Interview with Glen Coulthard*

Alexander Reid Ross*

ARR: I would start by stating unequivocally that we in the governments of North America live in a colonial system established most visibly through the police state and counterinsurgency complexes.

GC: Yeah, for sure. I think that, in broad strokes, applies to both the US and Canada. This is kind of what I touch on in *Red Skin, White Masks*.[1] In Canada, the state's first response has tended to not be explicitly violent in nature – it tends to coopt movements. The effects have still been violent. When other institutional means are not able to manage Indigenous dissent, then the hammer comes down quite frequently and quite hard on Indigenous peoples who would resist it. That's why I focus on the way dissent becomes managed through symbolically violent forms of recognition, and if that doesn't shape indigenous peoples' identities towards white power, state capital, and male dominance then that's when the State will recourse to pure force.

ARR: So do you agree with Paulo Freiri's thesis that liberation is descriptive and oppression is prescriptive?

GC: Yeah, I've learned a lot from Freiri, he's part of the tradition that I'm engaging with in Fanon and Hegel and liberation, so I think there's a lot of truth in what he's saying.

ARR: So how is an Indigenous person or someone from a First Nation prescribed by this symbolic violence in Canada?

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GC: You're asking the way that symbolic violence operates in order to secure settler-colonial power here in relation to Indigenous peoples?

ARR: Right.

GC: It's a matter of producing within both settler society but also indigenous peoples the forms of colonial identity that unwittingly attach us to these forms of violence to the degree (and this is Fanon's insight) that we don't even see them as such, or know it's affect so we can endure it longer. So, I talk about it with regards to the politics of recognition, where recognition will be "negotiated" with indigenous peoples on terms that are determined within the parameters of the colonial state, its capitalist overproduction, its articulation of male dominance, and its racism, in ways that don't undermine those interests; yet at the end of the day, a lot of people who are in these negotiations for the recognition of their rights come out with the sense that justice has been delivered when really it's still within these very problematic power structures. So that's symbolic violence, and that's the way it operates. The forms of violence often go unseen and are accepted as such, as opposed to a more structural violence, which is always present in the background and shapes these relationships, and when symbolic violence doesn't do its work, that's when the hammer of the state comes down, the police come in, and the billy clubs come out.

ARR: Like, for example the Elsipogtog.

GC: Yes, that would be a perfect example. The forms of symbolic violence that have shaped indigenous peoples over in terms of the image of the colonizer were clearly not working with the Elsipogtog land defenders and water defenders and that's when they throw in the riot squads and the police to bring them in line with the interests of state capital, and so on, by pure force and not negotiation.

ARR: It was really that moment when the Royal Canadian Military Police showed up with sniper rifles and a full invasion camo-wearing commando squad to take out this relatively peaceable group of blockaders that the world saw how colonial this counterinsurgency is, and then documents started leaking out about surveillance of "Idle No More" groups.

GC: Yeah, everyone's got their files on them.

ARR: I seems to me quite impossible not to recognize this oppression, but why is it important for the Canadian government? Why can't they actually negotiate?

GC: To negotiate would mean to abandon two fundamental pillars of state sovereignty, not to mention colonial state sovereignty, and that would have to throw into question its economic interests, its commitment to capitalist forms of production. A lot of the articulations of indigenous claims, if not explicitly against, at least implicitly challenge the accumulation of capital – land and resources and so on – but then it would also have to challenge the unilateral assumption that the state is the sovereign authority here, it holds a monopoly on the use of violence, and what it says goes. Indigenous claims challenge that as being a fundamentally racist assumption built on this ancient narrative of *terra nullius* – that there was no one here when the colonists arrived, at least in the context of rights-bearing nations that would require recognition by the states that would eventually colonize these territories. So when that's the moral, legal, and political question that Indigenous nations if not explicitly then implicitly posit then it becomes a pretty difficult negotiation process. States don't do that.

ARR: We see some really intense internalized racism and fear even among radicals who actually get really reactive when decolonization is brought up; first they go straight to guilt, as though "this was 200 years ago, why am I still being blamed?" and second they say, "well fine, we'll give Indigenous people the land, and they will be the government, and we'll be oppressed by the Indigenous peoples." To me, it sounds like lunacy to present those attitudes, but would you say that this is the kind of internalization or subjection that we're subjected to in this kind of symbolic way?

GC: Yes, symbolic violence and how it shapes identity and understanding works on both sides. So that would be one side of the play there. I'll break it into the two examples you give. The second one is ridiculous, because that's never what Indigenous peoples have demanded. They don't want all their land back. It's often articulated historically in words and deeds as a relationship built on reciprocity

and sharing wherein not only both parties involved in the relationship but there were multiple relationships subject to the agreements, as flexible as they are, that we'd agreed to live together on this land. So it's actually a form of empowerment, rather than another form of domination.

You can look at it historically in terms of treaties of what Indigenous people said and asked for. The other important aspect, and this might be an important one for your readership is that the parties' relationships to treaty reciprocity are not only human, but they include other-than-human elements of Indigenous peoples so often referred to as Creation or whatever, so the relationships also have to take into account the intrinsic, innate interests that the land has for purposes of long-term sustainability over time. So it's quite a complex set of relationships and claims that are embedded in what Indigenous peoples so often ask for.

The first one, which is the guilt thing, [...] I have some different views on [the topic of] guilt. I think that guilt, in the philosophical sense, is often seen as a passive emotion, a reactive stance, it doesn't create action. It doesn't create anything, you just kind of get saddled with it. I think that is a possibility of guilt-like emotional exchange, but I also see it as something that can be worked with, because when you are arguing with the colonizer and they experience no remorse, it's really hard to get anywhere with that. So I think that guilt has to be transformed into something more active.

In terms of Indigenous peoples, reactive emotions like anger and, in particular, resentment, is usually cast, following Nietzsche and others, as a passive emotion, as something that doesn't create action. It is reactive. But if you look at the actual meaning of resentment, it's a bitter indignation about being treated unfairly. So it's a really political emotion that I think really fuels a lot of Indigenous peoples' justice struggles. Why wouldn't we resent being colonized? And in so far as that's not a historical thing, like whatever happened 200 years ago, but structures that are present, then we should be resentful and angry about that ongoing symbolic and structural violence that is present in our lives. So I think that guilt and shame on the settler / colonizer's side can also serve as that kind of mobilizing outlet if it's directed correctly and towards transformative ends.

ARR: It's definitely interesting, there are some studies out about how political ideas and alignments take place more on an emotional level than on a rational one, so in a sense people who feel a certain way are more inclined to join one group than another group based on the sentiment. There's a neurochemical psychoactivity that attracts political affinities. It's very interesting that you're moving towards this emotional, existential content.

GC: I think the narrative that you started with is an understanding of politics that is antithetical to emotions – like emotions are subjective, reactional, reactionary, whereas politics is based on calculated reason, is cognative, not embodied – is one of the most sexist narratives there is, because guess who's the emotional one in that view of the political? It's women. [...] Whereas the political, 'calculated reason,' and 'liberation,' is characterized as the domain of men. I try to totally obliterate the very patriarchal, heterosexist, notion of politics that [claims that] when it's played out right it's a realm of reason and not emotion.

ARR: There is this split between right wing and left wing according to a group of scientists led by Dr. Hibbing, where those who identify as right-wing exhibit what is called a "negative bias," where pay more attention for longer periods of time to something that represents pain or agitation, whereas more left-wing people are more inclined to pay attention to things that excite or stimulate, cause enjoyment or what have you. The 'right' cares about momentary self-preservation, and the 'left' cares about protecting the rainforest and stopping climate change – is there something about the emotional connection to the land, which is also tied into the sexism, or absence thereof, and in turn to the subjectivity of colonialism and a process of liberation?

GC: If you think of the inter-subjective relations that constitute us as humans, the dominant Western tradition has tended to assume that it's the dialogical relationships that we have as human beings. Whereas [for] humans [...] there is always an element of place, where we are located, that profoundly shapes who we are, our affects, our political commitments – it's that grounding of place, and those relationships of place. And when those relationships are understood ontologically from indigenous peoples perspectives as

ones that are structured ethically by relationships of sharing and reciprocity then the politics that come out of it can be quite radical in terms of status quo.

So, there's a real phenomenological aspect of the land itself that is crucial and it's not absent from Western traditions either. If you think of somebody who defends their space in the world from gentrification, it's often because the social relations of that place construct you in certain ways, it provides you with attachment to neighborhoods, to people you know in that neighborhood, and you want to defend that, not only because it constitutes who you are as somebody who lived in Brooklyn for whatever, 32 years, but because you have relationships that form you and shaped your affects and your politics. So just to think of this as a human story is not only, empirically, factually incorrect, but it's strange that we keep it in such an anthropocentric narrative – this idea of inter-subjectivity, of course, what constitutes us as subjects or relationships, transcends this kind of human nature binary.

ARR: It's interesting that you leave it on the human nature binary, because it's tied to the narrative of private property in the civic religion of the United States [...]

GC: Canada, too. Canadians just don't like to admit it.

ARR: Yes, this idea of property as something to defend against the outside [...] There's a nature-against-nature that happens in a proprietary relationship. Some scholars have tried to go back to Indian Schools and other forms of subjection and try to approach how people are conditioned to appreciate that kind of antithetical relationship to nature. Is that what goes on with this kind of symbolic violence?

GC: We are all conditioned to the cold rationale of property relations in a capitalist society, violently often, and to quite violent effect. Indigenous peoples have specifically been targeted through legislation that tries to break their own lend tenure systems and relationships to the land and resources, and write them over in the capitalist logic of property. Land claims in Canada are explicitly about that. You negotiate a land claim and have to give up all your rights, and what you're negotiating for are property rights that have

to be subject to capitalist development and purposes of settlement, so this, over time, has quite an effect on how we understand land [...] from one that used to be about relationship with to ownership over or domination over.

So it's essential to understand how settler-colonial relationship and settler-colonial capital operates, and to a certain extent, the reverse of that, the challenges to it, and the creation of alternatives – the ones that I explore are the ones that structure actions around the conditions of relationships with land, and the obligations and politics that go on there. So when you're talking about Elsipogtog or land defenders in northern BC against pipelines, they're being informed by an entirely, ontologically, different understanding of land, where land isn't property, land is a relationship.

Now what is problematic is when well-to-do settler populations think that is what they can do as well, through things like noble savage, primitivism, and all these sorts of things [...] which are just other forms of racist appropriation. And in fact when they are engaging in these sorts of things – reclamation projects on the land, guerilla gardening – they are doing so that is making commons claims to space that is colonial in nature, but that actually belong to someone else and have been violently taken away from them, so there is a real tricky politic on the 'left' and in radical circles, which is a fetishization of the notion of the commons that is still rooted in layers and layers of dispossession and violence and theft.

ARR: So you can't really go for this kind of notion of liberation and leave out decolonization.

GC: No, not at all

ARR: You have to make the effort to reach out to indigenous peoples and see what's needed.

GC: Yeah, relationships of solidarity and a kind of decolonial practice [...] Even the question is kind of like [...] you can't have liberation without decolonization, because [without] the one, like in an equation, it rules out the other.

ARR: It's also a question of prescriptive identification. When you're

going back to a noble savage or revisiting some kind of ancient European self-identity in order to connect with Indigenous peoples and First Nations in this place, it falls short of a genuine effort. I have this funny thing about Fanon that I have been trying to work through. In terms of identity, he claims that the more he tries to be Black, the more that he sees himself as Black and everything that means to him, the more he realizes that he's "not yet" white, and his quest to rid himself of the colonial identity always falls short of the colonial place of whiteness. Then he moves on in *Wretched of the Earth* and talks about the "native" as a construction of the colonizer, and he gestures to Nietzsche [...] looking for the "new man." What are the implications for native identities and the production of Indigeneity in this place, Turtle Island, or whatever we could call it?

GC: In Fanon, especially *Black Skin, White Masks*, it's a pretty complicated story that he's telling; what are the kind of material and subjective conditions that produce the colonized native, and why can't we empower ourselves to overcome these conditions. And his understanding was that under the gaze of colonial white supremacy, the native will first try to self-annihilate by rejecting or denying their own difference that's marked as degenerate in the eyes of the colonizers. So this is the whitening of the skin, the shame, the wearing of European styles and clothing [...] perfect your accent with the perfect French or English or whatever, even if it is even structured at the level of desire.

Related to that, there's also the seeking one's affirmation through recognition of colonizer, so you wear the perfect dress, speak the perfect French, have the best philosophical education, and you expect out of this to be recognized as human by your oppressor, you expect to be recognized for your own self-worth. That's when Fanon has his break, he says, 'that's fucking impossible, I'm never going to get recognition for what I want, because we live in a colonial society.' And that's when he turns towards this form of Nietzschean self-affirmation, 'I'm going to recognize myself as Black, I'm going to recognize our own civilization as wealthy,' and so on.

So there's what he calls "this plunge into the black hole," the whole kind of renovation of Black antiquity, all this sort of stuff that he associates with Negritude and other movements, but he doesn't see that as being substantive use, because he still sees that as a reversal

of colonial discourse, and what we need to come out of it is that we need to be mobilized by this form of self-empowerment and this cultural turn, and that's got to gear to where we'll come out of this fighting as this new humanism or the new man. And I'm saying, my problem with Fanon is that kind of dialectical understanding of progress denies the substantive worth that certain cultural traditions and practices can have in the construction of alternatives.

I have far more substantive attachment to notions of identity and cultural practices and traditions than Fanon did as a very humanist and modern kind of progressive thinker. So when Indigenous peoples are engaging in these practices, which are often of a cultural nature or a historical nature brought down through generations of experiences on the land, that's a mobilizing transitional thing that gets us ready to fight. The social relations, and ethics, and politics, are what's supposed to endure; they're supposed to be engaged critically, but they're not supposed to melt away; they're supposed to structure our present and our future in ways that are more equitable and fair and reciprocal, sustainable.

[...]
ARR: I'm interested in your critique of Fanon because it's also present with Mbembe, who wrote *On the Postcolony*.[2] Mbembe [discusses] Hegel's Zeitgeist, breaks it down into different components, like lived experience, embodied practices, but he also differentiates between longue durée, long term historical understanding of progress, as well as indigenous durées – durations that maintain a vital connection to Indigenous practices and traditions. Do you see that kind of melding in a Hegelian way almost as a potential, or do you think, 'let's get rid of the first part, the whole colonial experience, and use the idea of reoccupy and reinhabit to return to a kind of pure experience?'

GC: I think that, in terms of Hegel – I don't find much use in Hegel, but I appreciate and learned a lot from Fanon's interpretation of him – it's the foreclosure of the possibility of mutual recognition in the context marked by white supremacy and colonialism. In Fanon's emphasis in Hegel, contrary to neo-Hegelians in the more liberal vein, there's that moment of struggle, and in Hegel it's a struggle to the death, that forces your identity onto the table for recognition. It's that struggle to the death that's the

important moment. Without it, you would not have mutual recognition.

And there's also his emphasis on the emancipatory politics and practices of the labor of the slave. The slave is the one who is able to fashion some sort of self-certainty in that relationship, because it's through his or her work, so their creative capacity in certain sorts of ways that they then recognize themselves in creating that sense of self-certainty. Its not actually through the recognition of the Master, it's through their own creative transformative work that they do, and that's what Fanon wants to emphasize: struggle and your own creative capacity to empower yourself, and where that leads us. I think that's a pretty rad appropriation and interpretation of what is otherwise a rather horrible or horrifying Western philosopher.

ARR: Oh, god Hegel is the worst, his whole *Lectures on History* where he says Africa has no history is just nonsense.

GC: Yeah it's just blatant white supremacy.

ARR: Then you read the *Phenomenology* or the *Logic*, and maybe there's some kind of substance there that Fanon draws out, I agree, but it's largely impossible and should be abandoned without a very rigorous critique.

[...]

ARR: [...] You hit on a sense of self-empowerment, and in Fanon's day in Algeria, there was the question of *autogestion*, not only self-empowerment, but also self-management. Is that still a principle that could work within decolonization? Taking back the land, sharing power, sovereignty, autonomy [...]

GC: Yes, it has to be. That's the point of the book, and it's not just theory, its based on an observation from many decades of struggle. It's never going to be given to you, it takes many years of struggle, and it's self-generated. And [...] you [should] look at it as an empirical question. Indigenous peoples have lived under a structure of domination and racist misrecognition for centuries now, but they're constantly displaying quite powerful acts of agency and resistance. [T]he Hegelian story that people like Charles Taylor

want to tell us that we're all dependent on the recognition of the other is just false. It doesn't work that way.

[T]here's an empirical question, and there're lots of other like-minded theories that I've found useful, like the self-valorization within the autonomous-Marxist traditions, and all of these forms of us doing the work, people building from the ground up and empowering themselves [...] how [does] that translate into action and direct action, and alternatives? It's absolutely essential. It's the way in which we've got to get out of this politics of demands where we say, 'we are appealing to you to stop behaving in such a horrible way.' Instead, we turn back inward and say, 'actually we're going to empower ourselves, and we're going to force you to do that.'

1 Glen Coulthard. (2014) *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition.* Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press.

2 Achille Mbembe. (2001) *On the Postcolony.* California: University of California Press.