Red skin, white masks: A review

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Introduction

A book hasn’t generated this much excitement in Indigenous academic and activist circles since Leanne Simpson’s Dancing on our Turtle’s Back or Taiaiake Alfred’s Wasâse, which is fitting as Glen Coulthard’s new book is very much in the same political vein. In the foreword, Alfred speaks of a new generation of, “Native thinkers and leaders (that) are coming on the scene intent on changing things, entirely” (p. x). Coulthard’s book is for a generation of activists who have witnessed their parents’ and grandparents’ generations struggle against the Canadian state for Aboriginal rights and recognition, having too often come away feeling cheated. Coulthard illuminates contemporary Indigenous-settler relations in Canada with theoretical interventions rooted in examples that he is intimately familiar with, such as the political maneuverings of the Dene Nation and, more recently, the resurgent politics of Idle No More. Red Skin, White Masks is a book that is truly for a generation that desires to change things entirely.

If there is an obvious criticism of the book, it is that some might find it ‘inaccessible’, especially for those not familiar with political theory. The strength of Coulthard’s contribution, however, is that it is a deep theoretical analysis that, as he admits, is often lacking in Indigenous Studies. Despite the dense nature of his analysis, he makes up for it with his concluding chapter,
which is both accessible and rooted in the necessity for real, material change on the ground. For the purpose of this review, I will focus primarily on Coulthard’s “Five Theses on Indigenous Resurgence and Decolonization,” offered in the final chapter; but, before I ‘zoom in’ on those, let me offer a brief summary of the broader theoretical contributions that the book makes.

With the premise that the last forty years of Indigenous-settler politics in Canada have been dominated by the politics of recognition, specifically the, “recognition (of) Aboriginal ‘cultural’ rights within the legal and political framework of the Canadian state” (pp. 1-2), Coulthard sets out to map how “the politics of recognition in its contemporary liberal form promises to reproduce the very configurations of colonialist, racist, patriarchal state power that Indigenous peoples’ demands for recognition have historically sought to transcend” (p. 3). While the Canadian approach is, “seemingly more conciliatory,” (p. 6) and seemingly less overtly assimilationalist, Red Skin, White Masks exposes the continuing colonial nature of the relationship and is a provocative call for a new form of resurgent Indigenous politics in Canada.

There is something very particular about settler-colonialism that lies at the heart of how we, as Indigenous peoples, have arrived at the current state of recognition politics that Coulthard is describing. Indigenous political rhetoric, over the generations, has shifted from one focused on protecting the land and perpetuating unique Indigenous ways of living to one that is much more in line with state recognition and accommodation. Coulthard cites Patrick Wolfe, pointing out that the primary goal of Settler-colonialism is, “access to territory” (p. 7), reminding us that settler politics is, and has always has been, about the land. Settler-colonialism is in the ‘being here to stay’ business. Coulthard skillfully mobilizes and, in many ways, re-orient Marx and Fanon to help explain and frame the trajectory of Indigenous rights discourses within the Canadian settler-colonial context. I will not engage these efforts in detail, but I do want to note a few highlights. Drawing primarily from chapters 26-32 from Volume One of Marx’s Capital, Coulthard argues that, “Marx was primarily interested in colonialism because it exposed some ‘truth’ about the nature of capitalism” (p. 10). Re-reading Marx with an anticolonial lens, as Coulthard argues we need to do in this context, alerts us to the fact that capitalism and settler-colonialism are not things and events, respectively, but ongoing “social relations” (p. 11). The settler hunger for land continues relentlessly, embedded in political and economic systems that still deny Indigenous claims for recognition and self-determination. The logical question is: Why do we allow this to keep happening? Cue Fanon.

Coulthard is mainly interested in Fanon’s contributions to our understanding of colonial subjectivity or the, “specific modes of colonial thought, desire and behavior that implicitly or explicitly commit the colonized to the types of practices and subject positions that are required for their continued domination” (p. 16). He believes that contemporary Canadian politics of reconciliation and recognition contribute to this colonial subjectivity among Indigenous peoples and, in particular, he implicates the works of Charles Taylor and Anishinaabe scholar, Dale Turner. The former has been an influential figure in liberal and communitarian circles, pushing the politics of recognition in Canada, while the latter encourages increased, albeit cautious, Indigenous engagement with the state. Coulthard writes that while Taylor’s approach might
mitigate, “some of the effects of colonial-capitalist exploitation and domination, it does little to address their generative structures” (p. 35). Coulthard also argues that Turner underestimates the transformative power of state discourses in these engagements (pp. 45-47), following Nadasdy’s concern that framing Indigenous claims in the language of the settler state may ultimately undermine those original claims and Indigenous worldviews (p. 78).

Coulthard also considers both left-materialist challenges (can’t we all be communists?) and anti-essentialist challenges (can’t we all be free liberal subjects?), but it is the latter that interests me the most. In chapter three, he looks at the anti-essentialist arguments of Seyla Benhabib and the gendered politics of Aboriginal self-government. Coulthard concludes that Benhabib’s liberal approach is problematic when considering Indigenous claims for self-determination, but warns that our appeals to “culture” and “tradition” must not, “replicate the racist and sexist misrecognitions of the Indian Act and in the process unwittingly reproduce the structure of dispossession we originally set out to challenge” (p. 103). In chapter three, Glen outlines how the Indian Act, the ‘high politics’ of mega-constitutionalism and patriarchy in Canadian and Indigenous societies, has pushed the necessity of a feminist intervention, but is not convinced by Benhabib’s liberal approach. In his concluding chapter, Coulthard again addresses the importance of gender justice in an Indigenous context.

Coulthard then moves to Leanne Simpson who, “suggests that while non-Indigenous critical theoretical frameworks still have much to offer our analyses of contemporary settler-colonialism, they are fundamentally limited in their ability to provide insight into what a culturally grounded alternative to colonialism might look like for Indigenous nations” (p. 148). In his final chapter, Coulthard offers his reflections on Idle No More, with some interesting insights into the affirmative utility of Indigenous resentment, as well as the writings of Simpson and Alfred. He also concludes with two perspectives on Indigenous-Settler relations in Canada that I want to focus on. First, that land remains a crucial focal point: “Settler-colonialism is territorially acquisitive in perpetuity” (p. 152, emphasis in original). Colonization, or primitive accumulation to use the words of Marx, is not merely a historical phenomenon. It is ongoing, and our obligations to live responsibly and honour our reciprocal relations must remain a priority. Second, “the forms of colonial power associated with primitive accumulation need not be understood as strictly coercive, repressive, or explicitly violent in nature; rather, the practices of dispossession central to the maintenance of settler-colonialism in liberal democratic contexts like Canada rely as much on the productive character of colonial power as it does on the coercive authority of the settler state” (p. 152). Going to residential schools, churches, engaging Canadian legal and political systems, and simply living in Canada has had a transformative effect on Indigenous peoples and politics. This is why Coulthard’s book is so important. It is not merely a theoretical intervention. It is a reminder of who we are, who we once were, and who we can be once again.

Coulthard closes the book with his ‘Five Theses on Indigenous Resurgence and Decolonization’, and this is where Red Skin, White Masks really comes alive.
Thesis #1: On the necessity of direct action

Here, Coulthard addresses the assertion that Indigenous direct action is reactionary, ineffective, and alienating. Direct action often is a response to some form of egregious political or economic action by the settler state or a corporation, such as in the case of Idle No More and its formation as a response to Bill C-45, or the Mi’kmaq resistance to fracking in Elsipogtog. However, these reactions are also affirmative. They are resistance to that which is destructive, but, “they also have ingrained within them a resounding ‘yes’: they are the affirmative enactment of another modality of being, a different way of relating to and with the world” (p. 169, emphasis in original). The suggestion that direct action is ineffective is almost laughable if it were not such a commonly leveled charge against so-called radicals from both settler and moderate Aboriginal politicians. The fact is that every major “victory,” concession, or negotiation in the history of Canadian-Indigenous relations has come as a result of some form of direct action, often led by Indigenous women (pp. 167-168).

There has also been concern that protests or blockades are too disruptive or alienating for other Canadians, and that this “sets our cause back.” This is where Coulthard’s analysis really hits home. Decolonization is messy, disruptive, and necessarily uncomfortable for everyone. To quote Tuck and Yang (2012), “decolonization is not a metaphor.” Reconciliation as envisioned by and within the parameters of the Canadian state, while being minimally disruptive, merely allows for business to carry on as usual. This is not what Coulthard is talking about. In order for things to be made right for Indigenous peoples, a new relationship will require a massive transformation of political, legal, cultural, social, and economic orders. More often than not, this requires Indigenous bodies on the land, protecting sacred spaces, and demanding and living alternatives.

Thesis #2: Capitalism, No More!

Capitalism has become so normalized, that to speak of a need for alternatives is often met with incredulity, but Red Skin, White Masks reminds us of its destructive and insatiable nature. There is no indigenizing capitalism. It is inherently predatory and exploitative. And yet there are some within Native academia that consider this very possibility. David Newhouse’s “capitalism with a red face” (2000), Duane Champagne’s “tribal capitalism” (2004), and Robert Miller’s “reservation capitalism” (2013) come to mind. There is also the influential Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development and many aspects of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, as well as the rhetoric of economic development that emanates from most Aboriginal leaders in Canada today. Not everyone has bought in though. Coulthard’s book speaks to those of us who believe that a revival of traditional Indigenous practices and the creation of non-exploitative alternatives must be a part of our decolonization.

Red Skin, White Masks helps us understand both the structural and cultural attachments to capitalism. Generations have been raised under the colonial gaze. We have been constantly told
that our traditional ways of living and our ancestors were under-developed, backward, and superstitious. Some even go so far to say that it is our Neolithic brains that are holding us back (Widdowson and Howard, 2008). Out of this crushing cloak of inferiority, we have tried to prove that we could be just as good as the colonizers. The colonial language of reconciliation, recognition, land claims, and Aboriginal law has shaped our words and our thoughts, and consequently, certain Indigenous responsibilities have been forgotten or ignored. But not everyone has forgotten. Indigenous peoples still resist with protests and blockades. If Idle No More taught us anything, it was that the Indigenous spirit of resistance and resurgence has not been extinguished. But, what comes next?

Coulthard asks, “How might we move beyond a resurgent Indigenous politics that seeks to inhibit the destructive effects of capital to one that strives to create Indigenous alternatives to it (p. 170, emphasis in original)? This might, arguably, be the hardest part of decolonization. We are so thoroughly immersed in capitalist modes of production that it becomes almost impossible to see or imagine alternatives. We tend to become more sensitive to the destructive nature of capitalism when a pipeline, or a mine, or a fish farm directly threatens a place we love. But, with so many of us living away from our homelands, these threats become easier to ignore and harder to fight, which is why Coulthard reminds us that we must, “continue to assert our presence on all of our territories” (p. 172). Exploring Indigenous economic alternatives can reconnect us to our homelands as we seek to live out relationships of respect and reciprocity that are free from dependence on the state and capitalist enterprises. Coulthard points out that land is not only important in a material sense but also that “Indigenous anticolonialism” is “deeply informed by what the land as system of reciprocal relations and obligations can teach us about living our lives in relation to one another and the natural world in nondominating and nonexploitative terms” (p. 13, emphasis in original). Living in non-capitalist ways demands that we break down the barriers of our segmented existences and that we work to create more consistency in all aspects of our lives. It might still be hard for people to imagine, but, “For Indigenous nations to live, capitalism must die. And for capitalism to die, we must actively participate in the construction of Indigenous alternatives to it” (p. 173).

**Thesis #3: Dispossession and Indigenous sovereignty in the city**

More than half of Indigenous people live in the city (p. 173). Amongst my father’s people, the Nuu-chah-nulth, the number is closer to two-thirds, and in some places it is even higher. Despite being ‘urban’ myself, I must admit to not having thought much about urban Indigenous resurgence other than the need to return home in some form or another. As Coulthard reminds us, this issue is more complicated than that, however. There are many reasons why we live in the city. In some cases people move for school or work. Some have been kicked out, relating to issues of Indian status. Some are simply curious. And, in some cases, the city came to them. I think it is safe to say that every major Canadian city was either a home to Indigenous people or an important gathering place. We cannot ignore urban Indigenous realities.
In the past, I have resisted the idea of urban self-government, because I have been unable to let go of the fact that we all have a homeland and, as Coulthard reminds us, “Access to land is essential” (p. 176). But, for many reasons, we do not always all have a place to call home; this should not preclude one from living an Indigenous life in the city, with a little creativity. How would it look if we recognized and respected local Indigenous nations in a material sense, recognizing cities as existing on Indigenous land, with Indigenous laws that had to be recognized by Indigenous and settler peoples alike? But Indigenous land continues to be erased and threatened in our cities. Coulthard writes, “Through gentrification, Native spaces in the city are now being treated as *urbs nullius* – urban space void of Indigenous sovereign presence” (p. 176). This has been an ongoing battle in the Vancouver Downtown Eastside for generations and witnessed recently in the Indigenous homeless encampment in Oppenheimer Park that gave the City of Vancouver an eviction notice this past summer. Coulthard states, “All of this is to say that the efficacy of Indigenous resurgence hinges on its ability to address the interrelated systems of dispossession that shape Indigenous peoples’ experiences in both urban and land-based settings” (p. 176).

**Thesis #4: Gender justice and decolonization**

True Indigenous resurgence needs Indigenous feminism. This has been hotly debated in “Indian Country” since it was called “women’s lib,” but there is no doubt for this author that for Indigenous resurgence to be genuine and lasting, it must include a feminist analysis. Coulthard quotes Anishinaabe scholar Dory Nason who writes, “that the boundless love that Indigenous women have for their families, their lands, their nations, and themselves as Indigenous people,” which has inspired others to, “resist and protest, to teach and to inspire,” has also made them targets of “epidemic levels of violence” (pp. 176-177). Citing Bourdieu, Coulthard points out that this violence is systemic and symbolic. The latter, “is the subjectifying form of violence that renders the crushing materiality of systemic violence invisible, appear natural, acceptable” (p. 177). This is a problem both in settler society and in Indigenous communities.

And what of the role of Indigenous men in this? I will not suppose to be prescriptive and neither is Coulthard, but there are stern warnings to heed and new directions to consider. First, the rhetoric of “protecting our women” is paternalistic and patriarchal (p. 178). Protecting our women, in addition to being paternalistic and patriarchal, is also a platitude. Not hurting Indigenous women, symbolically, systemically, or otherwise must be a priority in our decolonization efforts. Native men can begin by stopping the perpetuation of symbolic and community violence that too often gets brushed off as joking or inconsequential to the ‘high politics’ of self-government negotiations. Coulthard concludes that violence must be stopped, “in our daily relationships and practices in the home, workplaces, band offices, governance institutions, and, crucially, in our practices of cultural resurgence. Until this happens we have reconciled ourselves with defeat” (p. 178, *emphasis* in original). I appreciate the stressing of a critical feminist approach when it comes to cultural resurgence; too often patriarchal relations are
justified on the grounds of “traditional culture.” Much more work is required in this area, and not on the periphery, but at the centre of our decolonizing efforts.

**Thesis #5: Beyond the nation-state**

A respected Kanien'kehá:ka scholar once told me, “every movement gets co-opted.” This was profoundly disappointing for me to hear at the time but upon further reflection, an important realization as well. We must remain vigilant. Coulthard reminds us that we must continually rekindle our self-reflection, skepticism, and caution when engaging the settler state (p. 179). Many leaders and scholars preach the importance of peace and engagement with the Canadian state, having forgotten how we have collectively arrived at the negotiation tables in the first place, through resistance and conflict. As Wolfe reminds us, settler-colonialism is not an event but a structure. It remains voracious and unyielding. Therefore, we must continue to work toward, “a resurgent politics of recognition that seeks to practice decolonial, gender-emancipatory, and economically nonexploitative alternative structures of law and sovereign authority grounded on a critical refashioning of the best of Indigenous legal and political traditions” (p. 179). Coulthard says that these cannot be achieved through present settler-state mechanisms that are designed to deny the very things we seek to achieve, protect, and perpetuate.

Let us not delude ourselves; what Coulthard proposes here is completely beyond reason. Direct action? Bringing down capitalism? Decolonizing the city? Gendered justice? And, now, non-statist engagement? In *This is Not a Peace Pipe*, Anishinaabe scholar Dale Turner (2006) calls for more engagement with the state, albeit very carefully. Coulthard counters, “over the last forty years Indigenous peoples have become incredibly skilled at participating in the Canadian legal and political practices…however, our efforts to engage these discursive and institutional spaces to secure recognition of our rights have not only failed, but have instead served to subtly reproduce the forms of racist, sexist, economic, and political configurations of power that we initially sought, through our engagements and negotiations with the state, to challenge” (p. 179). If we are to survive in ways that our ancestors would recognize and respect, we must forge non-statist solutions that not only resist settler colonialism, but also resurge Indigenous alternatives that go beyond the state and its reasonability.

**Conclusion**

In the foreword, Taiaiake Alfred writes, “This book is a profound critique of contemporary colonialism, and a clear vision of Indigenous resurgence, and a serious contribution to the literature of freedom” (p. xi). I agree. I appreciate the in-depth understanding that Coulthard has of settler-colonialism and the politics of recognition in Canada, and his intervention into these discourses is a vital wake up call. I also appreciate his concluding thoughts on Idle No More and his ‘Five Theses on Indigenous Resurgence and Decolonization’. So-called radicals are often
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challenged to produce utopic solutions and alternatives in response to their critiques and, in *Red Skin, White Masks*, Coulthard points to many areas where we might imagine and enact alternatives economically, politically, socially, and culturally. He joins Leanne Simpson, Taiaiake Alfred and others in a small but growing canon of resurgent Indigenous literature that promises to keep disrupting colonial lines of power and demanding a better future for all Indigenous peoples, a future rooted in relationships of respect and reciprocity.

**References**


