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BEING INDIGENOUS:
PROPOSITIONS FROM THE MARGINS

JOHNNIE MANSON AND DOROTHY MANSON
ABSTRACT

In this article, we use Indigenous stories as tools to reclaim our Tla-o-qui-aht identities, reject the colonial settler state of Canada’s way of being, and redeem the philosophies and experiences of our relations – human and nonhuman – that have been silenced by the process of colonialism. We outline the Tla-o-qui-aht philosophy of Hishookish-tsaawalk, and demonstrate how its underlying principles inform the stories and actions of Dorothy’s ancestral teachers, whose stories and actions, in turn, informed how she experienced the world, her propositions on how the world should be, and finally, the stories she conveys to her children. Hence, we argue that Dorothy’s stories and experience can be thought of as a decolonizing praxis. We also seek to demonstrate that the coercive, discursive, and material configurations of colonial settler power constrain the ability of my mother to enact a life according to the teachings of her ancestors. We demonstrate how Dorothy, through recounting her stories within a relational and genealogical framework, challenges and rejects the discursive, coercive, and material propositions of the colonial settler state regarding the best way for her to conceptualize and enact her identity. The implications of Dorothy’s theoretical praxis are discussed regarding Indigenous sovereignty and Indigenous engagement in radical politics.
1. INTRODUCTION

**Johnnie:** This essay is about my mother’s lived experience as a Tla-o-qui-aht woman. The Tla-o-qui-aht First Nation, of which I am a member, is a Nuu-chah-nulth nation located on the west coast of Vancouver Island, Canada. My mother told me these stories in the hopes that we could share and learn from her life experiences. My mother told me her stories, and I transcribed them. This essay is interested in the idea that when our Indigenous\(^1\) relations tell stories, they are trying to teach us something about the way in which they think the world works and ought to work (c.f. Million, 2014). I take seriously the idea that our Indigenous stories, while theoretical, are meant to be engaged with and interpreted by the listener (Atleo, 2004; Wilson, 2008). Hence, I have no qualms with interpreting the theoretical positions advocated by my mother. Indeed, too often the stories of Indigenous people have been theorized on, but have not been appreciated for the theory they provide (Cruikshank, 2005; Million, 2014). I learn from my mother’s words, and extrapolate upon them with the theorizations of other scholars, Indigenous and non-Indigenous.

It is my argument that my mother and I, through the stories we tell, are engaged in an emancipatory process, focused on reclamation and rejuvenation of our identities as Tla-o-qui-aht people – i.e., a process of decolonization. The process is emancipatory because it is rooted in the telling of stories that celebrate my mother’s lived experience as a one of the Tla-o-qui-aht people: survivors whose stories have sought to critique and challenge colonial settler\(^2\) society. The process is identity-centric simply because it is through the process of articulating our identities that we are able to reject social, economic, and political prescriptions offered to us by the colonial settler state of Canada. Hence, through the process of storytelling, we question, and outright reject Canada’s juridical and normative authority over our identities as Tla-o-qui-aht people. Finally, it is through storytelling that we redeem the voices of our relations, human and nonhuman, that have been silenced by the colonial process.

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1 *Indigenous* is a broad term utilized by original inhabitants of colonized areas, such as the Tla-o-qui-aht First Nation of which I and my mother are a member (Wilson, 2008).

2 *Colonial settler state* refers to states that were the product of citizens of imperial powers, such as the British and French in Canada, that decided to “settle” in colonies such as Canada. Hence, *colonial settlers* refers to the populations of Europeans that settled in Canada, and their modern day descendants, including non-European immigrants (Tuck and Yang, 2012).
Simply put, our lives are driven by an underlying principle – that of relational accountability (c.f. Wilson, 2008). Associated with this principle are certain outcomes that we as Tla-o-qui-ahts would like to achieve, such as strengthening and maintaining the relationships that we have both here and now and with our ancestors (c.f. Atleo, 2004). We have certain mechanisms by which to achieve these outcomes, such as the article we are producing now, as well as our personal stories and physical and spiritual interaction with other relations. Thus, our stories are theoretical and practical. They are theoretical in that they are informed by underlying Tla-o-qui-aht ethical and moral principles which guide our propositions on the how the world does work and should work. Yet, they are practical in that they are used on a day-to-day basis to inform an existence rooted in relational accountability. Hence, these stories we tell are as much about the principles we hold dear as they are about our experiences as Tla-o-qui-ahts living in a colonial settler state.

2. RECLAIMING OUR WAY OF BEING

**Johnnie:** Over the years, I have seen numerous relations pass on due to afflictions associated with colonialism. This is what I share with my mother – stories of trauma. But our trauma is situated within a broader context with broader meaning. Indeed, for Athabascan scholar Dian Million (2014, p. 31), it is our stories as Indigenous people that “contain the affective legacy of our experiences. They are a felt knowledge that accumulates and becomes a force that empowers stories that are otherwise separate to become a focus, a potential for movement.” Much of the felt knowledge that my mother and I have is centered on our experiences at the margins of a colonial settler society. Indeed, for the longest time my family inhabited a space comprised mainly of rubble. According to Marxist theorist Walter Benjamin (2009, Thesis IX), redemption is achieved through reconstruction of that rubble – by viewing, without flinching, the catastrophe that is the everyday domination of the dominated. It is through this viewing, remembering, and recounting that we as Indigenous people make sense of the incomprehensible – the annihilation of our people, our lands, and our relations. It is through remembering and reclaiming my relations that I see that certain things were beyond my control as Tla-o-qui-aht person. It is not mine, my mother’s, or the Tla-o-qui-aht nation’s fault that I cannot, at the age of 34, speak our language. It is not our fault that we do not know cultural rituals, ceremonies, and practices that guided people, like my late grandfather Oliver, through life. I reclaim my right to my culture.
**Dorothy:** When I was little, we ate everything that came from the land around us. We had deer, duck, salmon sea urchin, clams, and berries. We had a variety of foods to eat. And we didn’t just eat our food. For us, eating foods was tied to the community. As a little girl, I would help my Nan Cecilia, my aunties Ruth and Rita gather berries from the side of the highway or from land outside the airport at Long Beach. As a little girl, I understood and spoke Indian. My Nan Lucy and my Nan’s Margaret and Cecilia would speak Indian to me, and I would understand the stories they told me. I really hate that I lost ability to speak our language.

My father would hunt deer – mowich is what we call it. I used to see him praying, giving thanks to the Creator for the food we got from the ocean – like salmon – from the sky – like duck – and from the land, like deer. He would offer the land and the ocean gifts to show his thanks.

We always ate together. My Nan Cecilia thought the old ways, the Indian ways, were important. It was important to eat together as a community as well. Sometimes we would eat together on the beach, or on the main field in Opitsaht. We would eat salmon cooked over a fire, or steamed clams, or tutsup [sea urchins]. I always noticed that people would give thanks to the Creator. Sometimes, there would be songs sung or dances danced, in thanks to the Creator. My father used to dance Indian dances. We used to just gather and have a good day. Families used to help each other out back then. We noticed when people needed help. And families helped out other families without asking for anything in return. They helped out because it was their responsibility, and because they had extra gifts from the Creator. My Nan’s would tell me we were really blessed with what we had. And nothing was ever wasted. What we didn’t use was put back to the land or the ocean as gifts to the Creator.

**Johnnie:** I feel that for too long I have ignored my mother’s teachings. I did not recognize that she had lessons to offer me, lessons born from her interactions with our ancestors, her experiences as an Indigenous woman in a colonial-Settler state, and in the stories she tried to tell her children. I now recognize the value in the story my mother is telling me above. These stories are linked to guiding principles – that of relationality, beneficial reciprocity, respect, and responsibility – that have guided how Tla-o-qui-ahts understood and navigated the multiple worlds – physical and spiritual – that they inhabited (Atleo, 2004). This way of understanding and interacting with the world is known as Hishook-ish-tsawalk, which roughly translates to “everything is one” (Atleo, 2004). It was a way of living that my mother’s grandparents practiced.
And it was a way of living that they tried to convey to my mother as being the appropriate way for her to live.

Stories are the mechanisms my mother uses to achieve outcomes that strengthen and maintain the relationships in which she is currently engaged. The actions of my mother’s ancestors shape her stories. Take, for instance, the story above, the one about my mother’s childhood. This story has been recounted to me on numerous occasions. I often attributed such stories to someone that was reminiscing about and idealizing a past that I would never experience. Yet, by accepting my mother as a teacher, I recognize that this story isn’t about some “authentic” past that she experienced. What my mother is trying to demonstrate to me is the importance of relationships for producing her and the Tla-o-qui-aht national identity. For her, being Tla-o-qui-aht was and is about paying respect to each other, the land, and to the spirit world. Indeed, as Ahousaht hereditary chief and scholar Richard Atleo (2004, p. 30) notes, for the Nuu-chah-nulth “the primary purpose in life is to create, maintain, and uphold relationships.” For my mother, this was done by accepting the fact that all our relations – including nonhumans – had to be honoured.

Richard Atleo (2004, p. 59) states that “the sacredness of common origin determines the basis of relationships between diverse life forms.” What my mother was witnessing as a child were spiritual ceremonies. These ceremonies she witnessed were meant to demonstrate the respect that her father had for our nonhuman kin and to maintain and strengthen the relationship he had with them through the practice of giving a gift back to creation. Indeed, according to Atleo, such practices for the Nuu-chah-nulth are crucial to establishing a relationship that is beneficially reciprocal for humans and nonhumans. My grandfather’s enactment of this ceremony was a way to convey a lesson to his daughter. What my mother was observing was her father fulfilling responsibilities associated with being engaged in a relationship with nonhumans that was supposed to be based on respect and beneficial reciprocity. And by telling a story about witnessing her father perform such a ceremony, she is reclaiming her father as a legitimate teaching authority, while also conveying to me the importance of living a life that recognizes that we are all relations, and that when we are engaged in relationships with others we have a responsibility to maintain and strengthen those relationships.

According to Hishook-ish-tsawalk, it is important to recognize who our relations are. In the case of Tla-o-qui-aht people, all our relations are all of creation (Atleo, 2004). This is because all
of creation is the product of the Creator. Hence, when entering a relationship with our relations – human and nonhuman – it is the responsibility of those engaged in a relationship to seek balance and harmony (Atleo, 2011). Thus, relations must engage in relationships that are beneficially reciprocal for both parties involved. Respect, or lisaak, is one mechanism for achieving balance and harmony (Atleo, 2011). lisaak recognizes the divine origin of creation. When conducting oneself according to the principles of lisaak it is demanded of the individual to treat one’s relations with caring because of our origin in common creation. Associated with lisaak is therefore the responsibility to ensure that the common origin of our relations is recognized, understood, and protected and maintained. Neither I nor my mother is arguing that she is a traditionalist that strictly adheres to Hishook-ish-tsawalk. Rather, what my mother and I are demonstrating is that the teachings of her ancestors – her father and grandparents – were themselves rooted in Hishook-ish-tsawalk and are guiding how she perceives and interacts with the context in which she find herself. Shawn Wilson (2008) has noted similar worldviews across Indigenous cultures, which he calls relational accountability. Relational accountability simply means living a life that is accountable to one’s relations. For Indigenous people, this was and is an appropriate way of being. Hence, for my mother the appropriate way to be in this world is one that adheres to a form of relational accountability.

I feel the need to quickly remind you, the reader, that I am learning from the experiences of my mother as an Indigenous person. I am concerned that you may think I am theorizing about my mother’s existence. Rather, I am learning from the knowledge my mother has procured throughout her lifetime. My mother’s knowledge is knowledge that only those that know the pain of colonization can articulate, transmit, and transmute. This knowledge is transmitted through stories about her past. My mother’s stories highlight Million’s observation (2014, p. 35) that “story has always been practical, strategic, and restorative. Story is Indigenous theory.” My mother’s stories are transmuted into theory through the employment of rhetorical devices – such as saying we got our foods from the land, water, and sky – that she learned from other storytellers in our Tla-o-qui-aht communities. These stories are incredibly valuable to me. Yet, for the longest time I denied my mother the authority to teach me. This denial was rooted in my own warped and colonized idea of who exactly could teach me about what it meant to be Tla-o-qui-aht. I thought only “authentic” Indigenous people were capable of carrying and dispensing Indigenous wisdom. Indeed, my mother cannot speak Nuu-chah-nulth. She is physically disabled, so she cannot practice sacred ceremonies. She has been dispossessed of
her language, culture, and land, so her physical ties to the Tla-o-qui-aht Ha-houl-thee (chiefly territories) is limited. Yet her recounting of these stories lauds the stories and actions of her Nans and father as those of philosophers theorizing on the appropriate way for Tla-o-qui-aht people to live. This echoes the observations of Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2011, p. 102-103) who notes that it is in the voices of her ancestors, found in stories passed down generation after generation, that cultural, political and individual orientation are found, and that redemptive emancipation is possible. This emancipation occurs in the past actions of Simpson’s ancestors, which intrude on her present. Yet, for these actions and associated stories Dibaajimowinan, or personal stories, to be effective, they both must occur in a Nishnaabeg context, where Nishnaabeg oral practices are the norm. For Simpson, such a process creates a decolonizing presence. I agree with Simpson and would like to add that when we Indigenous people tell our personal stories of survival, whatever the context, we are engaging in not only an act Indigenous presence. When my mother tells stories of her childhood, in English, from her urban home in Nanaimo, she is redeeming the voices of the ancestors with whom she interacted. She is giving credence to their wisdom and their cultural practices. She is saying: “this is how the world was and this is how I think it should be.” And I give credence to her words and experiences. I reclaim the role of my mother as a teacher.

3. THE STATE’S WAY OF BEING

Johnnie: Before European Settlement, Indigenous peoples of Canada inhabited free Indigenous nations (Alfred, 2009). Indeed, much of the interactions between Indigenous nations and colonial settlers of Canada, until the late 1850’s and early 1860’s, were organized according to the principle of nation-to-nation interaction (Lawrence, 2003). Furthermore, Indigenous people were valuable trading partners (Lawrence, 2002). However, with increased settlement of the Canadian colonies, along with a shift in the settler mode of production from a trading economy to an industrialized economy, came an increased pressure for the expropriation of Indigenous land along with a decreased demand for Indigenous labour (Coulthard, 2014). Thus, in 1850, the province of Canada “passed legislation which allowed for the creation of Indian reservations” (Lawrence, 2003, p. 7). This legislation contained the first loose definition of Indians (Lawrence, 2003). Following this legislation, Canada passed the Gradual Civilization Act (1857) and the Gradual Enfranchisement Act (1869). According to Bonita Lawrence (2003, p. 7), the Gradual Enfranchisement Act created a “provision for the conversion of reserve lands into alienated plots in the hands of men who would cease to be Indian upon enfranchisement.”
The *Gradual Enfranchisement Act* created “municipal” governments for Indigenous nations that were known as bands and were given the right to participate in democratic elections (Milloy, 1983). However, these elections were limited to allowing male “Indians” of a given band to vote for male chief and councillors. Furthermore, the time and legitimacy of band elections were determined solely by the Canadian government. While it did allow Indian bands jurisdictional control over some areas of concern, this control was very limited and restricted (Milloy, 1983). The *Gradual Enfranchisement Act* stipulated who exactly was a “status” and “non-status” Indian (Lawrence, 2003, 7). Such a definition allowed Indigenous women that married a white man to be stripped of their Indian status, while also allowing white women that married Indigenous women were granted Indian status (Lawrence, 2003). Finally, the *Gradual Enfranchisement Act* was the first legislation which rigidly defined what constitutes an Indian, Indians being those people that contained “at least one quarter Indian blood” (Dickason, 1992, 251, in Lawrence, 2003, p. 9).

Hence, it is in the *Gradual Enfranchisement Act* and the subsequent *Indian Act* (1876) that Indigenous people became “racialized” wards of the state. The *Indian Act* utilized much of the same governing mechanisms as the *Gradual Enfranchisement Act* (Lawrence, 2003). Indians women still lost their status if they married a white man, and white women could still obtain status by marrying white men. Native women protest of such discriminatory legislation led to an amendment to the Indian Act – Bill C-31 (1985). This amendment allowed for Indigenous women that were disenfranchised to reacquire their lost status (Cannon, 2011).

Yet, Indigenous people were not merely regulated juridically. Indigenous people were subject to disciplinary power. Disciplinary power, according to Foucault (1990, p. 139) is the "anatamo-politics of the human body". For Foucault (2003, p. 249) disciplinary power "centers on the body, produces individualizing effects, and manipulates the body as a source of forces that have to be rendered both useful and docile." Disciplinary power is utilized through the organization of space, time, and the behaviour of people by state institutions and what Foucault calls "sub-institutions" (Foucault, 2003, p. 249). As Sherene Razack (2002a, p. 10) notes "it is from Michel Foucault that many of learned to think about the production of subjects in space … Foucault believed that the organization of space was fundamental in any exercise of power. Reading Foucault’s observations for applications to Indigenous people, Andrea Smith (2014, p. 211) notes that normalization refers to “prisons, medicines, and other technologies of the body” which produce normative assumptions about health such that “in order to be a healthy person, there
are rules that any healthy person would like to follow.” Such rules enable the production of discourses that center on the “norm.” This norm is axis around which the behaviours of subjects revolve (Foucault, 1995). How individuals are judged is according to how much their behaviour deviates from and approximates the norm (Foucault, 1995). Indeed, according to Cherokee scholar Andrea Smith (2014, p. 211) “those that challenge social norms become not so much outlaws as sick or deviant.” These norms are enforced through surveillance (Foucault, 1995). Hence, disciplinary power functions at the individual and social level (Smith, 2014).

I would like to contextualize Foucault to a colonial settler setting, one concerned with the creation of racialized subjects, the elimination of Indigenous nations and peoples, and the usurpation of Indigenous land for the benefit of a settler population. Discourses about Indigenous people and their lifeways have always been intimately tied to discourses about the land. Furthermore, these dominant settler discourses have always been attached to non-discursive forms of power (Coulthard, 2008). Hence, discourses about Indigenous people have always been attached to the economic and military apparatus of the state (Coulthard, 2008; Harris, 2004). In short, Indigenous people of Canada have been subject to the discursive, coercive, and material formations of power. The reason for such a formation wasn’t to “normalize” Indigenous people, but rather to present Indigenous people as anomalies which existed outside of society (Rifkin, 2009). This creation of the “sovereign” subject, whose existence outside of the law legitimizes and naturalizes colonial settler society, while simultaneously denaturalizing Indigenous nationhood and sovereignty (Rifkin, 2009).

For Indigenous people, the punishment for deviating from the white hetero norm was astounding. In Canada, Indigenous children were apprehended by the state and forced to attend residential schools. Here, Indigenous children were subject to “strict discipline and constant surveillance over every aspect of their lives; and cultural expressions through language, dress, food, or beliefs were vigorously suppressed” (Kirmayer, et al., 2003, S17). Indigenous children that attended residential schools, such as my late grandparents Carol and Oliver, had the “Indigenous” physically disciplined out of them (Alston-O’Connor, 2010). Jean Barman (2011, p. 256) argues that governmental policy of residential schools meant that Indigenous children were schooled “not for assimilation, but for inequality.” I would like to modify Barman’s comments and state that Indigenous children that went to residential schools were schooled to be assimilated into colonial settler society as unequal subjects whom were told that they were never to be Indigenous, but also, that they could never be white.
Indigenous people were also socially disciplined in a multitude of often contradictory ways. Firstly, Indigenous hunting and gathering economies became highly stigmatized, especially with the rise of an industrialized Settler economy and technocratic wildlife management (Sandlos, 2001). Indigenous hunting and stewardship techniques were considered “barbarous” (Sandlos, 2001; Campbell, 2003). Such a view influenced the decision of the Canadian government to forcibly relocate the Sayisi Dene of Northern Manitoba (Bussidor, 1997). This forced relocation was based on evidence provided by the Canadian Wildlife Service, which stated that the Sayisi Dene was overhunting the barren ground caribou of northern Manitoba. This forced relocation led to a dramatically high level of alcoholism, violence, and suicide amongst the Dene (Bussidor and Bilgen-Reinart 1997).

Indigenous people were also disciplined for being unequal subjects in Canadian society. For instance, the 1960’s government officials apprehended the children of Indigenous people that sought help in the procurement of food or shelter (Kimmelman, 1985, p.196 in Alston-O’Connor, 2010). Indeed, numerous scholars have demonstrated how the colonial settler state has used both juridical, normative, and coercive tools to dispossess Indigenous peoples of their land and discipline Indigenous nations and people into accepting a way of being that not only challenges and undermines their Indigenous philosophies, but which also seeks to eliminate Indigenous nations – through cultural, political, and economic assimilation – as distinct national polities (Alfred, 2009; Monaghan, 2013; Morgensen, 2011, 2014; Rifkin, 2009, 2011, 2014; A. Simpson, 2014; L. Simpson, 2004, 2008, 2011; Silver, 2014).

Another avenue of by which the state has sought to eliminate Indigenous people is through the deployment of what Foucault (2003) referred to as biopower. For Foucault (2003), biopower is the power of nation-states to propagate, maintain, and distribute lifechances amongst various populations. For Indigenous people, such a distribution of lifechances has centered on not only disrupting the social, political, cultural, and economic institutions of Indigenous people, but also the transformation of Indigenous nations from nations to racialized populations (Lawrence and Dua, 2005; Rifkin, 2011, 2014). This was (and continues to be) done through disrupting Indigenous theorizations regarding political, communal, and familial organization and structure (Atleo, 2011; Rifkin, 2014). The transformation of political structure, from one concerned with being responsible to relations to one concerned with maintaining nationhood in the face of colonial onslaught had dramatic consequences (Rifkin, 2011; A. Simpson, 2014). Indigenous nations have been forced to reformulate notions of kinship, with some Indigenous nations
rigorously enforcing membership criteria, through techniques such as measuring the blood-quantum of their members, and denying membership to members that don’t fall within a given criteria (A. Simpson).

It is important to note that Indigenous people have been fully aware of the discursive and material techniques Canada has employed to try to manage their drives for self-determination (Coulthard, 2014). Hence, Indigenous anti-colonial resistance in Canada has centered on creating and maintaining Indigenous discourses and political institutions that are concerned with protecting the land, and advancing the national claims of Indigenous nations (Coulthard; Simpson, 2014). Hence, anti-colonial strategies in Canada are deeply associated with Indigenous notions of sovereignty or self-determination, which include: the idea to reject altogether the state concept of sovereignty (Alfred, 1999), to accept, assert, protect, and modify state definitions of sovereignty for the benefits of Indigenous people (Turner, 2006), or to practice a form of nested sovereignty – one that utilizes state sovereignty while seeking to create alternate Indigenous institutions (A. Simpson, 2014).

Often, claims by Indigenous nations that utilize sovereignty for emancipatory purposes do so through the politics of recognition and accommodation (Coulthard, 2007; Simpson and Smith, 2014). As Mohawk scholar Audra Simpson and Andrea Smith (2014, p. 10) note, claims by Indigenous nations for self-determination are often actually oriented toward “gaining recognition from the settler state and perpetuating its life, interpreting the small token of recognition as justice.” Simpson and Smith (2014, p. 10) note the appeal of the politics of recognition. This politics of recognition in a sense is centered on the argument that the colonial settler state misrecognizes Indigenous people. Therefore, the politics of recognitions seeks to posit Indigenous nations within the realm of interest groups worthy of consideration in the realm of politics. It strives for obtaining allowances from the state in the hopes that such allowances will lead to more self-governance. Yet, scholars such as Coulthard (2007) have noted how the politics of recognition merely perpetuates the political process that has led to the subjugation of Indigenous nations by accepting the terms of negotiating recognition that have been laid out by the Settler state. Furthermore, as Simpson and Smith note (2014, p. 10) the very fact that the Settler state exists in the same colonial composition with the same colonial juridical and normative powers, it has the ability to “retract whatever limited forms of recognition it grants and never actually has to question itself or even consider its own history very deeply.” Indeed, would the state question the legitimacy of creating socio-economic conditions that allowed for
the cultural and physical dispossession that my mother faced and continues to face on a day-to-day basis?

**Dorothy:** When I was 11 we moved to the Seattle. A lot of Tla-o-qui-aht’s moved to Seattle around this time in search of work. We began eating a lot of mumuthne, or white people, food, like chicken, pork, and beef. We stopped praying in thanks for our foods. The city changed us a lot. I still prayed. But, our sense of community was gone. The only time I saw family was when they stopped by to visit. I was used to family being around me [all the time]. During this time I really missed that sense of family. The only time I saw a lot of Indians was at the Indian hospital in Seattle, near Beacon Hill. I moved home when I was sixteen. My father passed away. When I moved home, it seemed like we were struggling to keep our culture. We didn’t just get together to be together. It seemed like we had lost our sense of culture.

**Johnnie:** I don’t think that for my mother, the politics of recognition and accommodation would have done her any good during her time in Seattle. This is because what was important for her was that family was around her all the time. What was important for her was that she could live on the land from which she had been culturally and physically dispossessed by the colonial-Settler state, and that she could live according to the traditions, rooted in relational accountability, that she deemed appropriate. My mother, in her recounting of her time in Seattle and back home in Opitsaht, is challenging the state’s authority over her. For her, the appropriate way to exist was / is rooted to her homeland and her relations; it was rooted to acts like picking berries, eating together, and just being around other Tla-o-qui-aht relations. It wasn’t rooted to whether or not the state viewed her as a legitimate human being that needed to be recognized and accommodated. The act of physical and cultural dispossession took away her ability to live a life she deemed appropriate. In short, it took away her self-determination.

4. REJECTING THE STATE’S WAY OF BEING

**Dorothy:** I talked to my children’s grandpa [her uncle, my great uncle in mumuthne terms] about them. I often wondered why they were not understanding the things I taught them. The things their grandpa, my uncle, taught me. I was worried I was not saying things properly because I was saying them in English. Their grandpa told me that not to worry about these things, that they would understand when they are older. He told me that sometimes lessons we teach our children, about the right way to be, were always around the corner waiting for us to
recognize them as being important. I want my family to know that the most important thing is family and home [the Tla-o-qui-aht Ha-houl-thee]. And to never ever forget that.

**Johnnie:** Like Andrea Smith (2014) I do not believe that our political emancipation as Indigenous people is found in the realm of recognition. As Smith notes, this line of thinking is a trap:

> Ironically, however, we fall into the Foucauldian trap of thinking that our liberation will be effected, not through structural change but through confessing our truths, demonstrating the worth of our cultures, proving to those in power that we are worthy of humanity (p. 211).

Indeed, my mother is not “confessing” some truth about suffering in the hopes that settler society will see as being more human. Rather, my mother situates her stories within a broader framework of resistance and regeneration. My mother is not worried about telling us stories that will show the settler how *human* we are, but telling us stories to show us how *Tla-o-qui-aht* we are. She wants to instill a sense of what Stan Wilson (1995) calls “relational self” within us. Such a sense of relational self recognizes the importance of individuality, but always within a context of relationships, and associated obligations to engaging in relationships that are beneficially reciprocal.

These lessons my mother teaches are always related to family and home. But by home, she does not mean home in the sense that colonial settler society thinks of home – as a dwelling which shelters an atomized family. No, my mother is talking of home in the sense that Tla-o-qui-aht people talk about home – that of our ancestral homeland, the Tla-o-qui-aht Ha-houl-thee. My mother’s stories are rooted to lessons that we can learn about ourselves in relation to home. Home is important because it is where our lessons as Tla-o-qui-aht people are found (see Atleo, 2004 for example). As we have seen, my mother envisions home as being a place where we Tla-o-qui-ahts are free to learn from and interact with each other, the land and water, animals, and the spirit world, without the intervention of the colonial settler state. Yet, my mother realizes that her ability to teach her children to be Tla-o-qui-ahts is constrained by the colonial settler society in which she finds herself.
I think my mother’s thinking about how we learn about lessons is important. It allows me to think of self-determination in a different light. For me, self-determination, or sovereignty, represents a political relationship, between the self, the colonizer and the colonized, and between members within colonized communities. For Mark Rifkin (2009, p. 109) sovereignty is “empty, a topological placeholder through which to displace, or contain, the paradox of asserting “domestic” authority over populations whose existence as peoples precedes the existence of the state.” Conversely, Scott Marratto (2014) concludes, based on his readings of Jacques Derrida’s thinking on sovereignty and Maurice Merleau-Ponty on political agency, that sovereignty or self-determination represents a political act or event. It is these sovereign acts or events, such as my mother’s recounting of her life and struggles – which she contextualizes within a broader critical and genealogical framework – that not only highlight her own propositions on how life does and should work, but also challenges the state’s way of being. Marratto also notes that sovereignty is associated with a truth that is always to come, one waiting to be discovered. It is at this point that I would like to draw lessons from what Marratto, my mother, and Walter Benjamin (2009, Thesis IX) and state that when we subaltern/Indigenous people are engaged in radical politics, we would be wise to not get too focused on whether or not our actions will produce a definitive outcome, a utopic society as it were. To visualize the political relationships of those that came before us as “failures” from which we can learn as we progress towards liberation actually naturalizes the teleological conception of relationships that our ancestors worked so hard to challenge. The point of existence isn’t to progress to some stage of utopic decolonization, the point existence is to engage in relationships which are rooted in respect, beneficial reciprocity, and responsibility (Atleo, 2004).

Dorothy: [When I moved back to Opitsaht] I noticed that women were not being respected like when I was a little girl. Women were the life givers of our community and their work was respected. They were respected. They gathered the berries, they did the canning, the jarring, smoked the salmon and deer, and collected the clams. It seemed like women were not appreciated for their work. Women still did their traditional work. They also worked in canneries alongside men from our community. The men were also working in fishing and logging. They got paid white people money. Yet, in my community, there was a real sense of loss. The only time we ever got together, it seemed, is when there was loss [death] in our communities. This is because we weren’t allowed to be who we wanted to be, which is Indians.
**Johnnie:** For my mother, resource extraction jobs – such as fishing and logging – did not represent an avenue for self-determination. They represented an entry-point for the colonial settler state to discipline Indigenous people into a way of being that the state deemed appropriate. Her disdain for resource extraction jobs is evident in her associating them with “white people” money (another rhetorical device being employed by mother to get her point across!). For my mother, the way of being advocated by the state produced an existence she viewed as entirely inappropriate for her and our Tla-o-qui-aht nation. It created, in her mind, a division of labour that denigrated women at the expense of men. What my mother calls “white people money”, I read as economic development, which has always been touted as a solution to cultural, social, political, and economic problems facing Indigenous people (Alfred, 2009).

For our Indigenous politicians, the need for recognition from the state seems all consuming. I think part of this need for recognition is because we Indigenous people have mystified how power functions within a politics of sovereignty and self-determination (c.f. Marratto, 2014). We assume that power is a *thing* that the state has and we don’t. Therefore, we assume that if we ask the state to recognize us as political entities worthy of consideration when conducting affairs of the state, somehow, we will have power that we have always been lacking. I think that Indigenous normative understandings about what constitutes the appropriate way to comprehend and interact with each other, the land and water, the cosmos, and our nonhuman kin produce our identities, our relationships, and our resistance to colonial domination. The state has tried, and sometimes succeeded, in disrupting the way power functions within our communities, assimilating our discourses for their own political needs. Yet our stories allow us to reconfigure a power that has been reconfigured by the state. The state has tried since contact to degrade our theoretical understandings of the world. Yet, here my mother sits, telling me stories about how all she wants to be is an “Indian”. I can’t imagine the state wanting a power that produces identities, such as my mother’s, which does not appreciate the logic of money equalling happiness.

This “white people money” is tied to a “real sense of loss” that my mother perceived as existing in our communities. Indeed, in her mind, the only time community members got together was when our communities experienced more loss in the form of death. It is here that my mother makes the poignant, and for me, emotionally devastating linkage between the land, cultural practices, death, and our ability as Tla-o-qui-aht people to decide who we are and are not. For
my mother, the only time we could engage in an act of self-determination that we deemed appropriate is when one of our community members died. This is because the rest of the time – while we are living – we are denied the opportunity of being who we want to be, which is, in her words, “Indians”. While this observation by mother may seem grim, it is also hopeful. My mother’s story firmly rejects the state’s narrative that economic development through resource extraction can provide her and our community with a suitable way of life.

5. REDEEMING THE VOICES OF THOSE WHO HAVE BEEN SILENCED

*Dorothy:* My nation provides food fish, like salmon, for members that live in the city. I hear people talk about how hard it is to catch fish and to provide it to members in the city. I tell these people it is really hard for us living in the city to not have our traditional foods. We have a right to that food, and us living in the city doesn’t change your responsibility to your members. Just because I am off reserve doesn’t mean I am not a member of our community.

When I get our food fish, it makes me feel really good. I have food that can help me out when times are tough. But it also reminds me of when I was a little girl, when I and my family would be together as a community. I am really grateful to the members of the community for delivering it to us. And I give thanks to the creator for allowing me to have it.

But living in the city is hard. A lot of the food I eat is really unhealthy, especially since I am on a fixed income. When I eat this food, it makes me feel really upset and lost. I really miss the food I was brought up on. Nowadays you have to watch what you eat, because so much of it is bad for your health. You didn’t have to do that with our traditional foods because we knew where they came from and we knew that they were good for us.

When I do get food fish it is very hard for me to store. So there is only so much I can take. I feel our people have a right to the food fish and shouldn’t be denied it because we don’t have access to proper storage. We have responsibilities to each other as Indians to look after each other. To make sure our people are looked after.

*Johnnie:* I think that groups of people engaged in radical emancipatory politics, such as a politics of decolonization, are always seeking to redeem the voices and actions of their silenced ancestors. This observation is based in part on my readings the work of Walter Benjamin,
(2009, Thesis II), who noted that history carries “A secret index with it, by which it is referred to its resurrection.” This index for my mother is found in the stories and actions of her ancestors and the stories she tells her children, which she hopes will affect their actions. Hence, Benjamin (Thesis II) continues: “Are we not touched by the same breath of air which was among that which came before? Is there not an echo of those who have been silenced in the voices to which we lend our ears today?” For my mother and me, the answer is a definitive yes. Indeed, throughout this paper, we not only see my mother discuss a future that she would like to inhabit, but a past that keeps intruding upon her life, impacting her lifecourse. Ever present are the stories and practices of her ancestors. Thus, for Benjamin (Thesis II) “there is a secret protocol [Verabredung: also appointment] between the generations of the past and that of our own.” For my mother, this secret protocol, between herself, the land, water, and her ancestors, is made manifest in her stories of survival, and my interpretations of her stories.

For Benjamin, such an iterative process of transmission, interpretation, and action is the product of the fact that we know there will be others who will see the utility of our stories. Benjamin continues (Thesis II): “we have been expected upon this earth. For it has been given us to know, just like every generation before us, a weak messianic power, on which the past has a claim. This claim is not to be settled lightly.” This weak messianic power, the power to redeem the voices of those that have been silenced is critical in understanding the way in which history intervenes in the life of my mother. For my mother, the relational existence she witnessed her father and relations practicing is redeemed through her stories, which posit that her relations have a responsibility to take care of each other. Yet, my mother recognizes that this claim of the past over her life is not settled lightly. Throughout her life, her ability to learn from the past has been impeded by physical and cultural dispossession associated with the process of colonialism. Thus, she has used her nonhuman relations – fish – to not only make claims in the present, but to make claims on behalf of the past. The duty of those that deliver fish to my mother is to recognize that she is a member of her community, and to recognize that her tie to her community is not severed by fabricated colonial boundaries. She validates her claims on the relational responsibility of the Tla-o-qui-aht nation to take care of her by invoking and redeeming lessons learned in the past. These lessons, Benjamin told us (2009, Thesis IX) are never completely vanquished, but rather are found in rubble placed at our feet. My mother has taken the lessons – fragmented – that the process of colonialism has placed before her feet. She takes whatever she has the strength to carry with her and has sought to build a life for herself.
Those who were silenced knew that their heirs would see their actions, and seek to apprehend them for their own emancipatory purposes. Walter Benjamin inhabited a time and space where the Nazis were devouring Jewish people, silencing their voices. Indeed, it seems as though Walter Benjamin knew that his body would be devoured and his voice silenced. His last political tome *The Arcades Project* (Benjamin, 1999) was smuggled out after he committed suicide on the French-Spanish border. He committed suicide after failing to gain entry into Spain from recently Nazi occupied France. What I have learned from Benjamin, what I-Banaba scholar Linda Teaiwa (2014) calls an ancestor we get to choose, is that the voices of the silenced are often found, paradoxically, in their stories (Benjamin, 2006). For Benjamin there is a distinct difference between stories and literature. Stories are communally produced and disseminated, whereas literature is the product of individuals, though it can be disseminated amongst community members (364). Echoing words of Million (2014) and Leanne Simpson (2011), Benjamin (364) argues that stories are practical in nature: they are told to provide “counsel” to those that have not been born. Furthermore, stories are contextual. Yet their existence is spatio-temporally fluid. They can remain rooted to a specific locale or travel great distances.

This brings me to my final point. My mother’s stories have travelled great spatial and temporal distances, and are meant to provide counsel to me and my siblings to continue our story. Her stories tell the strain that her living in the city has placed on her community. Yet, importantly for her, living in the city has put a strain on her ability to live a way of life that she deems appropriate, one rooted in relational accountability. For my mother, it is hard to live without traditional foods not only because of health reasons, but also because traditional foods help orient her towards her relations. Without traditional foods she feels “upset and lost.” Furthermore, not only has she been dispossessed of traditional land, but as an impoverished Indigenous person living in the city, is also dispossessed of relationships she would normally enjoy if she were living in the Tla-o-qui-aht Ha-houl-thee. Hence, it is my duty to recognize that our stories, and the lessons that they carry, don’t know the bounds of artificial borders set up by the colonial-Settler state. As she notes, just because we as Tla-o-qui-ahts have been removed from the land does not mean we are not members of our community. And it doesn’t mean we don’t have the responsibility to promote and maintain relationships with the land and water, nonhuman kin, other Tla-o-qui-ahts, or the Creator that are beneficially reciprocal to all relations involved.
My mother, far from complaining about her circumstance, is proposing that the world should work according to the teachings of her father and her relations. She is stating regardless of her status as an impoverished Tla-o-qui-aht living outside of the Tla-o-qui-aht Ha-houl-thee, that her theorizations on the nature of the relationships between food, spirituality, reciprocity, respect, and responsibility are important. My mother has made a link between her dispossession and trauma – of living a spiritually and physically unhealthy lifestyle. As she noted earlier in this paper, this trauma can be pinned squarely on the colonial settler society in which we live:

You have to watch out what you eat, because so much of it is bad for your health. You didn’t have to do that with our traditional foods because we knew where they came from and we knew that they were good for us.

My mother is fully aware of the larger meaning put on her existence and the associated trauma she has experienced. She is aware that some will interpret her trauma as burdensome and not worthy of consideration. Yet, my mother resists this interpretation of her trauma by way of redeeming the voices of those that have been silenced by the process of colonialism. For my mother, her life experience, along with the teachings of her father and relations, has shown her that as Tla-o-qui-ahts we are best served when we give thanks to the Creator, look after the land and water, our non-human relations, and look after one another.

Klecko-klecko (thank you thank you) for teaching me this mother.

6. LITERATURE CITED


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