



Generative Refusal: Creative Practice and Relational Indigenous Sovereignty

Notes from the field

KELSEY R. WRIGHTSON

*Dechinta Centre for Research and Learning,
Canada*

Abstract

This article critiques narrow conceptions of sovereignty, while holding up Indigenous practices of sovereign place making and creative relational sovereign enactment. I come into this contestation by thinking through creative acts of sovereignty as a generative praxis. Informed by these practices offers a new way of thinking about sovereignty as practiced, generative and relational. Grounded practices of Indigenous peoples in Denendeh (Northwest Territories, Canada) and the authors own experience as a settler living and working in Denendeh, this article also offers a space to think through 'refusability' as relational response.

Keywords: Sovereignty, Indigenous, Refusal, Canada, Colonialism

At the Dene National Assembly in 2018, incumbent National Chief Norman Yakeleya used his first speech as the newly elected Grand Chief to speak about the vest that he chose to wear. He said the hide vest, beaded in a Dene floral design, was a heavy weight, a constant reminder of the love and support of the women who made it for him, and also the responsibilities he carried into his new role because of those relations. Acknowledging the labor and care of the makers, Chief Yakeleya invoked both the commitments to his family and community, and the deep relationships that connected him through his clothing, to land. Woven throughout the assembly, Indigenous cultural production flourished through story and song, sewn into clothing, and beaded across moccasins. The intimate arts worn by Dene people invoked of deep relationships to land and community as a reminder of all the relations present and involved in the political proceedings. At gatherings of the Dene Nation, politics is embodied, heard in the simultaneous translation of the languages of Denendeh as a low murmur from the back of the room, in the scent of hides, in the pounding of the drum, the tangible, felt experience of political relations.

These stitches bind together hides, beads and ribbon, and create new relationships, both across time and geographies. For people who know how to read the techniques, the beads and stitches, the patterns speak about the maker—the land they are from and how the cut of the clothing helps them flourish, who they learned from, and who those teachers learned from. However, these forms are more than representation of nationhood, they enact a particular kind of relationship to the maker, the harvester, the wearer and the land. This is distinctly non-representative, but laboured and embodied practice.

The choice of Grand Chief Yakaleya to evoke these forms of relations and governance into the explicitly political arena of Dene National assembly invests politics with the makers, the ones who beaded the vest, the hide tanners who scraped it, the hunters who harvested with intention. These are sovereign acts in and of themselves. In resisting a reading of Indigenous, and specifically Dene, creative forms as solely representative and the process and the relationships that flow from them these creative acts, evoke a kind of practiced sovereignty.

The following article contains my reflections on these practices of Dene sovereignty, as white settler in Denendeh. Moving between theory and practice, I explore creative practices of Indigenous sovereignty through the critical concepts of relationality and refusal. Through this, I offer the practice of refusability as a means of thinking with and enacting a relational practice of Indigenous sovereignty in the ongoing context of settler colonialism.

Colonialism is not over

Colonialism in what is now known as North America takes the form of ongoing dispossession, physical, psychological and material violence. Taking different contemporary juridical and normative forms given the varying histories and contemporary political, cultural and legislative contexts, settler colonialism is an ongoing structure and process of dispossession (Wolfe, 1999). Settler colonial state sovereignty is then predicated on the ongoing material and psycho-effective dispossession of Indigenous peoples from their land and cultures using an array of tactics.

One of these tactics has been a specific effort to undermine, deny and otherwise overwrite Indigenous peoples' practices and assertions of sovereignty, including through legislative and juridical violence (Coulthard, 2013; A Simpson, 2015, 2016, 2017; Woolford 2005). Dene political theorist Glen Coulthard argues the shift from the mid 1990s from outright violence towards more conciliatory forms of dispossession (2014). In his critique of the 'colonial politics of recognition' Coulthard argues that this form of settler colonialism is still oriented around 'the exclusion/elimination double' but through new conciliatory means. Gina Starblanket and Heidi Stark (2018)

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argue that 'attention to the power and logic at work in state narratives enables us to better identify the *productive* (read: generative) quality of settler colonialism ... This productive nature of settler colonialism is rooted in relationality'. Indeed, settler colonialism doesn't just try to eliminate but, in its place, seeks to produce something new, often through relationship with Indigenous Nations (Starblanket and Stark, 2018).

Against these structures and practices of colonialism, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson describes Indigenous sovereignty in the following manner:

Indigenous thought, which is as diverse as the land itself, roots sovereignty in good relationships, responsibilities and deep respect for individual and collective self-determination, and honoring diversity ... Borders for indigenous nations are not rigid lines on a map but areas of increased diplomacy, ceremony and sharing ... Our idea of sovereignty accommodates separate jurisdictions and separate sovereignties over a shared territory as long as everyone is operating in a respectful and responsible manner (Simpson, 2015, p. 19).

Writing as a white non-Indigenous or settler¹ person living and working in Denendeh, settler colonialism, resistance, and resurgence exist simultaneously across scales of time and geography and challenge any division between the micro and macro forms. Settler colonialism is both structural and relational, expansive and intimate. It is the gross discrepancy in average earnings or education achievements between Indigenous and non-Indigenous residents of the North West Territories, and in the last Canadian residential school closing in 1996. But it also exists in the everyday acts of sovereignty, the ones that I am learning to see. It exists in that young one teaching me how to pluck a duck and the ones who choose not to work in mines. I feel it when someone introduces me to their territory with the drymeat their family made. I see it in drum dances, and stories, and I hear it in the sound of people making jokes in Wiiliideh. Sovereignty is enacted as people travel across their territories and when they remember the old trails and traplines. While land claims negotiations might try to map the borders, set claims, and determine citizenship, I understand sovereignty to move with caribou, shift around arsenic contamination, and weave through family trees.

Indigenous creative thought and practice is making important interventions into the location and understanding of Indigenous sovereignties that centre on the diverse practices, actors and locations. Indigenous artists and theorists have been arguing for, and enacting, an expansive understanding of Indigenous sovereignty, including but not limited to visual sovereignty (Raheja, 2015), dancing sovereignty (Dangeli, 2015), narrative sovereignty (Wente, 2019), doing sovereignty (Robinson, 2020). According to Michelle Raheja, sovereignty 'is a process that is kinetic rather than a rigid set of principles that transcends space and time unchanged. Perhaps it can best be imagined as a "being" and a "doing"' (Raheja, 2015, p. 28). While taking up the language of sovereignty, these practices are not co-determined, or conflated with state sovereignty, and require attentiveness to the multiplicity of locations and manifestations of Indigenous sovereign practices. As Starblanket and Stark (2018) argue, 'the broader understanding of relationality can help unsettle dominant understandings of who we see as political actors ... governance is the business of all living beings, not just that of elected leadership' (Starblanket and Stark, 2018, p. 25).

As Grand Chief Yakelaya identified, the source of the political power in his vest came through the relationships that went into the object, not in the materiality itself. This is vital distinction, and one informed by a larger conceptual shift that Coulthard (2014) identifies as a reorientation of struggle for land in distinction from struggles that are *informed by land* (Coulthard, 2014, p. 78). Starting from land as central to relationships creates a network of reciprocal obligations, or 'grounded normativity'. Thus, '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'' (Coulthard, 2007, p. 79). Situated as a practice of 'grounded normativity' rather than social relations of exploitation, creative practices are then extensions of non-exploitative relationships informed by land, rather than over land as a commodity. By extension, the materiality of what is produced is not consumable or reduced to the materiality of the work, but the embodiment of the relations and commitments that went into it. Only through healthy relations with the land, water, animals and the makers is such work possible. Rather than reading the

vest as object, the vest becomes a physical manifestation of the relationships as practiced and lived. Reading creative practices as enactments of sovereignty does not position the work as exemplary of the theoretical interventions, but as critical interventions, modalities of sovereign practice, in and of themselves.

When Stark and Starblanket (2018) assert that governance is the business of all living beings, they call for an analytical and methodological innovation. Whether performance art, a work displayed in a national gallery, or a vest worn to a national assembly, Indigenous creative acts of sovereignty can be read as relationships created and enacted. Each piece can be read—the origins of materials indicating transit or trade, the style, placement and precision of stitch, the number of needles, the type of floral mark the maker. But there are also things that cannot be read, that can really only be understood in the making. The materials to smoke a hide take work to gather, take a community to make. You have to know the time of year that the hides will be right, when the holes made by the warbols have healed, when the hide is still thin. Good beadwork starts with the land, starts with good hide and good smoke and the right season to do the work. Indigenous creative practices of sovereignty do not create an object, though that may be the result. Instead, the embodied practices of making grounds creative practice in the larger set of ethical obligations to human and non-human beings, and the land. The object created is not the end of the generative process, but a result of the practice of otherwise. The process of labouring to create something, whether a work of art or a political community, demands a set of non-exploitative relationships that are grounded in an alternative normative, and embodied, connection to the land. Sovereignty is because it is being enacted, emplaced.

Making and the Creation of Political Community

In the spring of 2018, I was given a pair of bear hide mitts. Although actually what I was given were pieces of bear hide mitts and the instruction that I was to sew them myself. Pualiya is a man of few words. Some people call him Paul, but that is his not his name. I had first met him the winter before at a meeting where I had shown up with a new parka and woefully inadequate gloves. As a visitor, I was determined to be tough. When he gave me these mitts in spring, he said 'I remember you—your hands were cold'.

If a pair of mittens is a gift, parts of mittens and instruction to make my own is a responsibility. It is exactly through the process of making them myself that the theories of the politics of making, of generative resurgence, have deepened and come to life for me. I understand the work that went into the hide—the processes of scraping, of fixing, of making sure it was done in good way. The instructions to make my own mitts meant asking for help. And while my friends joke that my blood is too thin to really sew, the important thing is I tried. And I learned.

There is a deep ethics of care when sharing what you have, but also a creation of political community when you see someone is cold and you decide that it is now your responsibility to help someone stay warm. It is that creation of political community, rooted in and informed by a radically different relationship to land, practiced through this process of making, generating and regenerating these new commitments that inform my work. The process of making connected me to Puliya, to Berna who made sure I didn't sew the lining in backwards, to Celine who loaned me her favourite glover needle, to the Denendeh—the land, the water and the animals which inform and make possible all of those other relationships.

These mittens connect me to a political community created in and through these relationships. The harvesting, the tanning, the knowledge to make and mend, they all come from the Indigenous peoples whose territories I am on. When I wear these mitts, I enact those relationships, and my responsibilities as a guest on their territory. This is not a form of sovereignty that pushes me out, nor is it a form of sovereignty that requires recognition. Sovereignty in this territory is lived in both who is welcomed, and how they are asked to be on these lands.

Sovereignty practiced in and through these relational forms is not one based on exclusions or demarcating difference. Instead, sovereignty is made manifest in the ways through which Indigenous nations, and individuals, practice self-determination and determining who and how we come into relation with each other. The gift of mitts, the obligations to treat that gift with respect, is a relational manifestation of that political community.

While Coulthard speaks of the generative nature of Indigenous peoples' resistance in relation to blockading, this analysis can be extended to other

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creative acts of where the actions of saying no, of refusing, 'have also ingrained within them a resounding "yes": they are the affirmative enactment of another modality of being, a different way of relating to and with the world' (Coulthard, 2014, p. 169). Thus, relational analysis enables an understanding of objects, of material work, to extend governance, and the practice of sovereignty, beyond a temporally and spatially delimited form, and as an expansive and shared relationship.

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In *Dancing on our Turtle's Back*, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2011, p. 32) pushes back against understanding Indigenous resistance as 'antagonism' but instead the desire to move towards resurgent new forms. She says 'I have spent enough time taking down the master's house, and now I want most of my energy to go into visioning and building our new house'. From this moment of refusal, resistance then is both generative and imaginative, visioning and building rather than dismantling. In *Stó:Lō*, scholar Dylan Robinson's analysis of Indigenous soundscapes, he argues that critical sovereign listening 'understands that in entering Indigenous sound territories as guests, we will be unable to hear Indigenous sovereignty, at the same time that Indigenous peoples affirm sovereignty of their lands through the felt history of song' (Robinson, 2020, p. 53). This is a vital decoupling of the *practice* of Indigenous sovereignty from the *perceptions* of those subject to Indigenous sovereignty as guests or settlers on sovereign territories. Robinson states that 'sovereign speech does not necessarily provoke specific forms of sovereign listening ... by decoupling the deterministic relationship between sovereign object and reception, we can gain a more nuanced understanding of Indigenous and settler forms of *sensory experience*' (Robinson, 2020, p. 63). Decoupling acts from reception offers the space for understanding Indigenous sovereignty as deeply relational, but not *requiring* recognition. Audra Simpson argues, 'just because the settler state cannot hear or comprehend the articulations of Indigenous sovereignty, does not mean that they are not happening' (A Simpson, 2000, p. 114). Indigenous practices of sovereignty need not be recognized and affirmed by the settler state in its juridical or normative forms to nevertheless be a manifestation of Indigenous sovereignty.

Robinson describes the colonial practice of 'hungry listening', or listening for settler consumption. In resistance, sovereign practices of listening refuse that ear, sometimes through spatializing sovereignty to create 'irreconcilable spaces' that 'unwelcome non-Indigenous desire' (Robinson, 2020, p. 236). Audra Simpson describes 'refusal' as 'a political and ethical stance that stands in stark contrast to the desire to have one's distinctiveness as a culture, as a people, recognized. Refusal comes with the requirement of having one's political sovereignty acknowledged and upheld, and raises the question of legitimacy for those who are usually in the position of recognizing' (Simpson, 2014, p. 11). Simpson identifies here the dual nature of a politics of refusal, simultaneously enacting a new reality while offering a critique of the assumed sovereignty of the settler colonial state. In turning away, the practice of refusal is the 'imagination of the political under conditions of falsehood' (Simpson, 2017, p. 2), and simultaneously enacts a critique of the state, and generative of Indigenous sovereignty as otherwise.

Decoupling sovereign actions from the perception and reception of those actions as sovereign challenges the assumed settler authority to recognize what and whom can be sovereign, again opening the space to answer Starblanket and Stark's call for governance as the business of all living things. Through the acts of doing, the relations these actions generate with the land and with others, this work becomes sovereign enactment in itself, refusing the authority of the state to authorize in favour of generating or creating something else. Embedding refusal within a relational analytic through his analysis of sensory sovereignty, by decoupling sovereign actions from sovereign perceptions, Robinson makes a vital interjection into understanding Indigenous sovereignty as both contemporary practice, but also within a larger historic context. Despite the ongoing settler colonial violence and dispossession, Indigenous sovereign acts continue, no matter the perception or recognition. These relational forms invite, but do not require, recognition.

In these moments of refusal 'this is political life that, in its insistence on certain things—such as nationhood and sovereignty—fundamentally interrupts and casts into question the story that settler states tell about themselves' (A Simpson, 2014, p. 177). While secondary to the generative and creative relations that Indigenous sovereignty produce, this refusal, and the moments of distribution

concomitantly enact a critique. Detangling the generative relations of sovereignty from a disruptive critique of the settler colonial state allows both acts to exist simultaneously, without capitulating to the authority of colonial recognition. Rather than demanding engagement from Indigenous forms and relations of sovereignty, refusal, or this generative no, takes critique into a realm that is responsive to, but not dependant on, the engagement of Indigenous nations.

This critique offers an opportunity for settler colonial relations to take up the generative refusal as a call to action. Taking seriously the assertion of Starblanket and Stark that governance is the business of all living things, this calls for non-Indigenous subjects and subjectivities to constitute themselves as *refusable*. As a response to Audra Simpson's call for refusal as consents revenge, to be refusable is not just imagining the possibilities of a world created through that generative 'no' but inviting it. It starts from acknowledging 'the trickery of consent' (A Simpson, 2016, p. 3), and affirming that these ongoing structures, events and experiences of settler colonial violence were not consented to, are not consented to. Moreover, it affirms that recognition, and the assumption of the consent to be recognized, is not the starting point of ethical relations. To be refusable is to invite action. To be refusable does not require being refused, but it does mark a moment of constituting oneself as acknowledging and understanding the diverse sovereignties of Indigenous nations and that to be refused is always a possibility and sometimes a necessity.

Refusability and the shared business of governance

There is a notable absence of self-situating in this piece. If you have read this far, you will know that I call myself a settler, white, non-Indigenous, and that I live and work in Denendeh. I have not told you how my family came to be in the places they are, or where and how I find myself here. While that kind of positionality can be important, it is largely absent in this piece—not because I seek to erase who I am or where I come from but because I am wary of the work 'non-performative speech acts' (Ahmed, 2004) do in order to elide rather than engage with the privileges that non-Indigenous and settler folks wield and hold.² However, I can try to position myself in relation to the territories and sovereign practices of the Indigenous nations in my life in a way that I hope

articulates what it means to be refusable and in relation.

So I can tell you that I grew up in Amiskwacîwâskahikan, but I only learned how to say the name four years ago from an artist from that place. I can tell you I grew up on the banks of the river here, that my family worked in education, social work and I am the third after my mother and grandmother to attend university, the first in my family to leave the prairies. I can tell you that it was in the territory of the Lekwungan, Songhees, Esquimalt and WSÁNEĆ nations that I learned that the international is not out there, but here. It was in their shared territories that I saw sovereignty being enacted through visiting, through accepting guests, through sharing food and hospitality.

I can tell you about living and working in Musqueam territory, again watching the iterations and practices of shared and overlapping sovereignties of the Musqueam, Squamish, Stó:lō and Tsleil-Waututh Nations. There I learned where and how to see sovereignty, pushing through the violence of a colonial city—up through the sidewalk cracks and in the tidal zones, sovereignty as an expansive and embodied in the art of place making. In welcome posts, and asking permission from nations to dance, in gifting songs and stories of paddling across the channel to save the same ones who would seek to destroy you, your family and home.

I can tell you about Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee territory—about the community that I found there in a tiny building amongst stone mansions and streets named after colonizers. I can tell you how community was made there when I learned to gift tobacco and asked an Elder to teach me to smudge.

The stories of what brought me here are important as well. They are my grandmothers and grandfathers, they are fleeing from persecution, they are a long history of solidarity and refusal in themselves, but they are also violence. They are my relations, and my ethics and my place. But many of these stories are still held—at least in part—by the state, by ongoing colonization, and right now I'm more interested in the new stories I choose to make. The stories that are created how I choose to live, to carry myself.

So I can tell you that my first lesson was, 'show up when invited', so you might find it difficult to track me down some days. My second lesson was listen.

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Sometimes 'no' sounds like 'we could do that', sometimes yes looks like freshly poured tea.

I can also tell you that now I spend time working to create and protect the spaces and practices that I have come to know as sovereign—space for young ones to learn, space for Elders to teach. Space to learn the boat trails, set the nets, and speak the language. I'm not often in those spaces because they are not for me. Sometimes I get invited, but sometimes I am not. This is all part of the relational practice of governance—being refused as an enactment of sovereignty does not end the relationship, but creates a new path of action. The moment of refusability there is also vulnerability. But often that vulnerability is met with generosity. If governance is the business of all living things, then governance is my responsibility as well. So being refusable is a responsibility that I hold, my small activation of the generative, creative, expansive and relational practices of Indigenous sovereignty. Sovereignty that is constantly negotiated and practiced, one that respects your autonomy, and offers a relationship but does not demand it. A sovereignty that exists in and of itself, but calls for others to be in relation, to take responsibility. To refuse and be refused together.

KELSEY R. WRIGHTSON is the Executive Director at Dechinta Centre for Research and Learning, located in Denendeh (Yellowknife, Northwest Territories, Canada). She has a PhD in political theory with research interests in Indigenous politics, governance and law, as well as land-based pedagogy and learning.

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Notes

¹ Explanation of the term settler, including the necessity to maintain the category as nuanced and both a verb and adjective. As a verb, the action of settlement is ongoing but it places the responsibilities and accountabilities for those actions within individuals and their practices. Thus, this is an extension of relational analysis while also creating the possibility of being otherwise (Wildcat, 2015, p. 394).

² Ahmed uses the term 'Non-performative utterances', or explicitly "'admitting" to one's own racism' to describe speech acts that do not do what the speech act says, in that they do not commit to actions that could be described as 'anti-racist'. She says 'My concern with the non-performativity of anti-racism has hence been to examine how sayings are not always doings, or to put it more strongly, to show how the investment in saying as if saying was doing can actually extend rather than challenge racism' (Ahmed, 2004).