

*Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial  
Politics of Recognition* by Glen Sean Coulthard  
A Book Review by Matt Cumings

The title of Glen Coulthard's (Yellowknives Dene) book, *Red Skin, White Masks*, will have readers scratching their heads even before they get started.

I went ahead and itched that scratch hoping, unlike the many scratch-offs games I play to find a winner. Thankfully, I found myself yelling, "bingo!" more than once. It's a good book, though it's written in academic jargon that is difficult to understand at times. I hope I can explain it in a way that makes sense and stays true to what Coulthard has to say. The title might be irritating, but it is a play on Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* written in 1952, a truly revolutionary book by an Algerian man educated by the elite of those who colonized his country. Fanon's work continues to be influential, and Coulthard uses Fanon's work to try to make sense of efforts to decolonize throughout Indian Country. Maybe things are a little different up in Canada, and the term reds\*\*\* is less loaded. The book has some good points though, a lot is taken from the author's people, the Dene, in their struggle with the Canadian government to maintain their own sovereignty.

The main point the book makes is it's high time Indian nations stop trying to seek sovereignty through the very countries and governments which have been stealing from them, killing and oppressing them -- nations like the USA and Canada. Coulthard refers to this as a move from seeking federal recognition to self recognition. A few different tracks are taken to reach this conclusion, and upon making his case that self recognition is the best, if not only, route for Indigenous people to attain political, economic, and social freedom, he goes on to show steps necessary to raise the consciousness of a people in order to produce a movement capable of self recognition that may result in the actuation of sovereignty.

Coulthard sets out righting the wrongs of Karl Marx and his theory for usurping capitalism. Though the end goal of communal living and resource sharing may seem familiar and ideal to Indigenous people, there are some important factors Coulthard addresses in order to "indigenize" Marx. One problem with Marx's theory is it depends on "primitive accumulation" or it needs a (probably Western power) to take over indigenous people's land before it can move to the capital accumulation phase, which is the part where resources are extracted from the land and used to make goods for the marketplace through "modes of production." Those who control the modes of production eventually reside in city centers which have the greatest control over the modes of production. Coulthard points out that the "primitive accumulation" phase is not really a phase at all, but an ongoing process, because indigenous people are still alive today and still being displaced and still resisting. Instead of relying on a market-centered "mode of production" (where produced goods are traded for hard currency to purchase other produced goods) Coulthard wants us to think in terms of a "mode of life." This means a way of living in a place, a watershed or other bound ecological area, in a way that life itself instead of resources or capital can be produced and reproduced. This is

pretty interesting as far as political and economic theory go and in the end it reemphasizes a point many indigenous people know already: creating food, clothing, shelter, and keeping a culture alive from the land *is not a way of life but is life itself*.

What is so great and devastating about Frantz Fanon is he shows the mind of the colonized and how the colonizers reproduce their own self-centered and greedy mindset throughout an entire colonized culture. As in the case of Fanon, the French government took the best and brightest young Algerians and trained them at their own universities (a Bible reader might think of Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego here.) These Algerians then went back to their home country and perpetuated the same oppressive systems the French had in place while they were directly ruling Algeria. Fanon shows readers how the colonized, elite or not, envy the lives of the colonizer and in turn accept and reproduce the colonial worldview without thinking about it. Coulthard shows how this has happened in Canada and other places through the setting up of political structures in Indian nations that are really just reproductions of US or Canadian governments. The Dene Nation has struggled with Canada since the 1970s to become genuinely sovereign, but time and time again the Canadian government has denied or tweaked the legislation the Dene put forth. In many cases the “new rights” bestowed on the First Nations have amendments ending previous treaty agreements and making it easier for corporations to take land or exert power over Indian land. The colonial state’s existence is possible only by the subjugation and disappearance of its original indigenous inhabitants. Because the state does not want to destroy itself, it is impossible for the state to truly recognize the political or cultural sovereignty of the indigenous inhabitants.

In order to stop internalizing the colonizer’s values, which is essentially an act of destroying ourselves and our cultures, the colonized must remember and [rearticulate] our traditional cultures. Coulthard differs from Fanon here by advocating for current stories, ceremonies, etc. to be mindful of the current state of subjection to a colonial force instead of remaining “purely” traditional. This is important, so a community may have a vision of a future independent from the colonial state and interdependent on one another. Here he says resentment is a good thing, which is kind of opposite of what we often hear. What he thinks of as healthy resentment is refusal to forgive and “move past” the wrongs done and the wrongs continuing to be done by the Settlers until there is *real* reconciliation and restitution, which would mean a new way of being a “nation-state” for places like the US, Canada, New Zealand, and Australia. He is careful to point out there are different levels of resentment. Unhealthy resentment stays angry for the sake of being angry. Healthy resentment uses anger to move individuals and community to cultural resurgence.

An entire chapter and a good part of the conclusion is devoted to indigenous feminism. Several recent Native scholars and activists have pointed out feminism as an indigenous concept, since women have always been seen as powerful and important in indigenous societies. Coulthard asserts that many mainstream and western feminists do not go far enough with their understanding of the problems caused by men having most or all of the power in a society. Basically, the goal of mainstream western feminism is to be somehow equal with western men, which in the end will only elevate a few token women to the top of a few corporations. But in order to stop domestic violence and other

abuse against women, bigger changes need to be made, and that begins with recognizing violence against women on Turtle Island as rooted in European settlement. In the book he also identifies recent Indian movements started by women and youth, many of which focus on creating better lives for Indian women and especially children. In particular, he highlights the Idle No More movement that began in Canada, outlining the history of resistance in the decade before Idle No More helped lead to cultural resurgence.

The book ends with five ideas that Coulthard believes could actually begin to produce change. The first is direct action, or organizing and thinking of ways to directly confront those things that stand in the way of indigenous people being self sovereign. The next is anti-capitalist praxis, a large part of which is basically relearning ways to live life that do not rely on buying stuff from Wal-Mart. Sure, it will take a community a long time to completely get there, but it's important to begin that journey and give that imagination to the young ones. The third is ending land dispossession. Typically, this is thought of in terms of large companies buying or stealing land and resources from Indigenous communities, but we should start thinking of this also in terms of urban communities and gentrification which displaces communities through higher land value; we might call it the "trail of taxes". Next is recognizing the important role of women in society as being one of the most important aspects decolonization. Coulthard's final idea is anti-statism or basically recognizing nation-states as illegitimate. I don't know how to do this other than changing my language. Sometimes I write or say, "so-called Oregon" or the "Illegitimate States of America." There isn't really any instant or concrete change when I do this, other than shock and confusion on people's faces, but it does lessen the power of those governments in my mind.

I don't know whether you'll want to run out and pick up the book today. It was a pretty hard read, but it helped me connect a lot of dots. I think the biggest thing was seeing how "federal recognition" which seems so important to a lot of people is actually another form of colonization. In what society does majority rule? Who votes for a president or chief? Who appoints a judge to handle all of the wrong doings of an entire community? A small committee that doesn't know the victim or the perpetrator at all, but is empowered to decide what should be done? Many of the things a people must do to be federally recognized serve to turn them into clones of their imperial societies. Federal recognition is basically forcing a people to take themselves to boarding school and strip themselves of their own culture so they can fit in with western society. But Coulthard doesn't just point out how bad this is. He reveals the resistance that has been happening for a long time. We have to learn from the history of resistance and find new ways to truly decolonize.

*Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* by Glen Sean Coulthard was published by Regents of the University of Minnesota in 2014.