

Place against Empire: Understanding Indigenous Anti-Colonialism

Glen Coulthardⁱ

Abstract

This article examines the role that "place" plays in radical Indigenous activism from the perspective of my community, the Dene Nation. I argue that, although Indigenous peoples' senses of place have been worn by centuries of colonial-capitalist displacement, they still serve as an orienting framework that guides radical Indigenous activism today and offers a way of thinking about relations within and between peoples and the natural world built on principles of reciprocity and freedom.

In his groundbreaking 1972 text, *God is Red*, the late Lakota philosopher Vine Deloria Jr. argues that one of the most significant differences that exist between Indigenous and Western metaphysics revolves around the central importance of land to Indigenous modes of being, thought, and ethics. When "ideology is divided according to American Indian and Western European [traditions]", writes Deloria, this "fundamental difference is one of great philosophical importance. American Indians hold their lands – *places* – as having the highest possible meaning, and all their statements are made with this reference point in mind."ⁱⁱ Whereas most Western societies, by contrast, tend to derive meaning from the world in historical/developmental terms, thereby placing *time* as the narrative of central importance.

In drawing our attention to the distinction between Indigenous place-based and Western time-oriented understandings of the world, Deloria does not simply intend to reiterate the rather obvious observation that most Indigenous societies hold a strong attachment to their homelands, but is instead attempting to explicate the position that land occupies as an ontological framework for understanding relationships. Seen in this light, it is a profound misunderstanding to think of land or place as simply some material object of profound importance to Indigenous cultures (although it is this too); instead it ought to be understood as a field of "relationships of things to each other."ⁱⁱⁱ Place is a way of knowing, experiencing, and relating with the world – and these ways of knowing often guide forms of resistance to power relations that threaten to erase or destroy our senses of place. This, I would argue, is precisely the understanding of land

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and/or place that not only anchors many Indigenous peoples' critique of colonial relations of force and command, but also our visions of what a truly post-colonial relationship of peaceful co-existence might look like.

Consider the following example from my people, the Dene Nations of what is now the Northwest Territories, Canada. In the Yellowknives Dene (or Weledeh) dialect of Dogrib, "land" (or *dè*) is translated in relational terms as that which encompasses not only the land (understood here as material), but also people and animals, rocks and trees, lakes and rivers, and so on. Seen in this light, we are as much a part of the land as any other element. Furthermore, within this system of relations human beings are not the only constituent believed to embody spirit or agency. Ethically, this meant that humans held certain obligations to the land, animals, plants, and lakes in much the same way that we hold obligations to other people. And if these obligations were met, then the land, animals, plants and lakes would *reciprocate* and meet their obligations to humans, thus ensuring the survival and well being of all over time. The following story told by the late George Blondin, a respected Sahtu Dene elder, highlights this place-based ethics of reciprocity nicely. The tale recounts an experience his brother Edward had while hunting moose:

Edward was hunting near a small river when he heard a raven croaking, far off to his left. Ravens can't kill animals themselves, so they depend on hunters and wolves to kill food for them. Flying high in the sky, they spot animals too far away for hunters or wolves to see. They then fly to the hunter and attract his attention by croaking loudly, then fly back to where the animals are.

Edward stopped and watched the raven carefully. It made two trips back and forth in the same direction. Edward made a sharp turn and walked to where the raven was flying. There were no moose tracks, but he kept following the raven. When he got to the riverbank and looked down, Edward saw two big moose feeding on the bank. He shot them, skinned them, and covered the meat with their hides.

Before he left, Edward put some fat meat out on the snow for the raven. He knew that without the bird, he wouldn't have killed any meat that day.^{iv}

Notice how Blondin's narrative not only emphasizes the consciousness and individual agency of the raven, but also depicts the relationship between the hunter and the bird as a mutually interdependent one. The cooperation displayed between Edward and the raven provides a clear example of the

ethic of reciprocity and sharing underlying Dene understandings of their relationship with land.

Over the last 60 years it has become apparent to numerous people within our communities that the organizational imperatives of colonial-capital accumulation has signified an affront to this place-based understanding of what constitutes proper relations – relations between people, relations between humans and their environment, and relations between individuals and institutions of authority. Although this place-based ethics has been worn by decades of colonial *displacement*, for many it still serves as the radical imaginary guiding our visions of a just political and economic relationship with non-Indigenous people and communities based on principles of reciprocity and mutual obligation. Peter Kulchyski highlights this spatial feature of Indigenous struggle well in his excellent book, *Like the Sound of a Drum: Aboriginal Cultural Politics in Denendeh and Nunavut*, when he writes: “It is possible to argue that precisely what distinguishes anti-colonial struggles from the classic Marxist accounts of the working class is that oppression for the colonized is registered in the spatial dimension – as *dispossession* – whereas for workers, oppression is measured as exploitation, as the theft of *time*.”^v I would simply add here that Indigenous ways of thinking about *non-oppressive* relations are often expressed with this spatial referent in mind as well.

Any cursory glance at the testimony made by Indigenous participants at the Mackenzie Valley Pipeline Inquiry in the 1970s clearly demonstrates the significance of land in our critique of colonial-capitalist development. The Mackenzie Valley Pipeline Inquiry was established in 1975 by the Government of Canada to investigate the environmental and social impacts potentially posed by the construction of a massive pipeline to transport natural gas from Prudhoe Bay, Alaska, south along the Mackenzie River Valley to markets in southern Canada and the USA. One of the most profound statements against the project was delivered by Philip Blake, a Dene from Fort McPherson. Notice the three interrelated meanings of “land” at play in his narrative: land-as-resource central to our material survival; land-as-identity, as constitutive of who we are as a people; and land-as-relationship:

If our Indian nation is being destroyed so that poor people of the world might get a chance to share this worlds riches, then as Indian people, I am sure that we would seriously consider giving up our resources. But do you really expect us to give up our life and our lands so that those few people who are the riches and most powerful in the world today can maintain their own position of privilege?

That is not our way.

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I strongly believe that we do have something to offer your nation, however, something other than our minerals. I believe it is in the self-interest of your own nation to allow the Indian nation to survive and develop in our own way, on our own land. For thousands of years we have lived with the land, we have taken care of the land, and the land has taken care of us. We did not believe that our society has to grow and expand and conquer new areas in order to fulfill our destiny as Indian people.

We have lived with the land, not tried to conquer or control it or rob it of its riches. We have not tried to get more and more riches and power, we have not tried to conquer new frontiers, or out do our parents or make sure that every year we are richer than the year before.

We have been satisfied to see our wealth as ourselves and the land we live with. It is our greatest wish to be able to pass on this land to succeeding generations in the same condition that our fathers have given it to us. We did not try to improve the land and we did not try to destroy it.

That is not our way.

I believe your nation might wish to see us, not as a relic from the past, but as a way of life, a system of values by which you may survive in the future. This we are willing to share.^{vi}

When Blake suggests in his testimony that as “Indian people” we must reject the pathological drive for accumulation that fuels colonial-capitalist expansion, he was basing this statement on a conception of Dene identity which locates us as an inseparable part of an expansive system of interdependent relations covering the land and animals, past and future generations, as well as other people and communities. This self-conception demands that we conduct ourselves in accordance with certain ethico-political norms, which stresses, among other things, the importance of sharing, egalitarianism, respecting the freedom and autonomy of both individuals and groups, and recognizing the obligations that one has not only to other people, but to the natural world as a whole. It is this place-based imaginary that serves as the ethical foundation from which many Indigenous people and communities continue to resist and critique the dual imperatives of state sovereignty and capitalist accumulation that constitute our colonial present.

Endnotes

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- i **Glen Coulthard** is a member of the Yellowknives Dene First Nation and an assistant professor in the First Nations Studies Program and the Department of Political Science at the University of British Columbia, Canada. Glen has written and published numerous articles and chapters in the areas of Indigenous thought and politics, contemporary political theory, and radical social and political thought. His most recent research and writing seeks to re-evaluate the negative portrayal of revenge in the history of Western political thought in light of anti-colonial struggles for land, freedom and dignity. He lives with his partner and two children in Vancouver, British Columbia, unceded Coast Salish Territories.
- ii Vine Deloria Jr., *God is Red: A Native View of Religion* (Golden, CO: Fulcrum Publishing, 1992), 62.
- iii Vine Deloria Jr., "Power and Place Equal Personality", in Vine Deloria Jr. and Daniel Wildcat, *Power and Place: Indian Education in America* (Golden, CO: Fulcrum Publishing, 2001), 23.
- iv George Blondin, *When the World Was New: Stories of the Sahtu Dene* (Yellowknife: Outcrop Publishers, 1990), 155-156.
- v Peter Kulchyski, *Like the Sound of a Drum: Aboriginal Cultural Politics in Denendeh and Nunuvut* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2005), 88.
- vi Philip Blake, "Statement to the Mackenzie Valley Pipeline Inquiry", in Mel Watkins (ed.), *Dene Nation: The Colony Within* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977), 7-8; emphasis added.
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