



INTERVIEW



INDIGENOUS INTERNATIONALISMS

SPECIAL SECTION



An Interview with Cheryl Bryce: Decolonizing Place for Indigenous Food and Land Sovereignty

Jeff Ganohalidoh Corntassel *

On February 4th, 2023, Jeff Ganohalidoh Corntassel spoke with Cheryl Bryce, Songhees Nation member and knowledge-keeper who focuses on land and Indigenous food sovereignty. She founded and continues to lead the lək'wəŋən Community Tool Shed, an initiative that brings people together to decolonize the land and reinstate indigenous food systems (learn more at the Facebook page, [Community Tool Shed](#), and Cheryl's [Instagram](#)). The following conversation covers kwetlal (camas) food systems, traditional land management, and sharing knowledge.¹

Jeff Corntassel: Cheryl, maybe you can start by introducing yourself.

Cheryl Bryce: Ok, my name is Cheryl Bryce. I am a member of the Songhees nation, traditionally known as lək'wəŋən. Some of what I do is traditional harvesting within the kwetlal food systems, and I think that's what we're talking about today.

Jeff: Thank you for being a part of this. Maybe I'll start with the general question of: What does sustainability mean to you? It's got all sorts of meanings. I've seen it have a darker meaning, especially when corporations take it over, and I've seen it have almost no meaning when other environmentalists take it over. So, what does it mean to you? Or is that a useful term for describing the work that you do?

Cheryl: Mm, it's interesting you should say that. I did a presentation recently; and it was very much talking about all different parts of what it/that kind of means to me when we start looking at environmental planning. And I veered off on a few things, but explained that I couldn't veer off on those other things. Like, it's not just about creating a plan, or conserving and protecting. It's many other things: it's the people, it's the connections, it's the stories, it's the songs, it's the trading of kwetlal, as well. To me, it's a food system, and it really encompasses more than 'sustaining the land' so-to-speak, as most people would think of it. As far as protecting it or planning to manage what's left.

Jeff: So it's about sustaining those practices?

Cheryl: Yeah.

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Jeff: And that ethic?

Cheryl: And it's reinstating these Indigenous food systems throughout our traditional territory as well, that's an important part of it. It's also creating awareness and finding ways to work together; it's ensuring that the knowledge is passed down through the generations, and done appropriately, and getting people ready to take it on.

Jeff: Ah, perfect. How do we share knowledge across generations, and, since you mentioned that, what are some ways that you think are working for sharing that knowledge? You and I have been working together for years on pulling invasives, and things like that. But there is so much knowledge that you shared with folks from Songhees, as well as from other nations, or even non-Indigenous peoples. What are some important things to consider when sharing that knowledge?

Cheryl: Where people are at, and—if they're ready—how much are they ready to take on. You don't want to give it all at once.

Usually, traditionally what we do is a bit at a time. Like for me, it was as I was growing up. And I didn't know I was being taught; it was just something my grandma was taking me out to do. To harvest, or prepare foods, or telling stories, or telling history. It was just on the land, and it was just something we did.

Jeff: Yeah.

Cheryl: And it was just something over time, so I think it's important to respect that it's going to take the time it needs to slowly share that knowledge, and how much is shared. Some people get certain parts of the knowledge, other people get other aspects of the knowledge depending on where they are at in life, right? And [there are] strengths they can see in the family.

And beyond—I guess beyond family, and beyond community—that's a tricky one. That one I think is more of a way to, for me anyways, to share enough that people understand that it's still important, that we're still connected to the land and our territory and our foods and everything, and we still have that connection, even though you might see it as a park or someone's back yard. We are still connected to these places and this land through our ancestors and our future generations really. So, it's not to teach people how to do it, and go, it's not a do-it-yourself.

Jeff: Right.

Cheryl: Interaction—it's educating to the point where people can understand why it's still important to us, and how we're still connected to the land and how we

can work together to re-instate these food systems. It's really a way of how we work together.

Jeff: Absolutely. Yeah, you've made the comment before: when people ask to see your traditional digging stick, you'll pull out your Canadian Tire shovel, right?

Cheryl: (Laughs)

Jeff: And how often people want to see a certain look, or action, that fits in with their maybe colonial mindset, or frozen-in-time mindset.

Cheryl: Yeah, well... It's an entitlement for some folks that they can't lose. They want to know every little detail, like “What do you use to dig?”, “How are you cooking and sharing that?”, and “Where do you harvest?” You know, the Indigenous folks are going to say “I never share where I harvest, do you?” And I went “No!” (Laughs)

But when it came to the old way with the camas, they had to, because it was a lot of work. All the family and extended family would come in. But that was the whole point of the death camas; it is being moved around so that people couldn't raid your fields.

Jeff: That makes sense. Do you think it still plays a similar role today? The death Camas?

Cheryl: I still move it around, yeah, I still move it around.

Jeff: And do you think people are aware enough of death camas and how that's deadly? And that they have to know, they have to be with someone who knows what they're doing...

Cheryl: Yeah, and I usually just put that disclaimer when I'm doing a public presentation: “This isn't to teach you how to do it”. It's just teaching you it's important to me, my family, the community, the future, and our ancestors. But it's just looking at ways we can work together, and it's... individuals finding their way in how they can contribute to where they live... As a guest.

Jeff: And I think, in the past when you and I have talked about kwetlal, you said about 95 percent of it has been wiped out?

Cheryl: Yeah. It's less, I think.

Jeff: So, it's actually gone down?

Cheryl: Quite a bit.

Jeff: Quite a bit, and so it's going in the opposite direction?

Cheryl: Yeah.

Jeff: Or in the negative direction?

Cheryl: Yeah. What did they say, about 75 percent of [B.C.'s population] is in Vancouver, Victoria and Nanaimo. [That's the highest population density of B.C.] Which is within that Coastal Douglas Fir Forest area, right?

Jeff: Right.

Cheryl: And that of course has a lot of unique ecosystems, like the Gary Oak ecosystem, as most people know it. But, [this area has] a higher amount of diversity as well as species at risk now because of development.

Jeff: And it's been mainly extraction, development...

Cheryl: Development, isolating what's left so there's no connecting corridors between the different communities of kwetlal food systems.

Jeff: So almost creating these islands?

Cheryl: Yeah.

Jeff: And has the pulling of invasives helped?

Cheryl: Oh, for sure. I think it's not expanding the land base that's needed, but it's helping with what's left. [And] it is, as far as people learning about it and re-instating it in their back yards, encouraging it to happen in their parks as well... That is happening. And more people are coming to myself and others, about their management plans in parks. It is helping what's left so [that] they aren't colonized by invasive plants. It's also addressing climate change in that way, because removing those fuels—often broom, some of the woodier species right, they're really fuel to fire, and one of the common things on the island and the coast is the increase of fires.

Jeff: Yeah, absolutely. It's almost like fire management as well, like traditional land management.

Cheryl: Yeah.

Jeff: One of the things you said, several things you said, have really stayed with me. One of them was to not serve camas at a pit cook, right? Because of the shortage and the scarcity...

To really impress upon people how scarce this is, and [say] "We're not going to just share it, so you can have a taste. And, that entitlement I guess it comes back to so..."

Cheryl: Yeah, and it really brings home how important it is, right? That there's so few left, and just having those colonial vegetables in there really demonstrates that impact on our foods, on the land, on our health, really.

It really encourages that conversation of colonial harm, and I think it's probably a hands-on way of seeing it.

Jeff: Yeah, absolutely. And I think another thing you said at our last pit cook, that you don't want to be talking to future generations and [hear them] say "I don't know what camas tastes like."

Cheryl: Yeah. Well, I'm not an Elder, but when I become an Elder, I want to be able to share camas. Not talk about what it used to taste like.

Jeff: That would be devastating, wouldn't it?

Cheryl: Yeah.

Jeff: So let's talk a little bit about trade; And so, camas was, you know—kwetlal is traded, even the story of Camosung (q'emásənǰ) seems to have that story of trade embedded in it.

Cheryl: And the star sisters.

Jeff: So, what would that trade network look like, and what are some ways to think about it now?

Cheryl: To be honest, I didn't work with very many students, because I usually found they came with an agenda, and it was just adding more work for me. But this one student came in and she asked "What can I do to contribute to what you're already doing, that's helpful and useful to you, but I could also use towards my honours paper?" So, I went "Ah, well here's the big picture." And she goes "Well, I'm just doing an honours," so we pulled it down into a public pit cook. That was what I wanted to publicly do at UVic, to be able to have that larger conversation. That bigger picture was to educate of the general public and my own community about kwetlal food systems, and why they're so important to protect and re-instate, and [that] our role is very important, and we need to continue that work. And that, of course, is reinstating as much as we can within our traditional homelands, because that's where a majority of it has been impacted. Opposed to, like our reserve lands...

Jeff: Right.

Cheryl: ... Not as impacted as off-reserve and is the larger part of our territory. So [it's about] getting out, educating, re-instating, finding ways to work together. The Community Toolshed was one of the ways. Other folks can do what they feel they need to do, whether it's management plans within their municipalities, contributing, or doing invasive species removal. It's just finding ways that we can get everyone working together because it's very urgent. I'm seeing more and more, and I'd see it 20 years ago, so it's even more urgent now. People are aware, but



it's still happening. Victoria's becoming very dense in population and more development is happening every day. It is greatly impacting what's left. You know, we've been saying five percent [of kwetlal] is left, but we've been saying that for a couple of decades now. It's surely three percent, even less, maybe.



Jeff: And would you say that, you know, those trade networks, did those trade networks go all up and down the coast?

Cheryl: Yes. So where UVic is now is one of the places where trade historically took place. And it was celebrated, camas was celebrated, and it was traded, and we would trade like razor clams down south, sturgeon into the Fraser area, and then oolichan up north. All kinds of different things were traded.

Jeff: Right.

Cheryl: So, it was highly sought after. It was very unique. It's not something you commonly found, in what you now know as Canada. It's pretty isolated to the southeast end of Vancouver Island.

Jeff: Right. And would you say, that—did it go all the way down, to, let's say, the far part of Turtle Island? Like to California?

Cheryl: More to Oregon, I think it might be...

Jeff: Oregon? Okay.

Cheryl: ... I think it might be a tip of California... But, in large part, Washington and Oregon.

Jeff: Okay.

Jeff: And would you say that trade still takes place? In maybe smaller or more informal ways?

Cheryl: Probably in smaller ways, for sure. And by public pit cooks, or pit cooks that are open, and a lot of nations will come to participate. It's a smaller part of it, where people bring food from their community and they share it at the pit cook. It'd be amazing to be able to see that, you know that's one of my long-term hopes, is that it's to the point where there's enough camas that we can sustainably travel, or trade, sorry, and Travel with it (laughs) up and down the coast and trade, but to trade the kwetlal.

Jeff: That would be amazing.

Cheryl: And to have those huge celebrations, I mean there was multiple pit cooks, you could just imagine the UVic grounds and there would be multiple pit cooks of all camas, and just how that would have been conducted would have been amazing. Yeah, I think it was Della Rice from Cowichan who came

to one of my pit cooks and she said "You're like orchestra conductor. You're like, "Just get everyone moving!" And you're just standing in the center, and just pointing and just getting everyone moving". and I'm like, "I hadn't thought of it that way!" (Laughs)

Jeff: Yeah, it's pretty amazing to watch.

Cheryl: Ah, I just think of myself being bossy but.

Jeff: No, not at all, not at all

Cheryl: (Laughs)

Jeff: It's leadership...

Cheryl: ... That's a good way to see it.

Jeff: And, so would you say—that's the other part I was going to ask, is about gender relations, or kind of roles and responsibilities; it was mainly *lək'wəŋən* women who would be in charge of the kwetlal and the trade, as well...

Cheryl: Yep. Men and women took part in the work for sure, but usually it was the head woman of a family that would oversee the work that had to take place on the land throughout the year. Bringing people in to help with the work on the land, for- whether it be harvesting or preparing sites, and, she would decide who, how it would be divided amongst those who came to help and within the family, and how it would be traded.

Jeff: And would you say that those roles have been challenged by colonization?

Cheryl: Oh yeah. (Laughs) Well you know, the Hudson Bay was our first "box store" and it went right onto a kwetlal food system and many other very important areas as well. The women continued, *lək'wəŋən* women continued to do the harvesting, and we do what people might call a prescribed burn, but we'd just call it like a traditional care to the land, with a low burn.

Jeff: Okay.

Cheryl: To move the shrubs further back, and the firs further back, and they almost burnt the fort down, so it was almost a push to oppress the roles really.

Jeff: Yeah, so burning—almost burning—the fort down, was an act of resistance?

Cheryl: Yeah!

Jeff: Yeah.... that's interesting to think of even prescribed burns as a form of resistance.



Cheryl: Yeah. When I started talking with the municipalities a bit more about doing them, it was a flat out "No". 20 years—like, was it the late 90s? —it was just a flat "No, there's no way." And so we just kept talking and talking. And it eventually came: "Well, maybe we should." There's more of that conversation now, about using Indigenous practices to decrease issues with wildfires and with climate change. And some are fine with listening.

Jeff: I think prescribed burns are something you and I have been talking about for a while, and it seems like there's maybe more of an openness...

Cheryl: Now.

Jeff: ... To addressing climate action and climate change.

Cheryl: Yes. We were doing them out on the island, and I'd like to get another one out there soon. And slowly making them bigger and moving it around at different times.

Jeff: Maybe one at UVic?

Cheryl: Yeah. (Laughs) Ah, that might be, how would that go over? (Laughs) What kind of conversation would that lead to?

Jeff: I think there's—I wonder, it's hard to know if it would be more likely at UVic or you know, so called "Beacon Hill", or Meeqan.

Cheryl: Yeah, well that's where the conversations have been happening mainly. That was one of the municipalities that flat out said "No." But now, they're more interested in having one.

Jeff: Yeah, that would be pretty powerful.

Cheryl: I think it was that meeting you attended with me too, it came up as well. When was that? Was that 2014?

Jeff: It sounds about right.

Cheryl: Yeah, with the city of Victoria, with the mayor and council.

Jeff: I remember that.

Cheryl: And they, they were actually a little more willing to do it, whereas before it was the opposite. I had better luck talking to staff, and people on the ground, and no political support. But now it's kind of switching.

Jeff: Seems like it is, slowly switching, and now there's a UVic climate and sustainable action plan. I headed up the Indigenous group, and the goal was to have the

university sign agreements with lək'wəŋən peoples around management of the land, and things like that, restoration.

Cheryl: Oh, oh good! I have been talking to Songhees about creating an M.O.U. with UVic. So, we can start ensuring that the research that's being done on our land, is held by us.

Jeff: Excellent.

Cheryl: And that we hold the knowledge and that, they can't just go out and publish it anywhere they want or travel the world and share that knowledge in any way they want. Because that's happening. And then especially with the work on our islands.

Jeff: Yeah, that makes total sense.

Cheryl: And in our communities.

Jeff: Well, that's part of O.C.A.P. too, with the ownership, control, access, and possession. And that should be embedded in research. Thinking about Songhees and even the position of chief and council system, what does nationhood look like for you?

Cheryl: I mean (laughs), traditionally speaking, we didn't have a chief and council, or like a band office, right?

It was family groups. And that's how we governed ourselves traditionally, is through family groups. And everyone has a voice, when it came to anything that needed to be addressed. No matter how small or large it was, everyone came together. The men, the women, the children, all sat together and discussed what the issue, and what they felt needed to get done. And they would send their speaker, so that person became the head family speaker to go speak to the other family groups or if it was another community, that community, on what they would like to do about the issue.

Jeff: Okay, so family to family?

Cheryl: Yeah. We still do it, even though we are, still in this colonial system. The Indian Act is still alive, and we're still running through chiefs and councils and band offices for everything, and housing and what not. But yeah, I think we're finding a way. I think as all Indigenous peoples, we're finding a way to utilize that, while still practicing our traditions and traditional ways. So, we have family groups—often they're brought in, making sure every family group's represented when there's a conversation about anything in the community, or anything that needs to be addressed in our traditional lands, as far as what the council's leading.

Jeff: Is your family group, is that Chekonein?



Cheryl: Yeah, my family groups are my—one of my ancestors is the first signature on there, and another one I think he’s third or fourth. They really are all family. I have ties to the different groups, but predominantly yeah, Chekonein, whereas UVic is now, so it’s Saanich and San Juan islands, what you now might know as Oak Bay as well.

Jeff: Yeah, I think that’d be the first thing to take back, is Oak Bay.

Cheryl: Yep.

Cheryl and Jeff: (Both laugh)

Jeff: You know, kind of tied to food systems and trade is representation, and I was thinking of you and I talked a little bit about *stqéyáʔ*, and the story of that wolf. What’s been missing from that conversation?

Cheryl: Our voice. I think the nations voice. I remember interviewing—and my sister did most of the interviewing really with the members—but I remember interviewing some of the members, and reading what my sister had interviewed as well, and when we were doing the marine use plan. And it was all small at first, and with the idea of it growing, but the focus was in and around [Tl’ches], so Discovery and Chatham Island. Every single member wanted *stqéyáʔ*, to be protected. And that more needed to be done to ensure he was provided that space to thrive and continue. So I think there needs to be more of a voice from the nation and I think someone like Mrs. Alexander has exploited and *stqéyáʔ*, to the point where he left, is my thinking. She [Alexander] was getting way to close. She was always on the island. She was trespassing on our island to take her photos for her book. And just even by water she was doing the same thing—just constantly stalking him really. You know, we asked her to not do this, and she threatened us—the nation, me, others—that she would sue. So really I think, I think that needs to be viewed kind of differently, and how that’s done right now, she’s kind of being seen as somebody who’s doing some great thing for *stqéyáʔ*, but they’re not really seeing her impact on *stqéyáʔ*, to the land and to us, and the damage she has done.

Jeff: And she’s undermining Songhees sovereignty.

Cheryl: Yes. She would challenge it. She’s basically saying she can, she’s not trespassing if she stays below the foreshore.

Jeff: And she didn’t get the name right, either, did she?

Cheryl: No, she’s spelling it wrong.

Jeff: So misrepresenting *stqéyáʔ* on all fronts?

Cheryl: She’s appropriating too, really. She wasn’t given permission to use it in any way.

Jeff: Where does that stand now, has *stqéyáʔ* been returned?

Cheryl: I haven’t heard of him being returned, I’d have to double check though.

Jeff: Okay. We talked about a lot of things, so here’s a larger question: What are your aspirations for future generations?

Cheryl: Yeah, well, you know within my own family I’ve been preparing a family to get ready, to take a lot of this on, and they’re helping for sure, for pit cooks, yeah I mean they’ve come. And various nephews have come out to help.

Jeff: Yeah, that’s wonderful.

Cheryl: Yeah so just that. As well making sure that knowledge is shared and passed down, continuing in the community as well, to see if there’s ways we can work together. Outside of the community is definitely going into schools and you know—they’re now doing them in gardens, I remember like, decades ago going in and encouraging schools to actually create native gardens. Not necessarily to take it and appropriate it, but to create awareness. And then some of [those] plants can be reinstated into the grounds.

Jeff: Well, yeah, and you had that beautiful vision of being able to trade *kwetlal* freely, and have it travel freely to other communities, and have abundance.

Cheryl: Yes. So, for me, it’s like getting people to help with the work... Ya know? It’s one thing to create this space, but they need to help with the work as well.

Jeff: Yeah. I think it’s time to get our Community Toolshed going again.

Cheryl: Going—yeah, I’ve been thinking about that, actually. I was like, ‘I should start doing, hauling some more pulls’. The nation has—I’m thinking within the community, as well—there’s some spots that they would like to have the pull.

Jeff: Sure.

Cheryl: Some pulls done, but right now I’m just having that conversation of creating a plan with the nation.

Jeff: The last question is: is there anything that we didn’t discuss that you think we should be bringing into the conversation?

Cheryl: I think in a large part we might have covered

what you're needing, but I think to me, of course, just to recap kwetlal is an important food system still to the lək'wəŋən today, especially to me, and the work is, there's a lot of work to do, there's a lot to do. Of course, within the community we also, outside the community within our ancestral lands, there's a lot of things that need to be addressed, I mean, it's one thing to reinstate them, but there's a lot behind that, that still needs to be worked on. When we start talking about doing this in municipalities, I mean there's this whole systemic racism we could probably go into, and all of the other colonial practices that still kind of continue in our governance system and in society at large right? And just changing that thinking—it's a huge undertaking. And that's something that I'm seeing more and more people challenging: misinformed individuals that kind of feel entitled to tell Indigenous folks, especially me, what I can and cannot do. So, it's nice to see that. It's still happening, but it's nice to also have more support. And I think back 20 years ago, or even beyond, it's like, it wasn't

there. Not very much of it, and there was not much of a conversation about camas, and there was no space created for that conversation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. And that conversation back then was so different. It was not respectful, or acknowledging our important role in managing and taking care of the future.

Jeff: So Hay'sxw'qa. Thank you so much for taking this time to speak with me...

Cheryl: Thank you.

Note

- 1 This interview is part of the Special Section: Honouring Indigenous Land and Water Defenders, edited by Jeff Ganohalidoh Corntassel, in *Borders in Globalization Review* 5(1): 7-53.

