

Violence, Law and the Everyday Politics of Recognition
By Sarah Hunt
Comments on Glen Coulthard's *Red Skin, White Masks*
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Gilakas'la. Thank you to my friend and colleague Glen Coulthard for inviting me to speak alongside such fantastic panelists today to provide comments on his important book.

My own political consciousness as an active, self-determined Kwagiulth woman was set ablaze in the year 1992 the first time I heard the song “Killing in the Name” by Rage Against the Machine. Already informed about colonial injustices facing my Kwakwaka’wakw community and our coastal neighbors, listening to this song about racism and police brutality inspired me with the fury to take action. Reading *Red Skin, White Masks* left me with this same sense of productive anger, as Glen skillfully shows us the truly sinister, self-serving nature of state recognition in this era of reconciliation. He gives us permission to express what he says is “an entirely appropriate manifestation of our *resentment*: a politicized expression of Indigenous anger and outrage directed at structural and symbolic violence that still structures our lives, our relations with others, and our relationship with land” (p109). Using various tools – the political theory of Franz Fanon, a historical account of the shifting tactics used in Dene land struggles, and those of Indigenous women to seek equity from under the oppressive *Indian Act* – Glen convincingly and movingly demonstrates the ways in which seeking freedom through technicalities of recognition reinscribes our colonial subjectivity.

As Glen recounts the history of Dene land struggles, we can see not only a growing unwillingness to engage in state apparatuses that only mask ongoing settler colonial dispossession, we also see Glen and other Dene people’s deep love for Dene

territories – the land, ancestors, spirits, wisdom and human and non-human relations of that territory – something that underlies the entire project of the book. This, to me, is why the book and the broader political project it advocates, is so powerful. It fosters an impulse toward action that is fueled as much by love as it is by rage. Glen is an activist and academic who is truly oriented to responsibilities which emerge from the law or teachings of his people – something he theorizes as ‘grounded normativity,’ or “modalities of Indigenous land-connected practices and longstanding experiential knowledge that inform and structure our ethical engagements with the world and our relationships with human and nonhuman others over time” (p13).

This is one of the core teachings of resurgence politics that emerges in the book: Indigeneity is not just an ideology but something which must be lived, embodied, felt, materialized. The grounded theory in the book wraps us in an affective decolonial terrain that fosters a commitment to mobilize ourselves. Glen states that resurgence is at its core a prefigurative politics –the methods of decolonization prefigure its aims.

In the final chapter of the book, we are guided to put our resurgent efforts into 5 key areas: direct action, ending capitalism, decolonizing Indigenous urbanism, gender justice and thinking beyond the nation state. To me, these theses demonstrate that Glen is someone who listens to his comrades, as he likes to call us – he listens to the women, the elders, the knowledge keepers who instruct him. This is significant.

Now it’s because Glen is someone who takes his responsibilities to his comrades seriously that I want to now discuss what, for me, was a core tension in the book. Glen’s analysis is founded in careful and challenging engagements with the political theory of Franz Fanon, Karl Marx, and Taiaiake Alfred, while he later adds the voices of Leanne

Simpson, Patricia Monture, and a more diverse group of Indigenous theorists (‘more diverse,’ meaning not all men). As I’ve said before¹, this initial theoretical foundation shapes the key concepts through which settler colonial power relations are imagined, such as the concept of state violence. Glen asks “what are we to make of contexts where state violence no longer constitutes the regulative norm governing the process of colonial dispossession, as appears to be the case in ostensibly tolerant, multinational, liberal settler polities such as Canada” (p15). The implications of this conceptualization of violence are apparent in the encouragement in the previous quote to direct our resentment at *structural and symbolic violence*, not material, everyday violence. And this is where the tension arises for me – the genealogy of political thinkers who frame his analysis have developed masculinist conceptualizations of what is politically significant.

The book’s citational politics² gives rise to a focus on what are considered macro-scale political struggles, while micro-scale concerns are added later. In his five theses of resurgence, Glen rightfully calls for Indigenous men to stop being violent toward Indigenous women as a way of achieving gender justice, yet I fear this can be taken as little more than a closing gesture. I don’t see this thesis being taken up by political theorists as they engage with the book – a result, I think, of not being foundational to the book’s overall theoretical framework.

Further, in a really wonderful interview about the book, called “Land is a Relationship”, Glen was asked about the nature of state engagement -- how we determine

¹ October 22, 2014 book launch for *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition*. SFU Woodward, Vancouver BC. <http://www.sfu.ca/video-library/video/860/view.html>

² For more on the politics of citation as a way of “reproducing the world around certain bodies” see ‘Making Feminist Points’ by Sarah Ahmed: <http://feministkilljoys.com/2013/09/11/making-feminist-points/>

when to turn toward the state as a short-term tactic, which he admits is necessary at times because of its immense power. He said “A native mother who has to call the cops to get an abuser out of her house and leadership negotiating land surrender under the current comprehensive claims process are two different scenarios; there is a difference in the character of violence that is being reproduced. When I speak about decolonizing our relationships with the state I am mainly gesturing towards the macropolitics of land negotiations, and our need to start vacating these fields and instead putting our efforts in bottom-up nation-building and land defence”. Now, I would agree that there is a different temporality to strategically calling the cops when your life is in immanent danger than to engaging with state representatives in slow moving land claims processes, but I would argue that, in fact, the violences being reproduced in these two state engagements are integrally connected. Just as reconciliation discourse requires us to create a *temporal* divide between past wrongs and current colonial realities, *this* framing creates a *scalar* division which positions everyday legal and state violence out of view. Because in order to buy into the notion that state violence “no longer constitutes the regulative norm of settler colonialism”, we have to view gendered violence, police brutality, carcerality of everyday life, deaths of kids in care and willful negligence of our communities as not politically significant.

The question of what is considered ‘the political realm’ has, of course, been discussed at great lengths by critical scholars in diverse fields. Political geographer Sally Marston (2003) writes “despite our abstract appreciation for the complex relationship between agency and structure in the making of social and political life, agency continues to get short shrift in political geography as large structural forces—the state, the economy

and capital—continue to occupy center stage” (p634) Marston goes on to push for political geographers take seriously the ways in which the micro scale of the household and the macro scale of the nation-state, are interdependent and co-productive.

From an Indigenous perspective, though, we might also consider that the macro/micro divide is, in fact, something that emerges from heteropatriarchial colonial epistemologies and is not in line with Indigenous ways of being in the world. Cherokee scholar Jeff Corntassel has said, “One of our biggest enemies is compartmentalization, as shape-shifting colonial entities attempt to sever our relationship to the natural world and define the terrain of struggle. Policy-makers who frame new government initiatives as ‘economic development’ miss the larger connections embedded within Indigenous economies linking homelands, culture and communities” (in Smith 2013).

Looking to Indigenous legal principles, it becomes clear that the teachings which guide the defense of our territories are interrelated with those used to defend our homes, our kinship networks and our own wellbeing. I would suggest that Glen’s concept of grounded normativity, when taken to its full extension, *requires* us to challenge this distinction being made between the nature of state violence in the homes of a woman being beaten and in negotiations for land.

Rather than dividing our energies between macro and micro scales of political change, I think it is more in line with traditional wisdom to consider the roles and responsibilities we take up individually and collectively as we move through and across various political spaces. Nuu-Chah-Nulth warrior, activist and educator Chaw-win-is has told me³ that as coastal people, we come into this world holding a war club in one hand

³ Chaw-win-is. May 2015. Personal conversation and correspondence.

and a fishing weir in the other. It's up to you (settlers and Indigenous people from other nations) to decide which one we will use. We can feed our neighbors, in all its multiplicity of meanings, or war with them, depending on how we are approached. Each of us, then, has the tools and responsibilities to focus internally on physical and spiritual sustenance of our relations and to focusing externally as we defend our community. Sometimes we move between these roles, or take up different tools at different moments, but the orientation toward the territorial teachings and responsibilities remains.

When I asked Chaw-win about legal principles for dealing with interpersonal conflict, she told me coastal laws were very clear when it came to crossing boundaries of *all* kinds. She said: "We basically knew how to let each other carry on our business because we had pretty strict boundaries. You come in to this part and your head gets cut off, that's basically it. And we might think of that as violent now but if we know the expectations and we're clear about who we are and who we are in relation to this community and that community, then nobody gets up to funny business" (in Hunt 2014).

Imagine if we had not lost the capacity to determine and enforce this jurisdictional power over our homelands *and* our bodies. If we started enforcing this now, I can tell you that there would be many chiefs, language speakers, cultural and political advocates who would lose their heads, because the version of resurgence we've been nurturing has allowed for cultural leaders to take up their roles on the 'political' front-lines even while violently preying on people at home. And we have left victims of violence at the whim of state actors who regularly demonstrate indifference or contempt for us, rather than building alternative mechanisms for dealing with interpersonal violence.

This is not true resurgence.

There should be no macro/micro political division here –our consciousness as legal and political actors must be formed both by looking inward toward the intimate spaces of our homes and communities as well as outward toward our engagement with systems of settler colonial power. These sites of resurgence and recognition are not separate, but unfold in the same spaces, within our territories, in relation to the same people, upon the same bodies⁴.

Given that we have generally not been nurturing options within Indigenous legal systems for defending our self-determination at personal and family scales, Indigenous women have instead had little choice but to appeal to police, the government and the Canadian public to recognize that we are being slaughtered. In doing so, we knowingly call on people who may be racist or indifferent, who may blame us, further victimize us, criminalize us, take away our kids and deepen state surveillance of our daily lives. I would suggest that we see the same rhetorics of recognition politics outlined powerfully in *Red Skin, White Masks* in relation to struggles for land mirrored in legal mechanisms like court cases and inquiries which ultimately call for increased state power, more resources for policing, while keeping Indigenous women in our place as victims who need to be ‘saved’. And even when ‘justice’ is served in Canadian legal terms, it is in a form which is unrecognizable to our ancestors. Because ‘justice’ doesn’t mean ending violence against us or humanizing us – it means a past-tense politics in which we only come to matter after we’ve been victimized. Our categorization as state-delineated ‘Indian’ subjects dispossessed of our self-determination remains untouched.

⁴ This is powerfully represented in the artwork of Erin Marie Koonsmo, particularly the piece ‘conquest’: <http://erinkoonsmo.blogspot.com/2011/06/conquest.html>

In my own research, I've found that in communities where the capacity *has* been fostered to prevent or respond to violence at a local level, Indigenous women would much rather use these systems instead of calling the cops. One Indigenous woman in a rural community said that when she caught a known sexual offender crawling in her daughter's window, she called her neighbors to take care of the situation because "the offender you know is better than the offender you don't know" (as told to me by Natalie Clark, in Hunt 2014). In this case, the offender you don't know is a cop who may or may not make the one-hour drive from town, might remove your kids as a result and might lock you up too. As another woman in a neighboring community said "If you really want the cops to show up, you'd be better off calling in a drug bust than a domestic assault – the police would take it more seriously" (as told to me by Linda Thomas, in Hunt 2014).

So while *Red Skin, White Masks* rightfully calls on us to *scale up* localized, resurgent land-based direct actions to produce a transformation in the colonial economy (p170) – these violent realities demand that we work in both directions, scaling resurgent actions down to the intimate level of our everyday relations at the same time. Grassroots organizers, primarily women and Two-Spirit people, have long been fostering change and activating Indigenous legal principles within our homes and communities. Yet this sphere is often seen as social in nature – the realm of women, not a politically important space. This must change.

Glen's five theses on Indigenous resurgence and decolonization provide us with an important impetus toward direct action. So what would happen if every time an Indigenous woman had her personal boundaries crossed without consent, we were moved to act in the same way as we've seen to the threat of a pipeline in our territories – the

nonconsensual crossing of territorial boundaries? We would see our chiefs and elders, the language speakers, children and networks of kin, all in our regalia, our allies and neighbors all across the generations show up outside the house of a woman who had been hurt to drum and sing her healing songs. What if we looked to the land for berries and to the ocean for fish and herring eggs and seaweed to help her body to heal? What if we put her within a circle of honor and respect to show her that we will not stand for this violence any longer. We would bring her food and song and story, we would truly protect her self-determination and to defend the boundaries of her body which had been trespassed and violated.

If we did this today, we would constantly be busy with this singular activity. That's the extent of violence today. But this would certainly show our dedication to take care of one another, as we hope to take care of our lands and responsibilities to our ancestors. I call on us to use *Red Skin, White Masks* as a jumping off point to imagine what else might be possible in the rejection of state recognition as we suture together the realms through which we move as political and legal actors, using our love and anger to resist state violence on *all* political fronts.

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