

## interlude: little brother Natalie Knight



**Abstract:** In “interlude: little brother,” a work of autobiographical criticism, Yurok-Diné scholar Natalie Knight recalls her experiences growing up in a white rural community in western Washington state with her two black siblings, all three children adopted by white parents. Knight felt an obligation to protect her little brother from the anti-Black racism he encountered on a daily basis at his school and in their town by exposing him to books, films, and music by Black creators whose perspectives reflected his experiences. Yet Knight, a young Indigenous woman, did not receive the same kind of guidance or protection. Through reading works by Black and Red Power Indigenous authors Knight found a way to put into words and contextualize her experiences. At the same time, the antagonisms between activist works and European traditions of philosophy, political science, and history, combined with the invisibility of Indigenous intellectual traditions in these discourses, created a profound sense of dissonance in Knight. Finding ways to navigate these traditions of thought within a framework of social justice energizes Knight’s search for a language and critical framework that addresses her experiences and provides context for the histories she carries.

**Keywords:** anti-Black racism, decolonization, colonialism, capitalism, recognition, Indigenous feminism



### I.

By the time I was twenty-two or so, I had become well-versed in what we in the United States call “ethnic studies”—what Canadians are likely to term multiculturalism—and what I learned later on to more precisely

identify as critical race studies. I'm not implying that these three terms mean the same thing; they certainly don't. I was a precocious youth in terms of my voracity for learning and reading. It meant I did well in school, except for math, a subject about which I asked too many questions, never wanting to accept that there were "rules" that existed just because a teacher said they did. Of course, I later learned—through reading popular histories of physics, quantum mechanics, and string theory—that math is grounded in the material world and its rules ultimately rely on information humans perceive about our environment. Grade school teachers don't usually explain long division or geometry in this way, however, and so I was lucky to get by with Cs. I excelled in other subjects, especially English, and later on in history, because I was lucky to have two outstanding history teachers who made what initially appeared (to a very young and naïve person) to be irrelevant to the present come alive in total relevance and vivid implication.

Going to public school in western Washington state from the time I was nine until I finished high school, I was not exposed to very much cultural production—knowledge, art, etc.—that reflected or related to my family's experiences. While my adoptive parents are white, I am Yurok and Diné (Navajo), and my little brother and baby sister are Black. We were always the odd ones out; none of us really looked alike, so people always expressed surprise when we sat down at a table together. I suppose we might have looked like five random people. As I matured, other odd things began to happen. For a couple years, it became common for strangers to assume my little sister was my kid, my brother was my boyfriend, and our mother was my sister's grandmother. At any rate, we apparently were a mismatched bunch, and this was primarily because of race.

Growing up with two Black siblings affected my consciousness in ways I cannot overstate. I recall clearly when my brother came home from school and asked us to explain why kids were calling him certain names and what those names meant. I helped my mom explain racism to my then five-year-old little brother. As he got older, I would gift him music, books, anything I could find that I thought would reflect something back to him that wasn't a white-washed reminder of everything he wasn't. Looking back on the ways that I tried to nurture my brother's

consciousness as a Black youth, I think I was unaware of how I was actually nurturing aspects of him I couldn't address in myself. Finding Black culture was not very hard for me to do, and so helping my brother make connections and identifications that I thought might ultimately increase his self-esteem was a task I took on with enthusiasm. However, as an Indigenous youth, I also needed the same kind of exposure to positive examples and models of Indigenous identity. Not only was there no one in my life to fulfill these roles, but there was no one in my life who took it upon themselves to show me Indigenous cultures the way I took it upon myself to try to expose my brother to Black culture that he was significantly removed from in a very white rural town in western Washington.

Though I certainly didn't develop this kind of vocabulary for many years, when I look back on this phase of my relationship with my little brother I recognize that I was trying to support him in the development of his own Black historical consciousness. It is as if I subconsciously, or intuitively, projected my own deep need for this—as an Indigenous youth growing up with no Indigenous family or community—onto my brother, and attempted to satisfy my own needs by trying to meet his. For a short period of time, this process of supporting my brother gave me the illusion of supporting myself.

My determination to help my brother develop a positive self-image meant that I was, without knowing it, exposing myself to Black culture and Black articulations of racism, discrimination, and violence but also liberation, power, and strength. I became very comfortable with Black articulations of these experiences, and I also became knowledgeable about Black history. So much so that, as I consider this period in my life, I think that I was substituting the development of my own Indigenous consciousness with my brother's development of his consciousness as a Black man, and that I was—without ever acknowledging it to myself or anyone else—identifying with aspects of Black experience in America that felt more similar to my own than those captured in dominant white narratives.

## II.

One of the significant experiences that began what I now recognize as the beginning of my development of an Indigenous historical consciousness

was taking a couple of ethnic studies classes with a Seminole, Creek, Choctaw teacher named Melinda Micco. The classes were introductory courses: one an overview of ethnic studies in the US with a focus on the Civil Rights era, and the other an overview of Native American history and Native issues in the US. I felt immediately at home in these courses and I excelled in them. I still wasn't identifying as Indigenous, but I had my first exposure to an Indigenous person in real life, and my first exposure to Indigenous histories.

These classes were important to me for many reasons. They began to provide me with a vocabulary for experiences I'd had and events I'd witnessed growing up. They gave me a framework for understanding struggle. I felt immediately spoken to and reflected in what was my very first introduction to anything remotely related to theories of social change. Because ethnic studies and critical race theory were born out of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, these discourses reflected aspects of the revolutionary imaginations and actions of groups like the Black Panthers and the American Indian Movement. When I first learned about the 1969–1971 occupation of Alcatraz by Indians of All Tribes, it gave me a joyful, irrepressible sense of hope. I was deeply inspired by the actions of revolutionaries who, decades later, were being taught in my ethnic studies class in order to provide context for how Civil Rights in the US came to be.

This sense of commitment to social justice contrasts significantly with my experience of postcolonial theory, with its often intentionally inaccessible texts. The greatest gift that postcolonial theory could have offered me was an anti-imperial awareness, and at best, a framework for linking US imperialism abroad to colonialism at home. And yet, it was 9/11 and experiences like marching in the streets of San Francisco for an Iraq War protest that supported my development of anti-imperialist thought, not any of the postcolonial theory I was exposed to in school.

I think the reason why I did not feel an affinity with postcolonial theory, when I did encounter these ideas in my studies, was because, correctly or not, I perceived this theory to be about power in a vague form, and not so much focused on struggle or liberation. It was sometimes hard to locate the agency of the subject, or determine if the

subject was theorized to have any agency at all. It felt as though the motivation for the theory was divorced from the lived struggles and experiences of real people with real agency, where life, and the quality of it, was on the line.

Not long after this period, I became deeply interested in Marxism. I had already developed a fairly sophisticated understanding of race, informed as much by my lived experiences as my education. But suddenly, I had found an additional way to explain the structures that limit self-determination and oppress communities. I was fascinated by Marx's attempt to explain the world in a dialectical totality, and it was this same yearning for totality that eventually caused me to seek ways to bridge a Marxist analysis with an anti-colonial analysis. I should also say that other revolutionaries deeply informed my understanding of Marxism as well. Frantz Fanon's sense of a dialectical engagement with the world, as well as his insistence on the particularity of Blackness *and* the universality of humanity was and still is crucial. In addition, Rosa Luxemburg, Antonio Gramsci, Raya Dunayevskaya, C. L. R. James, and Angela Y. Davis have been significant influences on my understanding of a historical materialist method and my own development of consciousness.

And yet, while I was immersing myself in Marxism, I had a growing feeling that some part of who I am wasn't reflected in—was perhaps actually excluded from—the Marxist theory I was able to find. I eventually sought out and found Marxist theory that had strong, viable feminist analyses, like work by Silvia Federici, Selma James, Maria Mies, Abbie Bakan, and Lise Vogel. This was quite helpful. But still, I felt as though there was something really missing. I felt this gap years before I was actually able to articulate it: that there is indeed a wide gulf between the vast majority of Marxist theory and anti-colonial and Indigenous theory.<sup>1</sup>

### III.

These few years were a space of profound flux, and this is when I began to identify as Diné and Yurok. I may never fully understand the conditions that produced that transformation. But I do know that one contributing factor was finally being able to articulate to myself that although Marxism presented itself as a totalizing theory, and although I

wanted this to be true, it wasn't totalizing—it was leaving a big part of the world's story out. Eventually, I realized that the parts of the historical story Marxism ignored were precisely those aspects of my own story that form the ember of Indigenous rage and love that propels me forward.

Once I began identifying as Yurok and Diné, I still acknowledged my affinity for and with Marxism. I was still quite compelled by it; I didn't simply reject it because of my awareness of its limitations.<sup>2</sup> Instead, I straddled two awarenesses that seemed, and truly felt, to directly contradict each other. This produced a very uncomfortable and psychologically stressful situation. I am inclined to try to understand things abstractly. I have a natural tendency, for better or worse, to try to understand things in “global” versus “local” contexts, which helps to explain my attraction to Marxism. But two systems of understanding the world cannot sit easily within one mind, at least not without a tremendous amount of cognitive dissonance. In hindsight, I recognize that this awkward—psychologically and otherwise—phase of development was an incredibly intellectually and emotionally taxing one, since I was really trying to avoid creating a hierarchy within myself, and trying not to excommunicate one set of beliefs while swiftly and radically adopting another.

As I developed intellectually during this period, and as my personal confidence in my identity grew, I began to find connections between anti-colonial and Indigenous thought and movements and Marxism. I began to learn about Red Power and the Marxist tendencies of some Indigenous activists, especially during the late 1960s and 1970s. I sought out everything I could find by Indigenous authors, thinkers, and activists in both Canada and the US, looking for clues as to how I could possibly reconcile the Indigenous sensibility I was developing with a Marxist analysis of class, an analysis I thought was highly relevant to our contemporary world.

To be honest, I found few writers who dealt satisfyingly with these issues, and I think that is because there are very few who currently exist in a Canadian or US context. In the US, the development of a radical class analysis may be one of the most pressing political needs of our time but is also one of the most challenging, since the US is an unabashedly imperialist country rife with complex race and class antagonisms. I

fear that US global dominance (even as it may be waning) blinds many potential theorists of anti-colonial and anti-capitalist politics who live inside the country, precisely because of the deep legacy of imperialism that is so embedded in the structures of US governance and the national imaginary. It should not be surprising at all, then, that the internal corollary of imperialism—colonialism—would be so widely and deeply denied in the US that it is simply almost completely unspoken. This near-total silence around the history and present of colonialism in the US is the major reason why my move in 2012 to unceded Coast Salish territories was so impactful. I had never heard a territorial acknowledgment in my life;<sup>3</sup> I had never witnessed Indigenous activists leading protests, singing and drumming; I had never, in person, seen Indigenous people proudly and publicly assert their difference by wearing regalia. These public cultural displays still seem improbable in the US, even after events like Standing Rock, which has pushed conversations about Indigenous sovereignty into more mainstream media.

In the Canadian context, things are quite different. Canada's official policy of multiculturalism gives certain prescribed space for the recognition of Indigenous culture within the country's imagined cultural mosaic. But this space, as radical as it initially felt to me coming from the US, is prescribed rather than self-determined, about recognition rather than redistribution, and focused on culture rather than political sovereignty. While I still hold that there are meaningful ways in which the public presence of Indigenous peoples and cultures is important to us as Indigenous peoples who must construct positive identities and images of Nateness, multiculturalism as it is applied to Indigenous peoples in Canada is severely limiting.<sup>4</sup>

In British Columbia, where I moved to complete my doctorate, the vast majority of land is unceded; aside from the fourteen Douglas Treaties on Vancouver Island, and Treaty 8 territory that extends from Alberta into the northeast corner of BC, land was never negotiated (in "fair" or unfair terms) in sale to settlers. The exceptions are the lands negotiated under the Nisga'a Treaty and the handful of treaties that have been signed under BC's relatively new treaty process, established in 1993, which allocates land to Indigenous nations but requires the

extinguishment of Aboriginal title, thereby hindering any future claims to Indigenous land stewardship and rendering Indigenous land bound under fee simple property relations. In sum, the treaty process negates Indigenous political and economic difference by forcing Indigenous nations into capitalist private property relations. Other critiques of the treaty process exist as well, including the incredible expense of legal fees required of nations who engage in the process that extends years, sometimes decades, from the initial entry through its six stages.<sup>5</sup> Many Indigenous sovereigntists recognize the BC treaty process as an outright attack on Indigenous sovereignty.<sup>6</sup>

These two forces within Canadian politics—multiculturalism and the resolution of unceded Indigenous lands through the conversion to fee simple property relations—threaten to erase Indigenous difference entirely, subsuming the core of Indigenous noncapitalist difference within the Canadian nation as a multicultural element of some larger whole made up of smaller “equal” parts. So although I initially felt Canada to be a place that makes space for Indigenous difference, I’ve learned to instead see the country as one that tolerates Indigenous cultural presence and production while actively attacking the roots of Indigenous difference that this cultural production represents. While I am grateful to have stumbled my way into a place where I was able to find my voice, and while I do hold that the US has more regressive national and cultural attitudes toward Indigenous peoples within its borders, I do not think that Canada differs substantially from the US in its political and economic treatment of Indigenous peoples.

#### IV.

The US’ imperial haughtiness and Canada’s multicultural veneer greatly determine the range of political articulations available to Indigenous peoples who find ourselves within the borders of either state. I don’t think it’s so surprising, given these contexts, that the co-articulation of anti-capitalist and anti-colonial politics I’ve long searched for has proven so elusive. The production of race in North America, particularly in the US and Canada, is so fundamentally intertwined with the establishment of class hierarchy that the two cannot be spoken about individually. American



imperialism asserts a self-fulfilling, tautological, and highly violent conviction that the American system of democracy—itsself informed from the very beginning by the institution of race categories that determine who is recognized as a full human being and therefore who counts within liberal democracy—is the superior form of social organization for the entire world. This deeply held belief in American superiority can penetrate all aspects of internal resistance to American inequality, including resistance by progressives or radicals. One way that I see American imperialism infecting the broad and various political left within the country is how the vast majority of anti-capitalist organizations and groups consistently overlook the embedded history and ongoing present of American colonialism. I believe that without recognizing the full weight of colonialism in the US, it is impossible to understand the full weight of American interventions abroad. The founding and continuation of the wealthiest country in the world has required the ongoing dispossession of Indigenous peoples from their lands “at home.” American wealth has also required the dispossession of Indigenous peoples from their lands abroad, as well as a concerted imperialist agenda that attacks other countries’ resources, political organization, and norms. Without making this connection between internal and external domination by the US, critical analyses of American power, and ultimately its downfall, don’t tell a very full story. In a Canadian context, the deeply engrained belief in and political project of multiculturalism hinders the development of progressive or radical understandings of real difference, in that multiculturalism intends to place all cultural variations within a singular national tapestry that is woven together by commonly held values. But this national tapestry is predicated on the extinguishment of Aboriginal title and the violent negation of the noncapitalist Indigenous difference that produces the Indigenous cultural forms amenable for inclusion in Canadian multiculturalism. For Indigenous peoples living in an avowedly multicultural society, it can be frustrating to feel “recognition” with very few redistributive policies to back it up. For well-intended allies who support Indigenous sovereignty, multiculturalism infects their abilities to fully respect Indigenous difference; Canadian settler progressives commonly default to a way of acting and understanding that refers back to the only model of inclusion they have ever known. This severely limits

the transformation of left political communities in Canada into spaces that can hold Indigenous difference in its various forms without asserting a self-fulfilling expectation for Indigenous peoples to “play along” with white-settler social norms, political models, and ideas, and Western conceptions of land, property, and value.

To me, it makes a great deal of sense to connect these reflections on imperialism and multiculturalism to my relationship with my little brother. Of all the influences in my life, this relationship has been the seed from which a critical awareness of the world around me has developed. Understanding my own self, as an Indigenous woman, in relation to my brother’s subjectivity has deeply formed my assumptions about and perceptions of justice and oppression.

A few years ago, I accompanied my brother on a trip to Florida, where he met his birth mother, sister and brothers, nieces, and many cousins. The trip was transformational for him, and he has since returned to Florida for additional visits. The trip was also an amazing gift for me since my parents had known my little brother’s family before he was born; I had, in fact, played with my brother’s older sister when we were young girls outside in the humid heat while our moms chatted, all of us neighbours in an apartment complex. I remember my brother’s birth mother in our kitchen, making us hammocks and collard greens; I remember her braiding my straight brown hair into dozens of cornrows one afternoon. These relations of kinship provide me with evidence of the most human kind that in this imperfect, fraught world, we find ways to resist, thrive, and love alongside one another—open to the teachings our differences offer, and open to imagining better worlds for all of us.

## Notes

- 1 This is not to say that there aren’t writers, theorists, and revolutionaries who did and do hold anti-colonial and Marxist perspectives simultaneously; however, with few exceptions, these texts tend not to approach the tensions that exist between Indigenous and Marxist perspectives head on, and instead require the reader to surmise the authors’ opinions about various debates and contradictions. I think of Adams, Maracle, Bobb, Dunbar-Ortiz, and Manuel as writers who draw from Marxist analysis to varying degrees. There are others like Coulthard, Cornthassel, A. Simpson, Barker, Wilson, and L. Simpson whose work may at times be complementary to aspects of a Marxist analysis as well.

- 2 Alongside the occlusion of critiques of capitalism within postcolonial theory, the particular positions of Indigenous peoples within the rise of global capitalism have also been undertheorized, if not outright avoided and dismissed, by Marxist theorists. While Marx and Engels increasingly turned their attention to the role of Indigenous peasants in Russia and elsewhere, arguing *against* a teleological assumption of progressive stages of development that necessitated the colonization of Indigenous peoples, many Marxist scholars since have overlooked the complexities of Indigenous politics within capitalism.
- 3 For further information about territorial acknowledgements, see [native-land.ca/territory-acknowledgement/](http://native-land.ca/territory-acknowledgement/).
- 4 One of the foremost criticisms of the representational politics of multiculturalism is found in Coulthard's *Red Skin, White Masks*.
- 5 For criticism of the BC treaty process, as well as information on its costs, see newspaper articles by Lintz, Gyarmati, Meissner, Burgmann, and J. Simpson.
- 6 For a critique of contemporary approaches to First Nations treaty rights, see Diabo, Blackburn, and Asch.

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