demonstrated at numerous other indigenous stands for sovereignty, such as those at Seton Lake by the Lil'wat, Tspe'ten<sup>40</sup> and Skwekwelkwelt by the Secwepemc, Cheam by the Sto:lo (all in 'BC') and most famously, Kahnasatake by the Mohawks, media attention and access to indigenous perspectives is silenced through explicit media blackouts or reframing indigenous issues from accepted and reinforced Canadian perspectives<sup>41</sup>.

Locally, the internal disputes were portrayed as a spectacle of native ineptitude to govern themselves and live peaceably within the *settler* culture. Locally, the *Coast Mountain News* heavily

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<sup>40</sup> I could not find any online visual footage of the Gustafsen Lake confrontation in 1995, due to a media blackout. The same tactic was used to silence the Mohawks in Kahnasatake during the summer of 1990. Had it not been for the web-based campaign that the Forest Action Network had organized, I doubt that Ista would have received the international support and awareness that it did.

<sup>41</sup> Parallels can be attributed to the Zapatista awareness campaign, which utilized the Internet as its primary media tool in a hostile political climate of media blackouts regarding indigenous issues and human rights violations in Mexico. However, in the case of the Zapatistas, they organized and launched their campaign themselves.

favoured the logging industry while dismissing Nuxalk issues in articles that describe INTERFOR's victim status at the hands of illegal blockades, 'led by the Forest Action Network'.<sup>42</sup> Nowhere in the article does it state that although INTERFOR has taken billions of dollars worth of timber from Nuxalk lands (with permission from the provincial government), only six Nuxalk people were employed by their company, and no compensation had ever been offered or made by INTERFOR to the Nuxalk. In an editorial article, the *Coast Mountain News* reported that the Stand at Ista was 'staged' by FAN and 'Nuxalk "sovereignists"' [sic].<sup>43</sup> The article goes on to discredit Edward Moody for using his position as a hereditary chief to speak about Nuxalk issues, because he was not voted in during the past election! Obviously, the author has no grasp, nor interest in becoming informed about Nuxalk leadership and governance issues. Unfortunately, her opinion is widely held by others who are equally misinformed and prejudiced in their appraisal of what indigenous sovereignty issues are about.

In the quote by Nuxalk Chief Suncwmay<sup>44</sup> above, he captures the essence of the inequitable relationship that we, as Nuxalk, live with inside the settler Canadian society. However, we are not required to accept this perspective of our situation. During the Ista media campaign, the Forest Action Network utilized an emerging media tool embraced by the Zapatistas of Mexico in their struggle for human rights- the Internet. Images from the blockades and arrests were transmitted via satellite to the FAN and House of Smayusta websites. In addition, numerous press releases were circulated to environmental and indigenous support groups around the world in an awareness campaign to highlight not only the ecological devastation occurring at Ista, but the issue of Nuxalk Sovereignty, as stated by Nuxalk hereditary chiefs. However, the campaign mostly reached people already within the environmental movement, both locally and internationally. Most Nuxalk people at that time did not have access to or familiarity with the Internet and the online campaign that was taking place Although

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<sup>42</sup> "Illegal Blockade on King Island" and "A View From the Woods... Forestry and Fog Creek," *Coast Mountain News*, September 28, 1995.

<sup>43</sup> "Fog Creek Arrests Divide and Conquer," *Coast Mountain News*, October 12, 1995.

<sup>44</sup> Chief Suncwmay was my great grandfather.

international environmental awareness was raised, local, regional and national awareness of Ista was limited to the arrests and apparent civil disobedience by ‘a few renegade sovereigntists and hippies,’ effectively silencing the issues and injustices that were taking place. *Remembering Ista* is an attempt to ‘return the gaze’ of mainstream media and give voice to the people and issues of the Stand at Ista.

## V. NUTSNM<sup>45</sup>

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### Remembering Ista

Remembering Ista is a multi-faceted project, aimed at retelling an important history of my people while reflecting on the changes that have occurred because of the stand over the past ten years. It is an attempt to understand what Nuxalk Sovereignty is, where it derives its authority and how it impacts the lives of Nuxalk people. The story of Ista is layered in meaning and context, referring to the first Nuxalk woman; it is a place, a song, a dance and a modern social movement. In remembering Ista, Nuxalk people are remembering who we are and where we come from, we are remembering our active responsibilities to the land, our ancestors, community and ourselves. In remembering, we are acknowledging our silenced struggle for survival as we resist the colonial strategies of assimilation to forget who we are and where we come from, to forget our connections and responsibilities, and our rights as human beings. When we remember these things, we can speak from an informed and empowered place, one that draws on the struggles and victories of our predecessors in maintaining our identity as Nuxalkmc. We remember through practicing our language, smayustas, our songs, dances, ceremonial poles, feasts, potlatches and Nuxalk names. We remember by retelling the stories of our ancestors, and of our own lives, so that our perspective will not be lost. We re-tell our stories so that our children and those yet unborn will know where they come from, who they are, and that the struggle that they have been born into is a valuable and sacred one. We tell our stories so that people can better understand our position and responsibilities as Nuxalkmc. Our stories not only validate our being, but

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<sup>45</sup> Nuxalk: ‘to remember’

enrich those who would learn from them. Finally, in remembering Ista, we remember the role and importance of women in our culture and community; our grandmothers, mothers, aunts, sisters, daughters and other significant women in our lives by acknowledging that fundamental pieces of our identity are regenerated through the work and responsibilities that Nuxalk women carry. Although it was the men who were given the platform to speak during the Stand at Ista, it is generally acknowledged that it was the women who organized the meetings, food, logistics and support of the campaign. When the hereditary chiefs involved at Ista were jailed in 1995, a huge rally outside the provincial supreme courthouse was organized and led by the women involved.

Part of deconstructing colonialism is restructuring our lives from the experiences and knowledge gained from our struggle. When I asked about the events surrounding Ista, many people acknowledged the desire for people to learn from and remember the good that came out of it rather than focussing on the hurt and anger of the divide. This is not to silence our awful experience, but to learn from it and move on. Many stories of divided families were told, but as Ed Moody stated, that is not the essence of the Ista story.<sup>46</sup> Our community is coming to a greater understanding of the underlying causes of our suffering, and is working to improve the health and wellness of individuals and families. This includes the strategies and styles of leadership by both the elected band council and the House of Smayusta. For many people who were not at the Ista Stand, the tensions arose around the perceived secrecy of the campaign, (rationalized by FAN as a strategy to keep both INTERFOR and the RCMP unaware of their next move) and the inclusion of outsiders who were ‘different’. For those who *were* at Ista, they believed they were acting on their responsibilities as Nuxalkmc to protect our sacred connection to the Creator and the land. The messy political and economic chaos that was happening in the background of the community further intensified, confused, and angered many people who felt they were not included or consulted about the events unfolding and the decisions being made by ‘chiefs’ on

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<sup>46</sup> It was a sometimes very difficult process for me to tell enough of the story and events that shaped the conflict surrounding Ista in order to expose its complexities without publicly displaying the internal and personal details of the community.

all sides. Tensions regarding Ista remain as an undercurrent in the community, surfacing in discussions regarding environmental protection, resource extraction jobs, and the roles and responsibilities of traditional and elected leadership in the community. Harry Schooner, a Nuxalk man and House of Smayusta supporter, claims that since the Stand at Ista, he can no longer secure employment with the band council due to his political beliefs. Interestingly, more conscious efforts to include and inform the community in decisions that will affect them are being made at the *band level*, while the House of Smayusta has become considerably quieter in their political activism. At the community level, students in particular are taking the lead in becoming more informed on matters that affect the nation, such as the discussions surrounding developing protocols for protecting our intellectual and real property from outside interests and exploitation.<sup>47</sup>

The complex and politically charged question, “Who has the authority to speak for Nuxalk people?” remains, but not without a starting point for discussion. Even within the context of this project, the question of whether or not I had to ask for permission to tell this story was one I discussed with other Nuxalk women. I was afraid that if I asked permission to re-tell the story of Ista, somebody would tell me ‘no’. My fears were quickly put at ease when a young Nuxalk woman reminded me that I have every right, and a *responsibility*, to tell the story of Ista, because I am a Nuxalk woman! Not only am I a Nuxalk woman, but my own smayusta comes from Ista through my grandmother, Skwucwlikwana. Her name comes from Ista directly, and contributed to her decision to hike up the mountainside to protect it in 1995.

The Stand at Ista sparked both an international campaign and an introspective social movement to raise awareness of our colonial existence as Nuxalkmc. Although highly confrontational, the political issue of leadership between traditional and elected chiefs was brought to the forefront of

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<sup>47</sup> Most recently, there has been a lot of debate over a film just released by the National Film Board and filmmaker Barbara Hager regarding nine Nuxalk dancers who went to Germany for a year. Many Nuxalk people were angered at her breach of the signed protocol to screen the film in Bella Coola prior to any film festivals, as well as her interpretation that Nuxalk people needed her film to learn our history and culture. Discussions are continuing to establish a committee with students, elders and other advisors to deal with issues such as this for potential future projects.

Nuxalk consciousness. People were questioning the status quo band council system and wanting to learn more about their smayustas. Similarly, others were questioning the hereditary system in terms of what legitimates a chief's title, who has the right to speak for territory issues, and demanding transparency of political leadership. For some people, The Stand at Ista 'woke up our smayustas'<sup>48</sup> and reminded us that despite the occupation of our homeland, we still have our own laws and a responsibility to uphold them. Many young people who were involved at Ista had never seen a clear-cut logging block before, and were moved emotionally by the devastation it creates on the land. Others were touched by the healthy relationships re-established while at Ista, connecting on the land with friends and family, finding solidarity and a deeper sense of what it means to be Nuxalk.

Of course, for many it was also a hard, cold look at the social dysfunction in our community, the abuse and anger, the struggle and violence that has become internalized and normalized into our daily routines. Although difficult to face, one of the most important aspects of decolonizing is in evaluating the personal and collective health and wellness in our nation. The Stand at Ista brought everything to the surface for evaluation; every dirty detail was scrutinized. Although not everybody is at the same place in their personal wellness, families are starting to come together again. A striking example of this is the relationship between elected chief Archie Pootlass and his brother; head hereditary chief Nuximlayc (Lawrence Pootlass). Once bitter rivals, Archie and Lawrence have restored peace in their family after realizing the profound impacts that residential schools had on their relationship.

As a social movement, Ista also established within the Nuxalk consciousness the need for inclusive, open discussions regarding decisions that affect the entire community. People are beginning to acknowledge that the *entire* community was affected by the events surrounding Ista, whether they are directly involved or not. The political divide affected children as much as it did adults and elders as tensions and politics found their way to the playgrounds and classrooms of both the Nuxalk and public

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<sup>48</sup> Ed Moody, personal communication, July 16, 2005.



schools in Bella Coola. However, discussion in general was discouraged, instead devolving into confrontation, further perpetuating the residential school syndrome of violence and a defeatist attitude<sup>49</sup> of just accepting 'difficult truths'<sup>50</sup> such as suicide, alcohol and drug addictions, violence trauma and grief that are realities in the daily existence of our people. These must be understood within the larger context of colonization in order to fully appreciate the complex and far reaching effects that our history plays in our modern lives and modern identity.

Much of the conflict in the community arose regarding strategy and leadership styles with a significant amount of misunderstanding and gossip fuelling a growing political factionalism. Due partly to the reactionary nature of the Stand at Ista in 1995, communication was after the fact, which angered many people. In addition, the presence of the Forest Action Network agitated many people who were not familiar with their culture and beliefs nor their motives for being at Ista. They were 'outside agitators'<sup>51</sup> who were branded as the instigators of trouble in the valley, including the provincial court judge who gave the FAN activists harsher sentences than the Nuxalk due to their assumed instigator status.<sup>52</sup> However, both the House of Smayusta and FAN maintain that their relationship was initiated by the HOS. It seems that nobody could believe that a 'group of Indians' could lead and organize a stand to protect their land without the help and leadership of an outside, non-indigenous group, betraying the racist assumptions of such comments. Martin Luther King Jr. discusses the need for direct action as an act of self-defence in response to the social conditions that leave oppressed people no alternative<sup>53</sup>, a comment echoed by Nuxalk Sovereignist Jesse Mack Oud.<sup>54</sup> In response to the question, "Why direct action?" King states that

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<sup>49</sup> Alfred, 37.

<sup>50</sup> "Difficult truths" is adapted from Britzman's definition of 'difficult knowledge' as "The study of experiences and the traumatic residuals of genocide, ethnic hatred, aggression, and forms of state-sanctioned-and hence legal-social violence. The study of an other's painful encounter with victimization, aggression, and the desire to live on one's own terms" (p.117). For an excellent read on this, see Lee Maracle's *I am Woman* for insights into the difficult truths of indigenous womanhood, as well as Kim Anderson's *A Recognition of Being: Reconstructing Native Womanhood*.

<sup>51</sup> King, 537.

<sup>52</sup> Greg Higgs, personal communication, July 15, 2005.

<sup>53</sup> King, 537.

Non-violent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and foster such a tension that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue. It seeks so to dramatize the issue that it can no longer be ignored. p.538

Further, he goes on to explain that tensions are revealed rather than created, and brought out into the open so that they may be dealt with.<sup>55</sup> Mohawk scholar Taiaiake Alfred discusses a similar idea of ‘framing contention’ as

the need to justify, dignify, and animate collective contentious dissent, action by our people against the authority of the colonial state and all of its institutions and its representatives. p.228

According to Alfred, decolonization of the self is paramount prior to any real collective strength being available as a nation. Individual decolonization can be pursued by contending with the mental, spiritual and physical aspects of our being.<sup>56</sup> In the Nuxalk community, health and wellness has been identified as a priority, with creative solutions such as wilderness treatment centres and youth programs such as the Chako Kunamokst Rediscovery Camp that reconnects youth with community and the land through cultural programs in isolated locations within the traditional territory. In addition, renewed interest in the harvesting and nutritional value of traditional foods is helping people regain their physical health in a community with a disproportionately high occurrence of diabetes, obesity and alcohol and drug addictions.

The Stand at Ista also raised the environmental consciousness of Nuxalk people who depend on the natural resources to the level of the *entire* territory rather than just the habitual areas currently used for traditional purposes.<sup>57</sup> As Connie Watkinson stated, she noticed more singing and telling of stories after the Stand at Ista, including the construction of a new song house. Such actions and shifts in consciousness are key components to regaining and maintaining strength and wellness in our community. The Stand at Ista was the first action taken on the central-north coast, and sparked an

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<sup>54</sup> Jesse Mack Oud, personal communication, Bella Coola, BC, April 19, 2005.

<sup>55</sup> King, 540.

<sup>56</sup> Alfred, 164.

<sup>57</sup> For many people, the confines of the reservation boundaries are strictly adhered to when harvesting for food or ceremonial purposes. However, this mindset is slowly changing, and people are making concerted efforts to reacquaint themselves with areas in the territory far removed from the main village.

environmental movement known as the Great Bear Rainforest campaign. After years of organizing, a coalition of environmental groups and indigenous communities were able to secure partial protection of one of the last remaining stands of temperate rainforest in the world, initiating a coalition called, *Turning Point*<sup>58</sup>. Ironically, the Nuxalk were the only indigenous nation to *not* sign on to the alliance, mainly due to the unstable political climate and extreme distrust of any alliance with the Canadian governments. Although the Great Bear Rainforest protection area is far from perfect, it is an example of the change that mainstream media and anti-environmentalists predicted was a fruitless effort in the mid 1990s. It brought awareness to our part of the world on many levels.

## VI. ACWSALC<sup>59</sup>

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### Conclusion

As native people, our communities have been conditioned to underestimate our power through the processes of colonization; crippling diseases, abuses, racism, and chronic under-valuation in both past and present. We must continue to fight for our very survival on a daily basis. ‘Post-colonialism’ is not just an academic theory discussing a distinct portion of our history, but is also a lived reality in our daily experience as indigenous people. Much of indigenous academic discourse regarding colonialism is *anti-colonial*. In its rejection of assumed western superiority, it frames decolonization in the daily reconstructions of our own identities and experiences as indigenous peoples. Where colonization is the destruction of indigenous ways, decolonization is a reclamation and reconstruction of being. It privileges and values our own history, culture, knowledge, land, community, spiritual understanding, language, relationships and all other aspects of what makes us Nuxalk, on our own terms and frame of

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<sup>58</sup> On April 4, 2001, eight First Nations of British Columbia's central and north coast, including Haida Gwaii (Queen Charlotte Islands), signed an historic General Protocol Agreement on Land Use Planning and Interim Measures with the provincial government. Members of the Initiative are working closely with the Federal and Provincial Governments, industry, environmental groups and other stakeholders to promote economically and environmentally sustainable development on the Central and North Coast of BC, and Haida Gwaii. The work of the Turning Point Initiative office in Vancouver focuses on negotiations, policy development, and the creation of economic development opportunities for First Nations' communities on the Coast. < [http://www.davidsuzuki.org/Forests/Turning\\_Point.asp](http://www.davidsuzuki.org/Forests/Turning_Point.asp) > (April 30, 2006.)

<sup>59</sup> Nuxalk: ‘what was learned’

reference. Decolonization is an active shift to regain health and strength on multiple levels: physically, mentally, spiritually, emotionally, politically, economically, etc. Decolonization is about reframing ourselves for our own benefit, according to our own terms. It is about questioning and challenging assumed western authority and legitimacy. It is about embracing and engaging with our responsibilities of being the first citizens of this land, of protecting all that makes us who we are.

The story of Ista is layered with history, geography, culture, politics and varied human experience of the Nuxalk and our neighbours. It is the story of the first Nuxalk woman who showed us how to maintain a connection with the Creator by dancing with her crest on her blanket. It is the place where my grandmother's name comes from, it is the place she hiked over a mile up a mountainside to protect her heritage. It is the song and dance we use to remember and clear the path for our most powerful dance, the dance of thunder. In some ways, I see the Stand at Ista as a metaphor of our own 'clearing of the path' as the dance of thunder is a healing dance, a spiritual connection to the past and future. The experiences we have as individuals and as a community have shaped where we are today. Ista sparked a social movement of awareness; it 'woke up our creation stories.' In doing so, it is privileging a Nuxalk understanding of the world and our place in it, as *Nuxalk* citizens, not Canadians.

Through this project, I have come to realize the profound importance of knowing my history and the responsibilities that come with being a Nuxalk woman. To me, Nuxalk Sovereignty is more than a legalistic definition of land title and jurisdiction; it is an understanding of all the active relationships that bind us to the land, our culture, language, history, families, villages, our ancestors and children, and to those yet unborn. It is a feeling as much as it is a responsibility and spiritual connection to the sacred knowledge that is born of our very blood ties to the land itself. It is a way of knowing that is not commonly accepted or encouraged in western academic institutions, but it is valid just the same. Decolonization comes in many forms; actions, values, knowledge, practices and coming to terms with our ever changing culture and the complexities of our society. This project was very difficult on a personal level because it required me to scrutinize my community, my family and my

own life in a way that revealed and created tensions I did not expect. For several months during the process of piecing together the people, places, events and larger story of both Ista and the realities of colonialism, I was physically ill and exhausted. It is important for me to acknowledge the tremendous emotional nature of this work, as emotion often leads to insight that logic alone cannot. I can better appreciate why people are hesitant to discuss Ista; it is deeply personal and political.

I know that not everybody will like or agree with the video, but it is from my vantage point and an expression of my learning. Although I am extremely hesitant in scheduling a community screening, I believe that I have an obligation to share what I learned with my community who was so willing to share with me. I also have a responsibility to stand up for my work and be answerable to those it represents. Such is the work of decolonized methodology, whereby I must be responsible and accountable to my community, to acknowledge the intertwined and invested relationship I have with those I am representing, before I can take credit for my work.

The most profound learning I experienced through this project was the ‘feeling’ of being Nuxalkmc. Prior to beginning this project, I had dreams of great spiritual significance that only now make sense to me. I dreamt about Ista, before I even knew what it meant- who she was, where it was, what happened there. I dreamt about thunder and experienced its healing powers during a potlatch; it overwhelmed me to the point of tears. I also felt the spirit in the land when we went to Ixpexem (Talio Hot Springs), which was a mix of awe, humbleness and a feeling of self discovery; it was like meeting a part of me that I didn’t even know existed. Through these experiences, and especially after the death of my father last summer, I was surrounded by my family and community in a way that upheld my spirit and our ways as Nuxalkmc. It is that love and spiritual strength that sustains me in the difficult work that I do. I believe that is a very real part of the strength in our communities as well; the commitment to our families and land and the validation of who we are through our histories, our culture, our values and our smayustas.

In remembering Ista, I remember Ista herself, how she showed her connection to the Creator by decorating her blanket and dancing. I remember her through my own blanket, and when I dance to her song in our potlatches that validate our ways and connection to the Creator. I remember my grandmother, Skwucwlikwana (she who invites others to feast) who climbed the mile-long hill at Ista in order to protect what is left of our territory for me and my son, and all of the forthcoming children who will be born into our struggle. I remember the words of the women at Ista who maintained that we must remain strong for our children and remember the sacred connections passed down to us by our grandparents. I remember the pain and anger my community experienced at the hands of colonial institutions and the internalized devaluation we struggle with because of it. It is a story that is still raw with emotion and intensity; something I will not soon forget. I also remember the hopefulness and strength in my people to become healthy and united again. In remembering, not only will we survive, we will thrive. Our story continues.

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\* It is interesting to browse the Nuxalk (House of Smayusta) website that FAN helped set up. It includes the story of Ista, photos of elders and chiefs, and the numerous press releases by the HOS; some in response to press releases by the Nuxalk elected council. Although the site is interesting, it is not kept up to date, mostly due to financial and technical logistics, as the HOS has grown quieter in recent years. However, it remains a good archival resource for people who are interested in the issues surrounding industrial logging, Ista, and other threats to the Nuxalk, such as salmon farms neighbouring our territory and a proposed deep-sea port and rock quarry on our local salmon estuary.

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**Ista Footage** provided by Faye Edgar, Ray Morton and the Forest Action Network (Bella Coola).

**APPENDIX A- MAP OF NUXALK TERRITORY**

Courtesy of Nuxalk Nation Government [<http://www.Nuxalk.org>]

