Reconciliation or Colonial Continuity? A Critical Perspective from a Newcomer

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ABSTRACT

This paper critically examines the concept of reconciliation in Canada from a newcomer's perspective, interrogating its role in disrupting or perpetuating colonial continuity. Drawing on personal and political reflections, this analysis challenges the narrative of Canada as a reconciler and highlights the state's historical and ongoing role in Indigenous dispossession and cultural erasure. By engaging thinkers such as Glen Coulthard, Romeo Saganash, Norma Dunning and Elders, the paper critiques settler policies and further investigates how recognition policies reassert colonial authority under the guise of reconciliation. The paper concludes by advocating for a shift beyond symbolic gestures toward structural transformation that centers Indigenous determinations and worldviews. In doing so, it calls on non-Indigenous individuals to move beyond passive solidarity and engage critically and responsibly in the work of decolonization.

Introduction

Agô! In my religion, Umbanda—an Afro-Indigenous Brazilian religion—asking for "Agô" (an old Yoruba word) means respect and honor for those who came before us. To honor the Ancestors who took and take care of the Land[1] we are stepping on. So, as a guest in amiskwaciwâskahikan,[2] I have started this paper asking for permission to talk about those who belong to this Land and have honored it since the beginning.

This paper will examine critically the effectiveness of the Canadian government in maintaining a colonial status quo over the past 157 years, tracing the roots of settler colonialism back to the very inception of the Canadian state. Also, it will question the position of non-Indigenous society, especially the government's stance, to reflect on the differences between how the reconciliation process is publicly portrayed and how it actually unfolds within society as a whole. Furthermore, this paper primarily engages with non-Indigenous readers—though not exclusively—based on the understanding that those who benefit from colonial structures hold a greater responsibility to adopt a conscious and active stance against their ongoing perpetuation.

First, I will conceptualize reconciliation[3] from different perspectives, providing a historical context around the topic, which is a current process but emerges as a corrective for past actions. Also, I will address colonization as an ongoing violent process of Indigenous dispossession, marginalization, and cultural erasure, not just a historical event stuck in the past.

Settler policies, from Land theft to assimilation mechanisms like residential schools and the eskimo identification Canada system , have reinforced this systemic violence. Despite Canada's emphasis on reconciliation, efforts such as public apologies and acknowledgments and a "holiday"—September 30, the National Day for Truth and Reconciliation—have been largely ineffective; asking if reconciliation is a mere symbolic gesture rather than transformative.

Next, I will address the politics of reconciliation intertwined with recognition politics, highlighting contradictions in governmental actions. While the government presents itself as a reconciler through public apologies and symbolic gestures, it simultaneously reinforces colonial structures by dictating the terms of recognition for Indigenous Peoples.

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Last, while Indigenous resistance actively challenges colonial structures, non-Indigenous individuals must also recognize their role in dismantling it. Engaging with colonialism critically requires more than acknowledgment, it demands active participation in shifting narratives and confronting the systems that uphold inequality. Recognizing this, I position myself within this dialogue as someone committed to both understanding and action.

Reconciliation: conceptualization and historical overview

As a young mixed Brazilian woman, who understands myself as a foreign settler in Canada because my Ancestors are not from here, my first encounter with the concept of reconciliation occurred when I first set foot on this Land. I went to Canada as an exchange student to advance my studies in humanities. In my home country, I have always been a student of History, and here I became a student of Indigenous Studies, engaging with research topics that have always been my focus, such as decolonial history, decoloniality, and the connections between art and history.

Since my arrival, I have observed different perspectives on reconciliation—both the non-Indigenous and Indigenous points of view. These experiences have motivated me to reflect on and undertake this analysis. Because as someone who has been experiencing the violence of the colonial process and perpetuating it, I believe that it is important not only to redress actions but also to work against the perpetuation of it. So this, to non-Indigenous readers, is an invitation to question yourself, to position yourself, and not to accommodate.

My first contact with reconciliation was on the airplane, listening to an instructional video from the airline company saying that they recognize the traditional Nations from this Land, it was a Land Acknowledgment. The most recent one was reading *The True Canadians: Forgotten Nevermore*,[4] for my INDG200 course. The book, written by Russel and Wylynko[5] (2023), is focused on the history of the Métis people, which provided me with insights into the ongoing struggle for living on this Land.

Through the reading, the final chapter was the reason that prompted me to reflect on what the much-discussed reconciliation would be, because it adopts a more critical perspective on the Canadian system, particularly its policies of reconciliation. Which made it crucial for my understanding of the ineffectiveness of Canada's reconciliation efforts nowadays.

Building upon this idea, Russel and Wylynko (2023) argue that while Canada may offer symbolic apologies and performative acts of reconciliation—such as Land Acknowledgement, working as a topic to cover, and the meaning of September 30th, for most non-Indigenous people mean nothing but a free day of work[6] —they are superficial to achieve "genuine reconciliation," because it "will depend on non-Indigenous governments, industry, societal public advocacy agencies, and citizens of Canada acting through concrete public policies and actions" (100).

On the topic of defining reconciliation, to Russel and Wylynko (2023, 7) it intertwines the broader societal recognition of injustices stemming from colonization with the individual and collective processes of healing that emerge from acknowledging past harms, like the two centuries of Métis struggle for recognition as a Nation or the way media galvanized the public imagination on the Kanesatake Resistance.[7]

On the same topic, The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) Final Report (2015) states that it "is about establishing and maintaining a mutually respectful relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples in this country. For that to happen, there must be awareness of the past, acknowledgment of the harm that has been inflicted, atonement for the causes, and action to change behavior." (6–7). It is important to note that harm is understood as the racist and paternalistic legacy of the residential schools system.

Furthermore, on its official website, the Government of Canada states that it is about renewing "the relationship with Indigenous Peoples, based on recognition of rights, respect, cooperation and partnership." (2024). Moreover, in 2008, Prime Minister Harper made a questionable public apology speech on behalf of the state to the survivors of the residential schools system, turning into a first step in the long process of reconciliation. Such speech was part of the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement,[8] offering an apology for the intergenerational trauma caused by the residential schools.

As one of the most popular colonial violence cases in Canada, the residential school system has come to symbolize one of the most shameful aspects of Canada's colonial history. Over approximately 150,000 Métis, First Nations, and Inuit children were sent to these Euro-Canadian culture assimilation institutions (Russel and Wylynko 2023, 102). However, talking about numbers is often not enough to convey the extent of the terror that many people faced.

In this way, I believe it is important to bring forward the words of Elder Angie Crerar to highlight the ignored emotional aspect: "There is no way you can make up for those thousands of boys and girls that are buried, who never knew a smile, never knew a hug,

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never knew those simple words that we all say to each other 'I love you', and to heal" (quoted in Russel and Wylynko 2023, 105). Her sensible words make more tangible the proximity with the lived experiences in this context.[9] To me, getting in contact with other people's feelings makes me more empathic. To my understanding, empathy is a major feeling for non-Indigenous people to act for change: it highlights our humanity.

While Canada was building a progressive image in the 20th century—participating in two world wars, joining international organizations like the League of Nations and the United Nations, implementing universal healthcare, and aiding in the fight against apartheid—the negative legacy of its homegrown genocide against Indigenous peoples remained largely undisclosed (Dunning 2014, 18). The last residential school only closed in 1996.

On the other hand, another example of what happened in this Land justified by racial ideologies is the eskimo identification Canada system, also known as disk system . During the week that my classmates and I were studying about it, I shared with them that nowadays, after years of studies, colonialism hardly shocks me.

Introduced in 1941, the disk system was a deeply dehumanizing practice that assigned numbers to Inuit individuals, replacing their traditional names and identities (Dunning 2014, 8). This system, which persisted until 1971, was part of a broader colonial effort to control and assimilate Indigenous populations, reducing them to mere numbers in government records—physically materialized as necklace identifiers (Dunning 2014, 12).

Moreover, the impact of this system on Inuit identity was profound, as it led to the erasure of cultural heritage and inflicted psychological harm by stripping individuals of their personal and communal identities. Norma Dunning (2019, 8), an Ihalmiut Inuit scholar, highlights how this practice marginalized the Inuit Peoples, silencing their voices and disregarding their cultural practices within official government narratives. In this context, the disk system stands as a stark example of how colonial governance sought not only to control Indigenous populations but to erase their cultural identities and replace them with a sterile, bureaucratic system that ignored their humanity.

In terms of the effects of colonial policies on Indigenous people, as a residential school Warrior, Romeo Saganash (2021) says: "Our people feel disenfranchised, and rightly so. The imposed institutions that we've come to accept over time, including the political instruments of the Indian Act, have suspended the capacity, the ability, of our own people to participate in decisions pertaining to their own well-being, their sacred dignity and, most important, their very survival and security" (62). His words are a statement of the impact of colonial acts of violence on target bodies. When the history of colonial policies in Canada is told by the people who faced it, Canada's history turns into a different perspective from the history taught in the schools and media in this Land and around the world.

Settler-colonialism: a way of viewing and living

During his G20 speech in 2009, Prime Minister Stephen Harper stated that "We also have no history of colonialism." Despite his words, in my understanding, Canada has been a settler-colonial founded country from its very beginning. Not only because of the legal structures that sustain the country, but also because it is part of a broader legal system.

The Racial Contract theory, created by the Jamaican philosopher Charles Mills in 1997, states that the world as we know it began to be constituted in the colonial process. Dear reader, how have you learned that the world began? In my education,[10] the world as we know it—with its epistemologies and ontologies—started with Christopher Columbus and the "discovery" of the new world. This way, Mills (1997) explains that "We live in a world which has been foundationally shaped for the past five hundred years by the realities of European domination and the gradual consolidation of global white supremacy" (20).

Even though it is not widely known, colonialism can be defined as a creative "practice of domination, which involves the subjugation of one people to another" (Kohn and Reddy 2024). In this way, colonialism is inherently a violent process. It involves a division and a binary classification of the world. More than a system of economic exploitation and political domination, it is a way of perceiving the world.

In my home country, I've never studied settler-colonialism due to a different but still colonial process.[11] Erin Morton (2019), a white settler scholar, helped me to understand that settler-colonialism is not a past event but an ongoing system that continues to shape the current social, political, and economic order in Canada, where the legitimacy of white settler land possession and sovereignty continues to erase Indigenous presence (439).

Barrington Walker (quoted in Rutherford 2020, 7), a black Canadian author and historian of modern Canada, argues that Canada's Indigenous policy formed a web of interconnected attitudes and practices of racial governance during the early years

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of Confederation, laying much of the foundation for modern Canada. Such foundation is marked by a settler-colonial relationship, defined by Glen Sean Coulthard [12] (2014, 6-7) as a specific form of domination, where power has been structured into a stable and entrenched set of hierarchical social relations.

In addition, Mills' (1997) thoughts are important to understand how this colonial system works in a broader context:

> The Racial Contract establishes a racial polity, a racial state, and a racial juridical system, where the status of whites and nonwhites is clearly demarcated, whether by law or custom. And the purpose of this state, by contrast with the neutral state of classic contractarianism, is, inter alia, specifically to maintain and reproduce this racial order, securing the privileges and advantages of the full white citizens and maintaining the subordination of nonwhites. (13–14)

So, this way of perceiving the world is what created and drove many significant actions within the Canadian legal system against the People who belong to this Land. Settler-colonialism presents a complex and controversial structure that may seem positive at times, as is the case with individual experiences understood as positive during the legality of residential schools, but for the most part violent, as seen in the case of the identification objects in the disk system.

Likewise, it was the same social system that sustained the Kanesatake Resistance, denied the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) in 2007 and then signed it 11 years later, and was responsible for the deaths of Louis Riel and Dudley George.[13] At the same time, it is the same system that established the Truth and Reconciliation Commission as a means to acknowledge and address the historical abuses and injustices perpetrated by the Canadian government. However, I keep asking myself: Is it enough?

Expanding on this, in 2015, the TRC released the *94 Calls to Action* report as a way to address and move forward with the reconciliation process. Since then, according to the 2023 accountability report by the Yellowhead Institute, only 13 of the 94 Calls to Action have been completed (Jewell and Mosby 2023, 4).

Romeo Saganash (2021), a lawyer and former politician from the Cree Nation, answers my question on his work, *No Reconciliation in the Absence of Truth and Justice*. From his political point of view, he shows how Canadian history has been seen out of the mainstream perspective, he says:

> The roadmap proposed, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's 94 Calls to Action, remains largely unheeded by all governments to this day. Former chair and retiring senator Murray Sinclair said in an interview something to the effect that it took Canada 150 years to get us into this mess and it will take us another 150 to get out of it. It doesn't have to be that complicated; just some political will and honesty and integrity would take us a long way forward. But there isn't any. (62)

Also, not proceeding with the 94 Calls to Action and other initiatives guarantees "the continued survival of the settler state" (Morton 2019, 441–442).

Reconciliation, in this way, serves as a mechanism to mask settler-state action that hinders meaningful changes in Land relations or power dynamics between the state and Indigenous communities. If Prime Minister Harper's public apology, as a figure who represented the government in 2009, had been sincere, the Canadian government as a whole—federally and provincially—should have acted better within 8 years to reconcile. As a newcomer, acknowledging how Canada was historically built makes me aware of my actions and gives me the possibility to think about how not to reproduce a settler relationship.

Recognition and subordination

Public statements, payments,[14] and apologies are not enough to erase all the effects that such government actions have caused on entire populations. Especially when, on one hand, the government presents itself as a reconciler, but on the other hand, it reveals its true colonial face—as it did in 2007 when they refused to sign the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). One year later, the Prime Minister offered a public apology for what he called the sad part of Canadian history, referring only to the residential schools. And in 2009, the same white politician said that Canada had never experienced colonialism. As a result, it indicates that actions in favor of reconciliation are empty gestures because they are conflicting and reinforce in the present the harms inflicted in the past. Should not the government be a public example to society?

To begin with a broader understanding of recognition politics, Dane Allard, a Red River Métis and settler historian, analyzes the reality of the diverse Métis People. In his award-recognized article *Kitchen Table Politics: Bannock and Métis Common Sense in an Era of Nascent Recognition Politics*, he argues that while the Métis gain legal and political recognition, this recognition is often imposed from the top down, based on bureaucratic criteria that do not reflect the

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cultural or political realities of Métis communities (2003, 59). Notably, despite the existence of hundreds of Peoples with diverse cultures, languages, and relationships with societies, the state reduced them all to "Indians", a racially and culturally constructed term that embodied the settlers' goals and ideas (Lawrence 2003, 4).

In this way, reconciliation politics are blending with well-established recognition politics, defending federal recognition as a step further to achieve a strategic civic friendship between the settler-state and Indigenous Peoples (Coulthard 2014, 106). This process, by focusing on narrow, legal definitions of identity, neglects the lived experiences of the Métis, as well as the cultural complexities that cannot be reduced to mere administrative categories. In this way, Allard shows how policies of recognition like “Bill C-31 was a profoundly affective state intervention into Indigeneity” (Allard 2023, 54), which made the Métis People rearticulate their definitions of what is being Métis.

Notably, to gain federal recognition as an Indigenous person in Canada, an individual must have specific government regulatory criteria (Lawrence 2003, 3). This recognition comes with the subordination of Indigenous identities to external control, functioning as regulatory systems, limiting their self-determination and also access to Land and rights. Russel and Wylynko demonstrate how it works in the Métis community: “Affirming Métis rights in the Constitution Act of 1982 symbolized a major moment in the history of the true Canadians” (2023, 9). The referenced rights are the recognition of Métis People as Indigenous People in the Constitution. Their statement highlights how the government's concept of recognition became meaningful to a Nation.

"Indigenous peoples have the right to self-determination." (UNDRIP 2007, 8) This statement is stated in Article 3 of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. In 2022, 6 years after Canada adopted UNDRIP—a process that took three years to finalize—the government stated that UNDRIP serves as a roadmap for reconciliation efforts. Article 3 guarantees the autonomy of Indigenous Peoples, not the autonomy of the settler-state.

However, by defining the terms of recognition, the government continues to control the reconciliation process in ways that often do not serve the true interests of Indigenous communities, perpetuating colonial dynamics. Moreover, reducing people's identities racially classified as "Indigenous" and disregarding their traditional identities is subjugation (Lawrence 2003, 5).

For this reason, Coulthard (2014, 23–24) classifies the politics of recognition as inherently colonial. Accordingly, merging reconciliation politics with recognition makes the reconciliation discourse a subjugation tool. The recognition stemming from the reconciliation process exists as part of an implicit strategy of control and subordination, following a colonial logic and keeping the social status quo intact.

Moving the rocks: possible paths

If I would try to materialize colonialism, I would say it is like an ancient stone castle, well-built and firmly sustained, surrounded by a towering wall so high that, even if we look up, we cannot see the top. And this wall makes those who did not build it feel suffocated.

Resisting colonial powers is a possible way to remove some stones from this wall and destabilize it. However, the way of removing these stones, or even destroying them, requires a major responsibility to build whatever we want after the wall, in the wall, or far away from it.

In this manner, Coulthard (2014, 170) emphasizes Indigenous self-determination through land-based practices, community organizing, and governance as active forms of rejecting colonialism. Resistance—whether through protests, direct action, or cultural resurgence—challenges settler structures and asserts Indigenous autonomy.

Historically, such resistance threatened the colonial system, leading to government suppression and surveillance, particularly between the 1960s and 1970s (Rutherford 2020, 16). Coulthard further argues that true decolonization requires an Indigenous resurgence, restoring governance, laws, and cultural practices disrupted by colonialism (2014, 171).

Nevertheless, at the beginning of this paper, I invited the non-Indigenous readers to actively operate against the colonial perpetuation because we can and should play an important role in moving those stones from the giant wall created to benefit us. Therefore, it is important to assume a political and epistemological position in the face of colonialism.

At the beginning of the Fall 2024 Term, I listened to Elder Marge Friedel (n.d), an Elder from the Métis Nation of Alberta, claiming the possibility of being listened to and telling another story. She said: “We need to tell our stories, that isn't only a story that was written by somebody else who was researching” (Friedel n.d, at 00:12–26). Through these words, I understand that shifting the narrative is a possibility to shake that wall.

So, as a position for this shift, I compromise not only engaging with the studies but also with the struggles. As an academic student, I pay attention to institutional racism. As a photographer, I pay attention

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to representations. As a foreign settler, I listen, read and learn, I give my voice and position myself where and when it needs. I am only suggesting actions to show us, non-Indigenous individuals, which actions we can take to address how we can act to develop a collective struggle.

Conclusion

In conclusion, when shifting the point of view of the history of Canada, as it is officially presented, we are able to see the hidden history of colonization, violence, and marginalization of Indigenous Peoples and Land. The experiences of Métis and other Indigenous Peoples are central to understanding the systemic and ongoing nature of this colonial relationship.

Reconciliation in its current form, largely symbolic and bureaucratic, does not dismantle the structures that perpetuate the settler-colonial system and continues to be used as a power-maintaining tool by the Canadian government (Coulthard 2014, 107; Russel and Wylynko 2023, 100). Also, colonial practices are not relics of the past but continue to shape the present-day struggles of Indigenous communities as they fight for Land rights, cultural preservation, and self-determination.

Moreover, “for the good of Mother Earth” (Freidel n.d., at 03:24), the story of what is known as Canada is not simply the story of settler nation-building but also the story of Indigenous lives, resistance, and resilience. While the colonial project may continue to evolve and adapt, so too does the spirit of Indigenous Peoples who, despite centuries of oppression, continue to live and imagine a future of justice and peace. For this reason, Saganash reinforces, “We are still here. We will still be here later, too” (2021, 73).

Ultimately, this paper is part of my position. However, it does not end here, it goes further. The questions of reconciliation that linger in my mind will not be resolved through symbolic gestures or state-imposed recognition but through meaningful, structural change that respects Indigenous lives, autonomy, worldviews, practices, and Lands.

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Notes

[1]When I use the term “Land”, I capitalize the “L” to acknowledge its sacred significance to Indigenous Peoples. Capitalization and non-capitalization through this paper is a style choice, mostly, in term of honor. Additionally, I am referring to the territory currently known as Canada.

[2]The Cree word for the city now known as Edmonton.

[3]Reconciliation involves many delicate layers, this paper does not pretend to talk about all of them. Even though, I invite you, the reader, to search, engage and study about it and all of the other subjects that come with it.

[4]I took the INDG200 course (Experiences and Perspectives of Indigenous Peoples in Canadian History) with Professor Courteney Durand Morin, an incredible and sweet person, who I thank the most for all of the shared knowledge and support.

[5]Patricia Russell, a Métis journalist and photographer, brings an insider’s perspective to *The True Canadians: Forgotten Nevermore*, shaping its nuanced take on Métis culture and history. Co-authored with David Wylynko, a white settler journalist, the book reflects their combined journalistic influence. It serves as a historical account of the Métis Nation, exploring key events, laws, and legislation that have shaped its communities.

[6]In my experience with non-Indigenous people living in Canada, September 30th is just a regular holiday. However, it should be a reflection day. This says a lot about the non-Indigenous society in general and the government’s actions.

[7]Commonly referred to as the Oka Crisis, which was a 78-day standoff in 1990 involving Kanyen'kehà:ka Land defenders, the Canadian Army, Quebec police and the RCMP. The dispute stemmed from a proposal to extend a golf course on a territory in Kanesatake, which included a sacred Kanyen'kehà:ka burial site.

[8]It was implemented on September 19, 2007, and is a landmark agreement addressing the legacy of residential schools in Canada. It was responsible for the establishment of the TRC.

[9]The history of what is known as Canada is not solely based on violence, reducing Indigenous Peoples experiences only to violence is also perpetuating colonialism. So, it is important to note that there were diverse experiences in the residential schools system. There are survivors who state their positive experiences during their time in the schools.

[10]I was educated in Brazil, although the “Occidental world” has the same curricular content.

[11]Brazil was colonized by Portugal, an exploitation colony, while Canada was marked by British and French empires, and is known as a settler colony.

[12]Glen Coulthard is a Yellownives Dene Nation author and scholar in the areas of contemporary political theory, Indigenous politics and thoughts. His work, referenced in this paper, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* is a well-awarded book.

[13]Louis Riel, a Métis leader, was judged as a high traitor and hanged in 1885. And Dudley George, member of Kettle & Stony Point First Nation, was shot and killed by the Ontario Provincial Police while protesting for Land rights. He did not receive medical attention at the scene.

[14]The Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement defined a financial compensation to some of the survivors of the residential schools system. It is important to note that not all of the survivors received this payment, because some residential schools were not recognized as part of the system.

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