
On 11 December 2012, in a teepee in the shadow of the Canadian Parliament, Theresa Spence, the chief of Attawapiskat First Nation, began a hunger strike. With her protest, she sought to focus public attention on issues of concern to Indigenous peoples in Canada, including recent federal legislative changes, and support an emerging Indigenous rights movement called Idle No More. The poverty, substandard housing, and overcrowding of Attawapiskat stood in marked contrast to the wealth flowing from their traditional territories. Upstream from Attawapiskat, De Beers’ Victor Diamond Mine produced 826,000 carats of diamonds in 2010, worth an approximate US$210,000,000.¹ To further facilitate such development, in 2012 the Canadian government introduced a pair of omnibus bills, removing environmental protections and regulatory hurdles that impeded resource extraction. The juxtaposition of government priorities and the desperate conditions in Indigenous communities incited Indigenous political resurgence. A group of women on the prairies began organizing local teach-ins about the impact of the omnibus bills for Indigenous peoples, publicizing events under the hashtag #idlenomore. The message resonated and through the winter of 2012-2013, the call for action became a movement. Indigenous peoples across the country took part in rallies and marches, flash

¹ These production figures for the Victor mine are taken from the De Beers’ 2010 Report to Society, *Canada: Maximizing the Value and Life of the Resource*. The approximation is extrapolated from the company’s 2010 total net receipts from the sale of 1,661,000 carats to the Diamond Trading Company of US$446,020,000.
mobs in malls and intersections, and blockades of highways and rail lines (Kino-nda-niimi Collective 2014).

This is the political backdrop for the release of Glen Coulthard’s first book, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition*. It is a timely book, resonant with the frustration of Indigenous communities who have pursued formal political negotiations with the Canadian settler colonial state for decades without meaningful change. While Coulthard concludes the text with a discussion of Idle No More, his central contribution is not describing the emergence of a new Indigenous movement, but rather explaining why this movement’s turn to towards more militant strategies of resistance is appropriate and necessary. Through the book, Coulthard makes three arguments. First, settler colonialism can be effectively understood as governed by a drive to enact ongoing forms of primitive accumulation, maintaining and extending the dispossession of Indigenous lands. Second, efforts to secure state recognition of Indigenous peoples inevitably flounder as the settler state is structurally founded on this dispossession of Indigenous lands and the concomitant delimitation of Indigenous self-governing authority. Third, in developing a counter to colonial politics and a vision of a better world, Indigenous traditions remain a vital source of knowledge for alternative frameworks for orienting to the land.

The book is premised on an understanding of settler colonialism as a project of ongoing dispossession. Coulthard defines the colonial relationship as one in which power “has been structured into a relatively secure or sedimented set of hierarchical social relations that continue to facilitate the dispossession of Indigenous peoples of their lands and self-determining authority” (p.7). Thinking through dispossession, Coulthard seeks to bring into dialogue Marxism and Indigenous studies. Three decades ago, Ward Churchill
(1983) described the rift between the (white) universal aspirations of Marxism and the particular demands of Indigenous peoples. While Marxism focused on the need for a global revolution to progress beyond the relations of capital, Indigenous politics focused on remedying territorial displacement through the restitution of dispossessed lands. Marxist and Indigenous political projects have continued to be delineated by their distinct temporal frames, respectively looking towards the future and towards the past, and geographic orientations, respectively directed towards global change and the restitution of Indigenous jurisdiction over discrete territories. Coulthard attempts to broker a form of rapprochement between these two camps of critical scholarship and activism though a retheorization of the concept of primitive accumulation.

Specifically, Coulthard draws together the work of Karl Marx (1990) and Patrick Wolfe (2006) to develop an analysis of the ongoing role of primitive accumulation in settler colonialism. Within Marx’s critique of political economy, primitive accumulation referred to the violent historical process through which people were first separated from their means of production and subsequently forced to sell their labour power to survive. However, as Wolfe argues, settler colonialism centred on the question of securing Indigenous lands rather than Indigenous labour. Settler colonialism sought to displace Indigenous societies from the land to provide a territorial foundation for the development of settler society. Within this project of development, Indigenous labour was superfluous. Thus, Coulthard argues that if we are to understand dispossession in the colonies, we must conceptually shift our critical inquiries “from an emphasis on the capital relation to the colonial relation” (p.10). For Coulthard, this means focusing on the dynamics of dispossession that displace Indigenous peoples from the land, enabling a reterritorialization of space in association with the construction and maintenance of the
settler political economy. Centring our analytical focus on the colonial relation requires shifting frames from Marx’s account of the historical emergence of capitalism to an understanding of the enduring nature of settler colonialism.

Recognizing that land is the essential, concrete foundation of settler colonialism, Coulthard issues three injunctions regarding how Marx’s concept of primitive accumulation should be repurposed to understand the dynamic of dispossession in settler colonial regimes. First, he suggests that the thesis of primitive accumulation must be stripped of its rigid temporal character. Processes of land privatization represent not simply the historical origins of capitalism but remain an enduring practice that continues to structure colonial, capitalist relations in the present. Second, Coulthard problematizes Marx’s developmentalist orientation, in which Marx depicted primitive accumulation not simply as the precursor to capitalism but as “a historically inevitable process that would ultimately have a beneficial effect on those violently drawn into the capitalist circuit” (p.10). Without disputing the import of processes of primitive accumulation as the condition of possibility for the capitalist mode of production, Coulthard challenges the notion that the only path forward is through capitalism. Rather, Coulthard holds that Indigenous modes of life remain central to the production of critical consciousness and articulation of other-than-capitalist lifeways. Finally, Coulthard suggests that primitive accumulation must be understood as incorporating other means of subjugation beyond express violence. Instead, he suggests that in settler states such as Canada, “state violence no longer constitutes the regulative norm governing the process of colonial dispossession” (p.15). Coulthard argues that regimes of dispossession in contemporary settler colonialism are veiled by the incorporation of the colonized within circumscribed processes of recognition and accommodation. To understand the processes that normalize
dispossession among Indigenous populations and render it consensual, Coulthard argues that we must develop an analysis of subjective effects of colonialism.

Coulthard dedicates the majority of *Red Skin, White Masks* to an analysis of the subjective dynamics of Indigenous peoples’ relationship to settler colonialism. He makes the case that Indigenous efforts to gain recognition within the existing order necessarily fail to achieve meaningful justice because they remain premised on the preservation of the settler colonial political economy. Coulthard’s intervention thus complements recent critiques of settler state recognition as serving to perpetuate the colonial order, such as Elizabeth Povinelli’s (2002) *The Cunning of Recognition* and Damien Short’s (2008) *Reconciliation and Colonial Power*. Povinelli has interrogated how the incarceration of Indigeneity in an impossible ideal of authentic traditions within settler discourse works to “defuse struggles for liberation waged against the modern liberal state and recuperate these struggles as moments in which the future of the nation and its core institutions and values are ensured rather than shaken” (2002: 29). Similarly, Short argues that reconciliation processes in Australia have “exhibited a subtle yet pervasive nation building agenda that appeared to offer ‘post-colonial’ legitimacy via the ‘inclusion’ of previously excluded Aboriginal peoples, but which actually served to weaken Aboriginal claims” (2008: 7). Coulthard contributes to and extends the critique of state recognition, emphasizing the necessity of confrontation. Where Povinelli lauds Indigenous peoples’ strategic negotiations of the slippages and fractures within colonial discourse, and Short argues for the constitution of a multinational liberalism in which settler society enters a treaty confederacy with Indigenous peoples, Coulthard argues that the foundation of settler society in the dispossession of Indigenous peoples necessitates direct confrontation to enable Indigenous peoples to subjectively decolonize.
Developing the argument that recognition of colonized peoples cannot be granted but must be won through struggle, Coulthard turns to Franz Fanon. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon (2008) rebuts the Hegelian conceptualization of mutual recognition, dismantling the myth of reciprocity between Master and Slave. For Hegel, these subjects’ dialectical juxtaposition enables each to obtain consciousness of the self against the foil of the other, meaning that there is a mutual interdependence between Master and Slave. However, for Fanon, Hegelian frames do not hold in the colonial context, where there can be no true reciprocity between Master and Slave—colonizer and colonized—because the former always sets the terms of the latter’s recognition. Any offer of mutual recognition in the colonial context is thus “profoundly asymmetrical and nonreciprocal” (p.25), and continually distorts the meaning of colonized subjectivity. Fanon argues that colonized subjects can only achieve self-definition by struggling against (and ultimately overthrowing) colonial regimes.

In Coulthard’s reading, Fanon is a prophylactic against the offers of state recognition for Indigenous peoples. He applies Fanon’s analysis to interrogate the colonial function of the contemporary politics of recognition, finding that colonial power works to define the horizon of recognition. For example, in a chapter on Dene land claims in the Arctic, Coulthard demonstrates how negotiations with the Canadian government transformed traditional reciprocal Dene relationships with the land into rights to participate in the exploitation of the land as a resource. When Indigenous peoples quest for forms of justice sanctioned by colonial authorities, they subjugate themselves to circumscribed categories of colonial reason. The effect is insidious, as colonized peoples learn to internalize colonial frames. Once such frames become normalized, the original brutality of primitive accumulation morphs into a regime of subjectification that imparts a
seeming consensuality to the reproduction of colonial hierarchies. To breach the subjective effects of settler colonialism, colonized peoples must eschew the politics of mutual recognition and instead develop knowledge of self through struggle. Thus, Coulthard eschews negotiation with the settler state and calls instead for confronting colonial authorities through an Indigenous political resurgence in which increased militancy plays a central role.

However, in theorizing Indigenous political resurgence, Coulthard departs from and challenges Fanon’s investment in a progressive dialectical teleology that fails to accord sufficient respect to the role of tradition in anti-colonial struggle. Coulthard particularly charges that Fanon recycles Sartrean dialectics in his approach to concepts of tradition invoked by the Négritude movement. Addressing the question of the political status of Jewish and black subjects, respectively in Anti-Semite and Jew (1995) and “Black Orpheus” (1964), Sartre had posited that the valorization of racialized difference represented the negative phase in the dialectic, a racial identity that must be articulated against white supremacy to seed the destruction of racial categories and emergence of a post-racial society. Coulthard reads Fanon as modifying but ultimately upholding the Sartrean schema. Thus, Fanon recognized that the valorization of African traditions played an important a therapeutic and mobilizing role in anti-colonial struggle–serving to counter colonial constructions of colonized peoples as lacking history or culture. However, for Fanon, the invocation of tradition had only transitional utility in the revolutionary project. Appeals to tradition worked as but a first step in a movement to abolish the structural relations of colonialism, as Fanon eschewed the confinement of revolutionary ends to a project of ethnonationalist revival. For Coulthard, this conceptualization repeated Sartre’s developmentalist frames.
Coulthard argues that Fanon’s utility to understanding contemporary Indigenous struggle finds its limit in his instrumental approach to tradition. Simply expressed, Fanon’s desire to transcend ethnonational identity overlaps with the long-standing colonial aspiration to displace Indigenous political subjects. Coulthard thus suggests that in his dialectical approach to history, Fanon was uncritically repeating colonial constructions that placed Indigeneity in the past and disappeared Indigenous peoples from the future. This teleological approach not only echoed colonial temporal frames, it crucially neglected the importance of Indigenous traditions as potential models for an alternative society to capitalism. In contrast to Fanon’s circumscribed acceptance of tradition as merely transitional in its utility, Coulthard is clear in his advocacy of Indigenous traditions as both a means and ends to struggle.

Instead of a developmentalist imagination of revolution, Coulthard presents the idea of resurgence, a critical return to the Indigenous political and economic traditions that colonialism sought to displace. Coulthard situates this call for Indigenous resurgence amid the arguments of recent radical Indigenous scholarship, including Taiaiake Alfred’s (1999) *Peace, Power, Righteousness* and Leanne Simpson’s (2011) *Dancing on Our Turtle’s Back*. Specifically, Coulthard argues that a resurgence of Indigenous traditions can play an important role in both resisting the subjective politics of colonialism and articulating alternatives to colonial social relations. The enactment of Indigenous traditions represent for Coulthard an effective means to counter to the devaluation of Indigenous peoples in settler colonial discourse. But they are also prefigurative of the political and economic relations that Indigenous resurgence aims to emplace as an alternative to capitalism.
For all the importance of Coulthard’s overall arguments, *Red Skin, White Masks* is not a text without flaws. The chapters are excessively discrete, and at times the relation between the argument in a chapter and the book as a whole remains somewhat oblique. The chapter on land claims seems to turn away from the book’s larger argument, instead challenging the Left materialist assertion that a focus on the politics of recognition necessarily implies a displacement of economic questions with cultural ones. Chapter 3, which looks at the gendered politics of self-government, is even more pronouncedly disjointed from the larger project of the book. In that chapter, Coulthard demonstrates the insufficiency of feminist anti-essentialist critiques of the discrimination of women in determinations of Indigenous community membership. Coulthard agrees that “certain segments of the male Native elite have problematically seized on the language of cultural incommensurability, tradition, and self-preservation” (p.94) to rationalize the maintenance of discriminatory practice; however, he convincingly argues that this position fails to address the historical origins of gender discrimination in membership determination in colonial statute, and legitimates the authority of the settler colonial state as arbiter in contests over gender rights. While this chapter highlights how processes of state recognition work to normalize the settler colonial state, the literature and debates cited seem tangential to the central line of argument in *Red Skin, White Masks*. Moreover, gender analysis is a thread that could have been more productively woven through the rest of the book. For instance, how does gender articulate with processes of accumulation or the broader politics of recognition in settler colonialism? In short, the self-contained organization of the chapters in *Red Skin, White Masks* impairs the coherency of the book as a whole and acts to limit its analytical contributions.
I also question whether Coulthard may be too quickly dismissing Fanon as
harbouring residual colonial frames regarding tradition. I believe that we need to think
carefully about the relevance of Fanon’s thinking about tradition to understanding both
post-colonial states and Indigenous peoples within settler colonial states. Looking at
Algeria, Fanon could be critiqued for underestimating the continuing power of traditional
forms of identification—particularly, miscalculating the importance of Islam—and his
presumption of a post-revolutionary transcendence of tradition appear naïve. However, if
we read Fanon’s reticence to grant too great a role to traditional forms in defining the
post-colonial future not as a false prophecy but as a political caution, Fanon’s hesitancy
to endorse a return to traditional values seem sage. New (or old) regulative ideals are
easily established, circumscribing legitimate forms of political life and constituting new
forms of marginalization. Fanon’s ambivalence to tradition reflects very real concerns as
to the effects of harnessing decolonizing state apparatuses to traditionalists’ conceits. On
this basis, I would defend Fanon’s approach to tradition within the context of Third World
liberation struggles.

The application of Fanon to settler colonial contexts needs to be carefully
considered. Coulthard makes substantial contributions to articulating the need to think
about tradition differently in the context of Indigenous peoples’ relationships to settler
colonialism, clearly articulating the racist assumptions behind the notion that the progress
of history will erase the existence of Indigenous peoples. Moreover, he demonstrates the
genocidal apologetics of using the myth of progress to justify the continuation of
processes of colonial dispossession. However, in his advocacy of a return to tradition,
Coulthard too simply juxtaposes Indigenous traditions and colonialism and understates
the extent to which African colonial experiences could inform understanding of the
multifaceted and malleable relationship between Indigenous traditions and colonialism. As Mahmood Mamdani (2012) has documented with respect to the history of British colonialism in Africa, colonialism has worked not simply by trying to integrate colonized peoples into European political traditions, but also through the management of difference. Indigenous traditions have thus at various points served as a means to extend colonial agendas. Examining the co-optation of tradition by colonial or fundamentalist agendas, and the participation of traditional authorities in oppressive structures of rule, raises a number of important questions going forward. How do Indigenous movements and their supporters articulate the importance of a return to traditional values without accepting the co-optation of tradition by either colonial or conservative fundamentalist agendas? Moreover, as the definition of Indigenous peoples as traditional and not modern has been a lasting colonial strategy, how do activists refuse these colonial temporal frames while articulating a need to return to tradition? These questions remain open and undoubtedly will be an issue of ongoing debate not only within academic circles but also among Indigenous communities and activists.

To develop answers to these questions and anti-colonial strategies capable of countering the global workings modern empire, we must establish points of dialogue between different anti-colonial and anti-imperial struggles. As Taiaiake Alfred (2005) raises in Wasáse (2005), the problem of settler colonialism is not one that is internal to Indigenous communities and traditions but one that has been imposed upon said peoples. Settler colonialism has reshaped the context of Indigenous lives and the ways in which Indigenous peoples relate to other people both within Canada and across the globe. While Indigenous traditions include a history of struggle in resistance to colonialism, theorizing resistance requires an openness to thinking through how Indigenous struggles articulate
with the struggles of other colonized and racialized peoples. In part, my excitement about Coulthard’s book derives from the importance of drawing analytical connections between different anti-colonial struggles, linking theories based in struggles within Africa and the African-diaspora to an understanding of the relationship between colonialism and Indigenous peoples. However, Coulthard never addresses directly the value of establishing dialogue between different anti-colonial projects. This seems like an ironic gap in *Red Skin, White Masks* because the book itself is such strong evidence of the fruitfulness of bringing different kinds of anti-colonial struggle into dialogue.

Reading *Red Skin, White Masks*, I often found myself frustrated by Coulthard’s hesitancy to address the broader contribution of his work. This was particularly the case with the conclusion of the book. In it, Coulthard articulates a bold series of theses to inform Indigenous resistance. The list is provocative—including the necessity of direct action, anti-capitalism, gender justice, urban Indigenous sovereignty, and transcendence of the nation-state. Although some of these theses build upon the arguments in the book, a number are either new and take the argument in different directions from the main thesis of *Red Skin, White Masks*. For instance, urban Indigenous sovereignty is a concept unmentioned before the conclusion. Similarly, the emphasis on anti-capitalism in the conclusion did not resonate with the explicit focus on the colonial relation to the exclusion of the capital relation in the rest of the book. Only the first and the final theses, on the need for direct action and the need to theorize beyond the nation-state, reflected the central preoccupations of the book, and even here, the questions are placed within a different register than that which punctuates the majority of the text. Instead of addressing the central questions the book asked—how colonial rule is sustained through the processes of state recognition and accommodation of Indigenous peoples, and why
militant resistance is necessary for the subjective process of Indigenous decolonization—the conclusion flagged a series of questions the book had not substantively engaged: what are the modalities of effective resistance in terms of achieving political change; how is the capital relation articulated with the colonial relation; how does an analysis of primitive accumulation and Indigenous resurgence relate to processes of inner-city gentrification. While I think Coulthard’s final theses provide a strong program for future study and activism, they did not effectively integrate the lessons of the book or help situate its broader contribution.

It is a strange praise to say that the fault of a book is that it failed to really announce the strength of the contribution it was making. Yet my biggest complaint about Red Skin, White Masks is that it understates itself. It brings Marxism into dialogue with Indigenous studies; it demonstrates the potential for anti-colonial theorizing across continents and contexts of struggle; it demonstrates how thinking about settler colonialism brings forward necessary revisions to how we think about Marx and Fanon; and it brings attention to the need for radical theory to start thinking about the politics of Indigenous resurgence. On this basis, it is a crucial text for the development of not just radical Indigenous thought but radical thought more generally.

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References
