Reconciliation in the Context of Settler-Colonial Gender Violence: “How Do We Reconcile with an Abuser?”

JULIE KAYE

*University of Saskatchewan*

SOCIOLIGISTS INFORMED BY CRITICAL, anticolonial praxis are called to reflexively consider social realities as they are, while actively participating in social transformation. I write from my position as a settler in Misâskwâminihk (Saskatoon) on Treaty 6 territory and the homeland of the Métis and as an engaged sociologist. By settler, I do not simply mean “non-Indigenous”—like many non-Indigenous people living in Canada, my life is interwoven with the first people of this land, while also rooted in a colonial ancestry. As Dhamoon (2015) notes, in the context of settler colonialism, we are all “systemically (even if unintentionally) operating within, across, and through a matrix of interrelated forms and degrees of penalty and privilege” (p. 30). By settler, I primarily mean someone who benefits from the privileges of colonial dispossession and is protected from its many expressions of structural violence, even as I also work to resist ongoing forms of such violence. It is within this context of continued violence that I consider my role as an engaged sociologist in reconciliatory thought and action.

There remain restricted possibilities for transformative change involving settler societies that are characterized by ongoing structural and material forms of domination. Truth telling necessitates continuous disruption of what Sunera Thobani (2007:4) refers to as the “master narrative” of the nation. Notions of Canadians as “responsible citizens, compassionate, caring, and committed to the values of diversity and multiculturalism” (Thobani 2007:4) elide the intent of the nation-building project and the civilizing instruments that constructed notions of what it means to be
Canadian. The purpose of the Indian Act, in particular, “was openly aimed at the elimination of Indigenous people as a legal and social fact” (Lawrence 2004:33). In general, nation-forming legal instruments sought to strip Indigenous persons from their lands and “civilize” through assimilation and erasure.

By dehumanizing Indigenous persons, the land could be seen as empty of humanity. Thobani (2007) further describes the intersecting processes of appropriating land and dehumanizing Indigenous people: “as was the case with the deployment of the concept of terra nullius to claim European legal entitlement over territories emptied of Aboriginal presence, a corresponding humanitas nullius was deployed through the Act to empty Native peoples of their human status” (p. 50). In particular, the act sought the erasure of Indigenous peoples through the dispossession of Indigenous women. The settler colonial state continues today, in many ways, to treat Indigenous women’s bodies as empty of humanity. Just as the Indian Act and the formation of Canadian Criminal law cannot be separated from the intent through which it was formed, efforts at reconciliation necessitate solid grounding in the reality of ongoing colonial gender violence. As Kahnawà:ke Mohawk scholar Audra Simpson (2004) identifies:

In spite of the innocence of the story that Canada likes to tell about itself: that it is a place of immigrant and settler founding; that in this, it is a place that somehow escapes the ugliness of history. That it is a place that reconciles, that apologizes … Canada is just quite simply a settler society. A settler society who’s multicultural, liberal, and democratic structure and performance of governance seeks an ongoing settling of land. This settling is not, of course, innocent either. It is dispossession: the taking of our land from us. And, it is ongoing. It is killing our women in order to do so; and has historically done this to do so.

In this context of colonial gender violence, we have reached thousands of documented names of missing and murdered Indigenous women. According to Statistics Canada (2014), Indigenous women face a sexual assault rate of 115 incidents per 1,000 people, much higher than the rate of 35 per 1,000 recorded for non-Indigenous women. Sexualized violence stems from the sexist and racist policies that underpinned pervasive violence in residential schools and continue at the intersection of ongoing colonial gendered and racialized discrimination (Lindberg, Campeau, and Campbell 2012). This includes the significant overrepresentation of Indigenous women in Canada’s prison system, comprising one out of every three women incarcerated in the federal prison (Public Safety Canada 2012).

Moreover, reports of “systemic police failures” have been identified by multiple inquiries into documented instances of missing and murdered Indigenous women (e.g., British Columbia Missing Women Commission of Inquiry 2012; Manitoba Government 1999). In spite of such reports, the federal police force continues to provide misleading statements that blame
Indigenous communities for the crisis of missing and murdered Indigenous women while ignoring systemic failures of police and justice systems in Canada. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (2015) further documents that official government and police accounts of responses to missing and murdered Indigenous women are “diametrically opposed” to those provided by Indigenous women, their families, victim services, and academics.

Kwakwaka’wakw scholar, Sarah Hunt (2014) has described the sheer amount of energy it takes to grieve old and new losses, which is significantly compounded by the energy required to deal with state systems that continue to dehumanize:

What we have lost goes much deeper than the individual family members whose lives we mourn. Our grief is intergenerational; this is not a new phenomenon, but one as old as colonialism itself. One by one, colonial logics turn our loved ones into statistics . . . Yet, as the numbers climb higher with each new death, will they ever be enough to compel the changes that will transform this culture of violence?

Colonial logic begins from the assumption of emptiness and perpetuates a logic of dehumanization: of turning people into statistics. Colonial logic underpins a sociology that elides our relation to one another and the possibilities of transforming cultures of violence.

On June 22, 2011, Cindy Gladue was found lifeless in a motel room. She was a mother, a friend, and an auntie. She was also a women engaged in sex work and, at the time of her death, was found to have a blood alcohol level four times over the legal limit. When the police initially told her family of her death, they reported it to them as seemingly of “natural causes.” Days later, to the surprise of the family, Bradley Barton was arrested for her murder. Cindy Gladue bled to death as a result of a severe wound to her vaginal wall that was inflicted upon her by Barton. Yet, rather than delivering justice, the court responded to her assault with its own measure of violence. Relying on and reinforcing racist and sexist stereotypes about Indigenous women and particularly Indigenous women working in sex industries, the trial diluted Gladue’s right to consent and perpetuated the myth that sexual histories are relevant considerations in cases of sexual assault. At the trial, the jury accepted the defense argument that Gladue had consented to “rough sex” and acquitted the man accused of her murder. And, in an act of complete dehumanization, her sexual organs were brought into the court, covered in a paper towel.1 They were projected onto a screen and referred to as a “specimen.”

1 Cindy Gladue’s treatment also shows how we treat Indigenous suffering in this country: as a form of spectacle. Early colonial representatives placed the sacred ceremonial regalia of Indigenous communities on display in museums and private collections. Today, we perpetuate a settler colonial gaze that continues to make a “spectacle” of the lives of Indigenous persons in this country.
The treatment of Cindy Gladue underscores how the very system that dispossessed Indigenous people of their lands is continuing to perpetrate harms and reproduce multiple forms of violence. It led many indigenous people to ask, “how can we reconcile with a state that continues to perform violently against us? How can we reconcile with an abuser?” As Erica Violet Lee (2015) writes, “How do we heal from colonial gender violence? How do we heal from the violence when it is still ongoing? How do we heal from something that has never left us?” Sarah Hunt further questions, “How many more deaths will it take before the system is compelled to change?”

We see that even in our efforts toward reconciliation, we have often merely “recognized” Indigenous suffering and abuse without supporting the structural changes required to account for and eliminate ongoing forms of abuse and violence. Violence against Indigenous women, in particular, informs many claims for “recognition” in Canada; yet, such claims continue to reinforce the power of the settler colonial state, reify the state as savior, and undermine alternatives to state mechanisms of justice.

It is precisely in this context that sociologists informed by critical, anticolonial praxis are called to both reflexively examine colonial realities while actively participating with others to challenge the reproduction of structural inequality and create space for the systems of knowledge and transformative changes led by Indigenous organizing.

The markedly different responses to these ideas that I have received during the past year tell me that such reflexivity will not come easily. Most surprising among these was a question from a white, male colleague about the subtitle of my talk: “how do we reconcile with an abuser?” The colleague mentioned that he was taken aback by the content of the discussion because he was expecting my talk to provide an answer to the question. The estimation that such a question could be anything but rhetorical underscores how white, patriarchal privilege has so often dictated that the onus of reconciliation rests with the abused or even that reconciliation with an abuser is possible. Such ongoing expressions of dominance elide the necessary reckoning with truth and transformation of the people, systems, and structures that perpetuate abuse. We have so far to go in coming to terms with abuse in this country. We have not come to terms with the scale, nature, and pervasiveness of colonial gender violence and we especially have not come to terms with our history and our ongoing role in perpetuating such violence.

When faced with ongoing forms of oppression, “willful subjects” continue to contest the imposition of rescue efforts that restrict their lives, security, safety, and land. In spite of such resistance, settlers continue to shape and reproduce the conditions in which violence is experienced and how responses to such violence are negotiated.

Sara Ahmed (2014) illustrates her concept of “willful subjects” with the “Grimm” story of *The Willful Child*: 

The Willful Child
Once upon a time there was a child who was willful, and would not do as her mother wished. For this reason God had no pleasure in her, and let her become ill, and no doctor could do her any good, and in a short time she lay on her death-bed. When she had been lowered into her grave, and the earth was spread over her, all at once her arm came out again, and stretched upwards, and when they had put it in and spread fresh earth over it, it was all to no purpose, for the arm always came out again. Then the mother herself was obliged to go to the grave, and strike the arm with a rod, and when she had done that, it was drawn in, and then at last the child had rest beneath the ground. (Grimm and Grimm 1884:125 as cited in Ahmed 2014:1)

This story is particularly significant in the Canadian context, for a number of witnesses that testified at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) hearings shared that this “story of the arm” was told to “willful” Indigenous children by disciplinary Catholic nuns in Canada’s residential schools. In the Canadian narrative, the role of the nun replaced that of the mother. The message of the story is clear: willful resistance of dominant, colonial narratives is to be disciplined and silenced, even unto death. In Ahmed’s (2014) words: “The punishment for willfulness is a passive willing of death, an allowing of death” (p. 1). This is the context in which we aim to negotiate reconciliation; a context of passive willing of the deaths of Indigenous women on their land enabled by systemic and institutional violence and inequality facilitated through an ongoing failure to recognize basic rights to security and safety.

However, as Ahmed (2014) goes on to say, “willfulness is also that which persists even after death: displaced onto an arm . . . Willfulness involves persistence in the face of having been brought down, where simply to ‘keep going’ or to ‘keep coming up’ is to be stubborn and obstinate. Mere persistence can be an act of disobedience” (p. 2). Ongoing resistance, such as marches led by Indigenous women in Vancouver’s downtown eastside, has led to heightened awareness of the disproportionate violence Indigenous women face. What Indigenous women have been saying for over two centuries is finally being acknowledged, yet their resistances are often interpreted through lenses of state-based inclusion—recognition—that ignore calls for sovereignty and self-determination.

Lee Maracle (1996) details a sociology of colonial conditions and resistance by centering her perspective as an Indigenous woman of Salish and Cree ancestry and a member of the Stó:lō Nation. In I am Woman, she writes:

I sometimes feel like a foolish young grandmother armed with a teaspoon, determined to remove three mountains from the path to liberation: the mountain of racism, the mountain of sexism and the mountain of nationalist oppression. I tire easily these days . . . Sometimes I feel the tiredness is old, as old as the colonial process itself. On those days I am energized by the fact that
it is not my fatigue but the fatigue of the oppressor’s system which haunts me. On other days the tiredness is deeply personal. (Maracle 1996:x)

Just as the commitment to telling the truth disrupts taken-for-granted notions of Canadian-ness, reconciliation similarly disrupts tidy narratives of legacy and apology that ignore the ongoing conditions of violence and continued forms of resistance Indigenous women, in particular, continue to articulate: in word, in song, on the land, and embodied. Following a necessary process of uncovering truth in the obscured foundational narrative of the Canadian nation-state, Honorable Justice Murray Sinclair, Chair of the TRC, recognizes, “If you thought the truth was hard, reconciliation will be harder” (Sinclair 2014).

Anticolonial sociology reflects processes of truth and possibilities of reconciliation when it focuses on the truths and voices of people living and resisting colonial state violence. In doing so, much like the TRC, sociology can enact “a form of ongoing symbolic reversal of the power relations and colonial knowledge assumptions that were embodied in the schools and that continue to be woven into Canadian institutions and society today” (James 2012:183–84; Smith 2012). Anticolonial sociology is first and foremost a critically reflexive examination of the role of the discipline and society in general in the reproduction of colonial systems of domination in order to center alternate, nonoppressive ways of being in relation.

For an anticolonial sociologist, questions of reconciliation include: How might settlers create space for healing and change without drawing more energy, time, and resources from individuals oppressed within a settler-colonial context? What are the possibilities of systemic and transformative change and justice within ongoing conditions of inequality and violence?

In this, anticolonial sociology listens to the willful arm that rises from beyond the grave and to the embodied resistance of today:

Together, we form a network that is not in reference to a violent legal order, but in reference to our older relationships with the land, with the supernatural world, and with one another. We form a network of people walking in honor not only of the individual people we have lost to these interwoven violences, but also in honor of our ancestors who first fought against the onslaught of policies rooted in our dehumanization . . . The depths of our remembrance resonate across this land, invigorating a deep love for our relations and calling for a better tomorrow. (Hunt 2014)

Reconciliation de-centers privilege and creates space for ongoing calls for a better tomorrow. Such decentering will not come simply or easily, but is nonetheless the work of reconciliation and anticolonial praxis.

References

Reconciliation and Settler-Colonial Gender Violence


