Colonizing the North: Coloniality in the Canadian Arctic

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The Arctic is increasingly drawing attention from various parties for different reasons. Among these are various nation-states vying for new channels through which to increase trade and transportation via a Northwest Passage, expanding military presence to protect national sovereignty, and assisting corporations looking to extract natural resources buried under Arctic ice. However, the interests of the local communities, particularly the First Nations and Inuit in the region, are being undermined by the normalized rhetoric of development. It can be argued that there has also been a significant rise in attention towards climate change and its effects in the Arctic. Much of this attention has been in the wake of increasing catastrophic climate events which has sparked a response from the international community. The response, however, is restricted to this community of nation-state institutions and its representatives participating in multinational conferences, summits, and other bureaucratic forums in which there is a glaring lack of presence of affected communities (UNFCCC 2013).

Current mainstream Canadian approaches to addressing climate change and focused on the Arctic (Foreign Policy 2010; Northern Strategy 2009), not only exclude effected groups from analytical participation, but are rooted in a Western, Eurocentric, liberal and capitalist tradition which is inherently destructive to the environment and marginalized populations. In general, there is an overwhelming void of non-Western non-liberal knowledge and Indigenous representation in discussions concerning the impacts of extractive industry projects which are often conducted on land inhabited by these communities and contribute to this environmental destruction. Rather than being alarmed with the speed with which polar ice caps are melting, the environmental destruction that will inevitably accompany it and the negative effects on the

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1 The term representation in the context of this paper’s discussion will refer to the socio-political representation of Indigenous people and their knowledge in domestic and international decision-making meetings, roundtables, and other settings of policy formation and scholarship.
Arctic’s Indigenous populations’ livelihoods, attention to the Arctic is directed at staking a claim on the territory’s potentially mineable resources. The normalized neoliberal, market-driven, dominant narrative of modernity takes precedence over the lives of those directly affected.

This discussion will explore the hegemonic normative power of Westerncentric, Enlightenment-era knowledge in ongoing processes of coloniality in the Canadian context. The scholarship of the “coloniality of power” was originally produced by Anibal Quijano and further developed by subsequent decolonial scholars such as Walter Mignolo (2009), Maria Lugones (2007), Maldonado-Torres (2011), and Ramon Grosfoguel (2012). Using this scholarship as a framework, I will deconstruct Westerncentric knowledge, which serves as the foundation for neoliberal developmental policies of modernity, as an absolute and objective truth and apply it to the Canadian Arctic context. This deconstruction is necessary to invalidate the notion that Westerncentric knowledge is a superior way of knowing compared to Indigenous knowledge and worldviews. In particular, this deconstruction effort will help formulate the argument that Westerncentric knowledge perpetually colonizes Indigenous knowledge and bodies through processes of coloniality which manifest into the support for extractive industry development projects in the Canadian Arctic. These processes are aided by the misrecognition of Indigenous populations in Canada through self-governance structures derived from Westerncentric institutions. Thus, Indigenous communities located in Canada’s Arctic are subjected to the colonial matrix of power (Mignolo 2009) and are continuously having their voices silenced by normative hegemonic discourses of modernity.

In general, extractive industry projects and development discourse are rooted in the Westerncentric understanding that perpetual expansion of industry, construction, and capital are a measure of progress; modernity is the means by which progress can be achieved. However, the
concept of progress, as this discussion will show, is in itself a construct of Western-centric knowledge which operates through coloniality/modernity. Colonality and its enduring colonial power structures are pushed forward through neoliberal policies in the name of progress and modernity as “the rhetoric of modernity and the logic of coloniality are…two sides of the same coin” (Mignolo, 2011: 318) where one cannot exist without the other. Modernity, as Mignolo explains by citing Anthony Giddens, can be specifically understood as European modes of social life that became social norms over time (Mignolo, 2011: 318). As these modes of social life became increasingly normalized, attaining the supply to fuel these social norms, such as tobacco, gave rise to colonial pursuits to sustain these social norms. Colonial missions by the British Empire to discover new trade routes for sugar and tobacco, for example, facilitated the power and reach of the British Empire (Mignolo, 2011: 318). Therefore, this discussion will present coloniality/modernity as complementary terms.

Western-centric knowledge, which is the epistemological foundation for coloniality/modernity, is based on the Enlightenment-era revelation that European subjects are exclusively capable of rationality, giving rise to “a new radical dualism: divine reason and nature. The ‘subject’ is a bearer of ‘reason,’ while the ‘object,’ is not only external to it, but different nature. In fact it is ‘nature’ (Quijano, 2010: 26). European Christian males were regarded as the exclusive bearers of the capacity to reason and thus were regarded as subjects. This revelation and its eventual universality was promoted and normalized by European Enlightenment thinkers such as Rene Descartes who would “situate the subject in a ‘non-place’ and a ‘non-time’” (Grosfoguel, 2012: 88). By doing so, Descartes effectively allowed the European subject to attain a sense of absolute objectivity: “to be able to place the individual subject at the foundation of all knowledge, the internal monologue of the subject without any
dialogical relation with other human beings allows him to claim access to truth in its *sui generis* form, that is, as self-generated, insulated from social relations with other human beings” (Grosfoguel, 2012: 88). European epistemology, and the understanding that they held an exclusive ability to produce rational thought, was encouraged through this individualistic and self-generated position the subject-object dualism allowed. However, an integral aspect of this understanding, which would become vital during the colonial conquest of the Americas by European powers, is the exclusivity of the rational, self-aware subject. Furthermore, it is this particular subject, the enlightened, self-aware, and rational White male European that is capable of advancing humanity towards civility by means of industrial projects of modernity.

As colonial missions brought Europeans in contact with Indigenous populations in what would become European colonies, a hierarchical organization of beings was established on the basis of the subject-object dualism and the capacity for rationality. For example, colonization instituted the understanding that, “only European culture is rational, can contain ‘subjects’—the rest are not rational, they cannot be or harbor ‘subjects.’ As a consequence, the other cultures are different in the sense that they are unequal, in fact inferior, by nature. They can only be ‘objects’ of knowledge or/and of domination practices” (Quijano, 2010: 28). Thus, European culture, its practices, and world view were established as a norm through colonizing the bodies and epistemologies of non-European societies. Westerncentric knowledge is the enduring dominant narrative derived from this hegemonic colonization of non-European cultures and their ways of knowing. The exclusivity of rational thought was equated with the exclusivity of civility, an understanding which justified the colonization of Indigenous people around the world by Europeans.
In addition, Westerncentric epistemology normalized, and continues to normalize, the arrangement of human existence along a linear continuum of temporality: “history was conceived as an evolutionary continuum from the primitive to the civilized; from the traditional to the modern; from the savage to the rational; from pro-capitalism to capitalism, etc. And Europe thought of itself as the mirror of the future of all the other societies and cultures; as the advanced form of the history of the entire species” (Quijano, 2010: 30). For example, the ways of knowing and social norms of the colonizers were, through mass extermination and the use of native populations as expendable labour, constructed as a culture to aspire to; as a means of accessing power (Quijano, 2010: 23). Therefore, overtime Europeans, and eventually settlers in Western nations with European ancestry, were considered aligned with the civilized and modern, while racialized non-Europeans continued to be aligned with the past and perpetually confined to an inferior subjectivity. In the case of Canada, White settler society systematically colonized the bodies and epistemologies of First Nations communities and perpetually held them in alignment with nature. Within the contemporary context, the dominant White settler society of Canada operates on the normalized assumption that large-scale industry projects define the civilized and modern, while Indigenous opposition to such projects is considered characteristically primitive of these anti-modern populations.

Implicit within this subject-object dualism, which is inherent to Enlightenment-era Westerncentric knowledge, is the separation of the civilized man (i.e. the White, European, Male, heterosexual, Christian subject) from nature (i.e. land, water, material surroundings, etc.). Through this logic, nature itself and the racialized bodies who are rendered as a part of nature are equated with the uncivil and anti-modern. Instead, nature becomes something that needs to be made civil and utilized as productive; the capitalist paradigm is the means by which this
modernity is achieved. For Mignolo, the process of modernity was taken over by Christian theology beginning in the sixteenth century as it affirmed itself with capitalism, giving rise to its hegemonic power over non-subjects (i.e. non-White, non-Christian, non-capitalist, non-Europeans) and their epistemologies (Mignolo, 2010: 325). This tie with capitalism was the foundation of the imperial civilizing missions in pursuit of new markets and material resources. Thus, the hegemonic characteristics of Westerncentric knowledge, which continue to justify and normalize contemporary neoliberal capitalist projects of modernity, are based on the same intersection of race, capital, and knowledge employed during colonization. This racial matrix of power emerged “as a necessary epistemic structure that legitimized at the moment the epistemic supremacy of Theology and, later on, the epistemic supremacy of Philosophy and Science as the ultimate proof of the empirical existence of ‘races’” (Mignolo, 2009: 71) which is integral to the coloniality/modernity paradigm. The fundamental idea of coloniality/modernity is that civility is an end to which individuals must evolve and that it is only possible through the means of capitalist development of the unproductive and the uncivilized. Thus, the labelling of the Canadian Arctic as an underdeveloped and uncivil region assumes that development, by way of extractive industry expansion, and self-governance, through Westerncentric recognition, are the only means by which the racialized Indigenous population in the region can improve their livelihood.

Westerncentric knowledge, which normalized capitalist modernity as something society should strive for, placed Indigenous peoples in direct opposition with White colonial settlers. In particular, colonial instruments of capitalism, such as private property regimes, sought to undermine Indigenous epistemology and societal organization in the name of modernity and development. This coloniality/modernity paradigm is sustained in contemporary relations
between the neoliberal Canadian nation-state and First Nations and Inuit communities fighting for self-determination. However, the functionality of this paradigm in the contemporary context, such as with extractive industry projects in the Canadian Arctic, is dependent on the fabricated colonial idea that nature is a site of conquest. Westerncentric knowledge and its foundational subject-object binary contributed to the construction of nature as wild, untouched, and virgin under coloniality: “the myth of the virgin land is also the myth of the empty land...’ Within colonial narratives, the myth of virgin land ‘also effects a territorial appropriation, for if the land is virgin, colonized peoples cannot claim aboriginal territorial rights’” (Thorpe, 2011: 202). Dispossession of Indigenous land in Canada was and continues to be facilitated by the understanding of nature as pristine, untouched, and wild that will inevitably be developed as per the normalized conceptions of modernity. Westerncentric knowledge fixates nature in the past on its epistemological temporal continuum along with non-subject Indigenous populations who “became racialized as...’the living embodiment of the archaic ‘primitive’” (Thorpe, 2011: 203). Thus, nature becomes constructed as a place temporally fixated in the past and spatially distant from civilization and the civilized human.

An important facet of this colonial construction of nature as a site of conquest is the installation and normalization of the private property regime. There is a universality with which private property ownership is understood in contemporary contexts and upon which efforts for extraction industry projects on Indigenous land are dependent. However, such conceptions of this particular regime find their roots in Westerncentric knowledge and European colonial contexts (Dempsey et al, 2011: 240). That is, private property is a specific articulation of how nature or the environment should be treated and is intertwined with the capitalist system. Dempsey et al provide an analysis of the private property regime as it relates to Canada’s
Indigenous populations by framing it as an environmental formation, which is “a hegemonic and normative discourse that establishes appropriate and inappropriate conceptions of human-land relations and, by extension, standards for how land and subjects should be managed and/or governed” (Dempsey et al., 2011: 238). As was previously mentioned in this discussion’s analysis of the subject-object dualism of Westerncentric knowledge, nature is equated with anti-modernity and the uncivilized. By this logic, land and natural resources are to be understood solely as capital and utilized in the process of development towards modernity. However, as capitalism is a European construct and a colonial tool, “private property became a key site through which First Nations peoples were racialized as uncivilized and inferior due to their apparent lack of this particular land management regime” (Dempsey et al., 2011: 240). This rhetoric was much more than a conflict in land use ideology; it was rooted in a racial hierarchy. Westerncentric knowledge helped normalize the idea that Indigenous populations were not capable of establishing such advanced conceptions of land tenure because they were perpetually confined to “an early stage of development, with no hope of becoming full adults or even fully human” (Thorpe, 2011: 203). This discourse continues to underlie contemporary neoliberal policies of development. Policies conceived to assist Indigenous populations to overcome poverty through land privatization and market-participation, while promoting extractive industry projects is an idea which will be explored later in this discussion with a particular focus on the Canadian North.

At this point, it is necessary to examine the Indigenous epistemologies that the dominant White settler society, through processes of coloniality, continues to conquer in order to establish Westerncentric knowledge as an absolute worldview. Indigenous knowledge, while often homogenized as an opposing worldview to Westerncentric knowledge, is incredibly diverse and
dependent on the different places, local ecologies, and the Indigenous populations that inhabit them (Henderson, 2000: 260). However, Indigenous epistemologies share certain general characteristics which provide an overall critique of the normative dominant Westerncentric knowledge. A fundamental difference between Indigenous worldviews and Westerncentric knowledge is the absence of the subject-object dualism which places a wedge between human beings and nature. Instead, what is constructed as “the wilderness” and “nature” by Westerncentric knowledge is a fundamental part of an interconnected web of living entities under Indigenous worldviews. According to James (Sakej) Youngblood Henderson, nature is not measured materially and as an object, but is considered to have a common subjectivity with other living beings such as humans:

Most Aboriginal worldviews are founded on two understandings. First, they understand the ecosystem as an external system tolerant of flux and refined by endless renewals and realignments. Second, they understand that each ecosystem encapsulates and enfolds many forces or parts, none of which can enfold or encapsulate the whole. The forces express nature instead of creating it. These two understandings focus on the interdependence of the life forces. They also express the need for respectful behaviour to all parts of the sacred spaces. Thus, Aboriginal people perceive all the various forces of nature as connective fibres in a larger pattern that enfolds a fluctuating ecological system (Henderson, 2000: 260).

Thus, the Westerncentric assumption that human beings are the central figures of all existence whose purpose is to tame nature in the name of development and modernity is a constructed worldview rather than an absolute. Nature is understood as an expression rather than an object by the multiple forces of an ecosystem, which emphasizes the idea that nature and its constitutive parts are living beings alongside people with a mutual dependency. Indigenous concepts focused on the relationship between these multiple forces show the limitations of Westerncentric knowledge and expose it as a racist self-serving worldview focused on development and modernity at the expense of the environment.
What is missing from the paradigm of modernity is the reciprocity between human beings and other living beings which is foundational to Indigenous knowledge. In order to propel the modernity machine forward, development discourse must undermine Indigenous knowledge and Indigenous relationality. This concept can be understood through Winona LaDuke’s analysis concerning relations in which “the relations all around—animals, fish, trees, and rocks—are our brothers, sisters, uncles, and grandpas. Our relations to each other, our prayers whispered across generations to our relatives, are what bind our cultures together” (LaDuke, 1999: 2).

Human subjectivity, then, does not hold human beings separate from the surrounding environment and its various expressions. Instead, human beings are causally linked to the trees, water, and animals of our surrounding environments. However, hegemonic Western-centric knowledge imposes the subject-object dualism against this concept of relationality from which stems the detrimental manifestations of modernity on Indigenous populations. Species of animals which are now extinct or have been impacted by deforestation, mining, damming, and other processes of modernity are examples of such environmental injustice. As LaDuke explains, species of plants and animals that have been negatively impacted “are our older relatives—the ones who came before and taught us how to live. Their obliteration by dams, guns, and bounties is an immense loss to [Indigenous] families and cultures. Their absence may mean that a people sing to a barren river, a caged bear, or a buffalo far away” (LaDuke, 1999: 2).

Through these sustained colonial processes, Indigenous communities continue to feel the adverse effects of colonialism in the contemporary context, particularly through increased proliferation of extractive industry activity.

The adverse effects of increasing industrialization and modernity can be captured through the concept of relationality and Indigenous understanding in the striking example of toxic
contamination of animals and human breast milk. In particular, the Mohawk First Nation at Akwesasne has been designated as the most contaminated reservation in the Canadian Great Lakes region from the large concentration of industrial activity located nearby (LaDuke, 1999: 15). As a result, the toxins dumped into the surrounding waterways were found in species of fish and drinking water supplies that overwhelmingly affected the Indigenous communities who relied on these sources of sustenance. More strikingly, however, is the chain reaction that was recorded in 1985 through the Mothers’ Milk Project, a “bioaccumulative analysis of the entire food chain at Akwesasne, from fish to wildlife to breast milk” (LaDuke, 1999: 19). Thus, in addition to the concept of relationality, the interconnectedness of the environment— and the impacts of industries of modernity on it—are highlighted through both Indigenous knowledge and Western scientific knowledge.

Implicit in developmental rhetoric, especially which pertains to First Nations and Inuit communities in Canada, is the notion of a progression towards modernity. As this discussion has previously explored, there is an arrangement of beings along a temporal spectrum moving from the savage past towards a civilized future. However, Indigenous epistemologies do not operate on a unilateral and linear progression of time as these are Western-centric constructions. For example, the Anishnaabe people, in ensuring their responsibilities to Creation are met, consider not only relationships between people but also the relationship among all other living things and their ancestors (McGregor, 2009: 28). These responsibilities are not only to the ancestors of current beings but also to “those yet to come (at least as far ahead as seven generations from now) [who] also have an entitlement to environmental justice” (McGregor, 2009: 30). The linearity of time which is foundational in Western-centric knowledge is at odds with the multi-directional conceptions of life prevalent in Indigenous knowledge. In other words, there is no
modernity to which to aspire or past from which to evolve. Instead, “information, insight, and techniques are passed down and improved from one generation to another. Knowledge workers observe ecosystems and gather eyewitness reports from others so that they can continually test and improve their own systemic, predictive models of ecological dynamics” (Battiste, 2005: 8). In this understanding, human beings exist as a part of the ever-changing expressions of nature rather than apart from it. Narratives of modernity and development are inconsistent with the fundamentals of Indigenous knowledge as there is an inherent link between epistemology and the land. As Marie Battiste explains, “Indigenous knowledge is also inherently tied to land, not to land in general but to particular landscapes, landforms, and biomes where ceremonies are properly held, stories properly recited, medicines properly gathered, and transfers of knowledge properly authenticated” (Battiste, 2005: 8). Thus, notions of modernity, which encompass human-land relations based on extraction and exploitation of resources, are not only constructs of Westerncentric knowledge, but are inherently unjust according to Indigenous “natural law” (McGregor, 2009: 27).

The creation of “development” and “underdevelopment” as normative terms by which to measure society’s progression towards modernity has been beneficial for a particular class and race. These terms have helped facilitate colonially/modernity through the continuous hegemonic oppression of Indigenous bodies and epistemologies by Western nations. In particular, neoliberalism has flourished into a universal system which encompasses a particular relationship with nature that is rooted in coloniality. While it is primarily understood as an economic system “involving deregulation, privatization, individualization, and transformation of the state-citizen relationship, neoliberalism also shapes the constitution of identity and the commodification of nature…Neoliberalism involves not only deregulation but also the re-
regulation of nature” (Altamirano-Jimenez, 2013: 70). In other words, while it is fundamentally an economic system and is based on the principles of liberalism, neoliberalism takes into account the globalization of the market, the evolution of Western science, and allows some limited room for the inclusion of non-Westerncentric epistemologies and societies insofar as they can be managed and exploited. In general, “the recognition of cultural difference and the granting of compensatory collective rights to ‘disadvantaged’ social groups is integral to neoliberalism. These cultural rights, along with their socio-economic components, distinguish neoliberalism as a specific form of governance that shapes, delimits, and produces difference” (Altamirano-Jimenez, 2013: 70). In this regard, neoliberalism operates in conjunction with the coloniality of knowledge as an instrument of managing Indigenous bodies and epistemologies to produce market-citizens while seemingly supporting Indigenous self-determination.

The manifestation of neoliberal coloniality can be especially seen in Inuit relations with the Canadian government in the country’s North. The establishment of the territory of Nunavut was the result of a nationalist movement aided by transnational Inuit activism (Altamirano-Jimenez, 2013: 98). While self-determination remains a constant goal for many of Canada’s First Nations and Inuit people, the creation of Nunavut does not necessarily exemplify a victory for Indigenous self-determination. Generally, “self-determination is about how people signify, use, and manage their natural and social environments in ways that are specific to them. However, although Indigenous self-determination is recognized by the state, it has been refashioned in a way that reproduces basic colonial structures and behaviours” (Altamirano-Jimenez, 2013: 97). Such colonial structures can be seen through the limitations that are imposed by the neoliberal system and the processes of coloniality which ensure the Canadian government continues to hold the ultimate authority over the territory.
The degree of self-determination that has been given to the Inuit people through the establishment of Nunavut regulates the use and management of its natural resources through requirements of the federal government. In particular, these limitations in part stem from “Canada’s new strategy regarding its sovereignty in the Arctic and the continuation of a neoliberal approach in which autonomy as devolution is conceived as the ability of a self-governed entity to fulfil its responsibilities to deliver services” (Altamirano-Jimenez, 2013: 100).

The policy which laid the groundwork for the formation of Nunavut and Inuit self-governance is the Nunavut Land Claims Agreement (NLCA) and cites the “ownership and use of lands and resources, and of rights for Inuit to participate in decision-making concerning the use, management and conservation of land, water and resources; including offshore” (Nunavut Tunngavik Inc., 1993: 1). Canada’s limited recognition of Inuit self-governance, however, is apparent in the notion that “Indigenous elements brought into self-governance were incorporated only into different regulatory bodies responsible for Nunavut’s co-management of wildlife, fishery, water, and land resources. The Inuit participate in these bodies, yet decisions are made jointly with the federal government and its bureaucrats” (Altamirano-Jimenez, 2013: 100).

Clearly, the federal government remains an important stakeholder and authority in the determination of policies pertaining to natural resources and their extraction in Canada’s North. This form of self-governance that has been established for the Inuit in partnership with the Canadian government fits the definition of the distinctness of neoliberalism, exposing the colonial narratives which are apparent in this agreement. As Altamirano-Jimenez explains, neoliberalism differs from liberalism in that it “brings together global discourses of rights and the environment, thereby opening up space for the recognition of Indigenous rights as well as for management practices that have uneven implications for Indigenous places and senses of place”
(Altamirano-Jimenez, 2013: 72). As such, neoliberalism becomes strongly associated with identity formation, the normalization of Westerncentric knowledge, and the imposition of Westerncentric institutions disguised as self-determination. Within the policy itself, Article 4 specifically highlights the objectives to “provide Inuit with financial compensation and means of participating in economic opportunities [and] to encourage self-reliance and the cultural and social well-being of Inuit” (Nunavut Tunngavik Inc., 1993: 1) as an example of the colonial rhetoric implicit within this Westerncentric framework of recognition and self-governance.

Indigenous self-governance in the Canadian North is mandated by Westerncentric knowledge and its institutions in an example of coloniality. The formation of Nunavut and its self-governance is predicated on the usurping of Indigenous knowledge and Inuit self-determination by Westerncentric knowledge and its normalization in the institutions of the Canadian nation-state. For example, the recognition of Nunavut as Inuit land was completed through the channels of the Westerncentric knowledge of territorial borders and negotiations with the overseeing Canadian state (Altamirano-Jimenez, 2013: 98). Therefore, the legitimacy of the recognition of the Inuit territory of Nunavut is dependent on the validation by a Westerncentric institution, the nation-state of Canada, through specific negotiated terms. For example, the land allotted to the Inuit through Nunavut was 350,000 square kilometres with 10 percent surface mineral rights and stipulated a share of royalties on non-renewable natural resources for the government (Altamirano-Jimenez, 2013: 99). Thus, within the bordered area that constitutes the territory of Nunavut, governance structures based on Westerncentric knowledge, which promote modernity through development, have been established while Indigenous epistemologies have been silenced. For example, the Nunavut Implementation Commission, which is responsible for making recommendations on the territory’s political
attributes, “is mandated to serve Inuit interests by identifying and defining what traditional Inuit values and approaches can be integrated into the territorial government” (Altamirano-Jimenez, 2013: 101). Therefore, Indigenous epistemology is regulated and reduced to a tolerable amount to be incorporated into the institution of the self-governing territory. With regards to the extractive industry, Westerncentric narratives of development and modernity overpower and subordinate Indigenous knowledge which is inconsistent with this federal mandate. Therefore, the Indigenous movement for self-determination is being co-opted by the processes of coloniality in order to facilitate the ongoing coloniality of knowledge and normalization of Westerncentric, hegemonic, capitalist discourse in the Canadian Arctic.

Self-determination is an essential component in halting ongoing processes of coloniality which violate Indigenous epistemologies based on the interconnected relationship between humans, other life forces, and their expressions of nature. According to some Indigenous scholars, processes of modernity under neoliberalism promote a limited self-governance for Indigenous communities, such as with the case of Nunavut, rather than a sense of true self-determination. This form of sovereignty pitched to Indigenous communities through the Canadian state, which includes proposals to privatize reserve land and partnerships with the extractive industry, “represents the culmination of white society’s efforts to assimilate indigenous peoples” (Alfred, 1999: 59). An alternative form of self-determination with regards to land management and natural resource use within the contemporary economic world structure is possible according to Taiaiake Alfred:

Most Native people do not reject modernization or participation in larger economies. However, traditionalist recognize a responsibility to participate in the economy with the intent of ensuring the long-term health and stability of people and the land; in this context, development for development’s sake, consumerism, and unrestrained growth are not justifiable. It is the intense possessive materialism at the heart of Western economies
that must be rejected—for the basic reason that it contradicts traditional values aimed at maintaining a respectful balance among people and between human beings and the earth (Alfred, 1999: 61).

Projects of modernity which promote increased partnerships between Aboriginal communities and multinational corporations operating in the Canadian North do not align with this notion of Indigenous environmental justice expressed by Taiaiake Alfred. McGregor and LaDuke’s analyses of relationality are consistent with Alfred’s views on Indigenous self-determination in that they share an emphasis on Indigenous knowledge as a foundational concept for human-land interaction.

Mandates to continue operating under the institution of the Canadian nation-state and alliances with corporations operating in the Canadian Arctic territories do not represent Indigenous self-determination: “the primary goals of an Indigenous economy are to sustain the earth and to ensure the health and well-being of the people. Any derogation of that principle—whether in qualitative terms or with reference to the intensity of activity on the land—should be seen as upsetting the balanced ideal that lies at the heart of Native societies” (Alfred, 1999: 62). Thus, environmentally exploitative extractive industry activity and Indigenous partnerships with the natural resources industry exemplify the coloniality of knowledge in that the dominant Western, Enlightenment-era derived discourse of modernity renders Indigenous self-governance, diluted through the capitalist neoliberal paradigm, as the rational choice. In addition, the establishment of institutions of self-government, such as Nunavut, carry inherent colonial legacies which are continuously reconfigured. So while self-government in the Canadian Arctic may appear to be a step in the right direction for Indigenous self-determination, “the imposition of Western governance structures and the denial of Indigenous ones continue to have profoundly harmful effects on Indigenous people. Land, culture, and government are inseparable in
traditional philosophies; each depends on the others, and this means that denial of one aspect precludes recovery for the whole” (Alfred, 1999: 2). Establishing self-governing territories with federally imposed expectations regarding land and resource is an extension of the coloniality of knowledge which allows channels for resource exploitation to remain open.

Self-governing territories, however, have been the outcomes of sustained activism and pressure by Indigenous groups fighting for increased autonomy. This raises the question of why self-governance is not necessarily seen by all Indigenous people, such as Taiaiake Alfred, as a victory. During sustained policies and practices of colonization, the “colonized populations tend to internalize the derogatory images imposed on them by their colonial ‘masters,’ and…as a result of this process, these images, along with the structural relations with which they are entwined, come to be realized (or at least endured) as more or less natural” (Coulthard, 2007: 444). Limited forms of recognition, such as self-governance through the liberal institutions of the state, assist in reproducing colonial hierarchies and precarious conditions within Indigenous communities due to this internalization. In this regard, misrecognition of Indigenous groups by the colonial state is closely linked to the coloniality of knowledge. The church, school system, media, and other institutions of the state drive racist recognition into Indigenous psyches with detrimental effects (Coulthard, 2007: 452). Therefore, colonized populations cannot achieve a sense of mutuality with their colonizers because of the means by which such recognition is achieved. In other words, as Coulthard, building on the analysis of Franz Fanon explains, freedom is not achieved from the emancipatory recognition a slave is granted from his or her master (Coulthard, 2007:453). Instead, colonized populations “must struggle to critically reclaim and revaluate the worth of their own histories, traditions, and cultures against the subjectifying gaze and assimilative lure of colonial recognition” (Coulthard, 2007:453). Self-determination,
therefore, must exist outside of self-governance and without a dependency on the institutions of the colonizers which measures freedom through purely Western-centric and economic means.

Within the contemporary nation-station, capitalist paradigm, self-determination, however, is only seemingly achieved through economic development and limited degrees of recognition as controlled by the White settler state. Legal apparatuses of the state, through which this economic-based self-determination is achieved, “[facilitate] the creation of a new elite of Aboriginal capitalists whose thirst for profit has come to outweigh their ancestral obligations to the land and to others…[and] threaten to erode the most traditionally egalitarian aspects of Indigenous ethical systems, ways of life, and forms of social organization” (Coulthard, 2007: 452). Within the contexts of this discussion, this is evident in Canada with the formation of the self-governing territory of Nunavut and the Canadian state’s validation of the Inuit hinged on access to northern development and resource extraction.

The increasing development of the Canadian Arctic is a federal environmental formation project of the North. Through the governance structures that have been established for Aboriginal communities in Canada, specific spaces have been bounded and geographically situated as constructed places. In other words, with the establishment of the territorial borders of Nunavut, for example, the Canadian nation-state constructed a place in which Inuit culture, knowledge, and rights could be localized. In the process, however, “the Inuit surrendered any land claims and title rights held anywhere else in Canada, including the Nunavut settlement area” (Altamirano-Jimenez, 2013: 99), in exchange for rights and benefits allotted under the agreement which established the self-governed territory. In doing so, the Canadian nation-state was able to localize and confine Inuit indigeneity to the North, directly imposing a Western-centric conception of space onto Inuit communities. This notion is consistent with the idea of an
environmental formation as examined earlier: “a hegemonic and normative vision of human-land relations that is productive of specific conceptions of land and subjects” (Dempsey et al, 2011: 241). Contemporary narratives of the Canadian government concerning the Arctic have contributed to the normalization of a specific development oriented vision of the North which is strikingly colonial.

The Government of Canada released a Northern strategy report in 2009 which outlines its current ongoing mandate for the Arctic region. The report, while recognizing “the longstanding presence of Inuit and other Aboriginal peoples [who] are fundamental to [Canada’s] history” (Northern Strategy, 2009: 3), is highly focused on its economic potential while continuing to situate its Aboriginal population in an uncivilized and underdeveloped past: “[Canada’s] ability to meet the opportunities and challenges currently facing the North will shape our future” (Northern Strategy, 2009: 3). There is an underlying colonial narrative that is operating within the strategy report which insists that the Arctic region and its Indigenous residents, while important to the history of the nation, are moving along the Westerncentric spectrum of modernity towards civility. For the government, there is a need for the civilized and developed Canadian elite to assist the Indigenous population towards modernity through development:

From the development of world-class diamond mines and massive oil and gas reserves, to the growth of commercial fisheries, to a thriving tourism industry that attracts visitors from around the globe, the enormous potential of the North is being unlocked. Areas that require urgent attention—such as infrastructure, housing and education—are being addressed to help ensure Northerners are positioned to seize these unprecedented opportunities (Northern Strategy, 2009: 5).

The strategy is an example of the efforts by the Canadian government to normalize Westerncentric, Enlightenment-era, colonial narratives and scripts in the contemporary context in hopes of opening increased channels of capital. This is largely being done by ensuring that the
North is constructed as an environmentally sensitive yet relatively untouched region with the potential to achieve civility.

As has been made explicitly clear in the Canadian Northern Strategy, the extractive industry is the primary means by which Canada’s vision for the Arctic is to manifest. In part, this vision includes the creation of a region in which “self-reliant individuals live in healthy, vital communities, manage their own affairs and shape their own destinies” (Northern Strategy, 2009: 1). However, as is evident in the example of Nunavut’s self-governance model and the minimal form of self-determination embodied within the Northern territorial agreements, producing Aboriginal populations willing to keep their doors open corporate speculation of natural resources is the primary focus of Canada’s Northern Strategy: “The increasing political maturity and certainty in the North are helping to encourage private sector companies to explore and develop the region’s vast natural resources and to diversify the region’s economies” (Northern Strategy, 2009: 4). This excerpt is particularly revealing in its complicity with the colonality/modernity paradigm through its reference to both the North’s maturing political systems and development through the extractive industry. The implications of this portion of the strategy are that newly established Aboriginal self-governance structures, which are founded in Western-centric knowledge and institutions, are allowing Aboriginal populations to advance along the continuum towards modernity by adopting rational land management regimes. Additionally, the statement infantilizes Aboriginal communities while positioning the Canadian state, which embodies the same political systems of governance at a more developed level, in a paternalistic role relative to Indigenous populations. As such, the processes of colonality and normalization of colonial narratives persist systematically through the imposition of Western-centric institutions and their associated narratives.
Intertwined in this strategy is an explicit call for the Canadian government to assert its national sovereignty over the Arctic region as the effects of climate change begin to produce a new geopolitical picture. In particular, as the federal government has acknowledged, “decreasing ice cover will lead, over time, to increases in shipping, tourism and economic development in the Arctic Ocean region. While the full extent of the changes will take many decades to realize, Canada and other Arctic Ocean coastal states must begin to prepare for greater traffic into the region” (Foreign Policy 2010). The sentiment of a changing Arctic and its potential for economic development is echoed by Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper, in that “to not embrace the promise of the true North, now, at the time of its ascendency, would be to turn our backs on what it is to be Canadian” (NWT and Canada, 2013: 7). Remarks regarding the potential of the Arctic moving towards increased modernity through development are evident in many government documents which seek to normalize the rhetoric of a neoliberal system of modernity. However, colonial narratives underlie these documents as they undermine Indigenous knowledge, sovereignty, and fail to mention of negative effects of climate change on Indigenous populations.

Canada’s mission to assert its sovereignty is its primary focus for its policy regarding the Arctic. The government’s Statement on Canada’s Arctic Foreign Policy states that “the first and foremost important pillar towards recognizing the potential of Canada’s Arctic is the exercise of our sovereignty over the Far North” (Foreign Policy 2010). The presence of Indigenous people, however, is absent from discussions of sovereignty. Instead, the Arctic is continually presented and constructed as a place that is barren, unused, and unproductive but has potential once its territory and natural resources can be spoken for. The notion of sovereignty being presented through government compiled documents and strategies fails to take into account the “people
that are *living* the sovereignty...The idea of ‘use [the Arctic] or lose it’ is a moot point, because it is used” (Chase 2014). As a manifestation of the coloniality of power, Indigenous sovereignty is rendered invalid in comparison to national projects of declaring Canada’s sovereignty over the region. Thus, Indigenous self-determination and sovereignty is subordinated by the hegemonic and normative universality and legitimacy that Western-centric knowledge and its institutions have acquired through coloniality.

Under the federal strategy for the Arctic and its mandate to assert sovereignty, the question remains of what role Indigenous people are expected to play. Through the investigation of the colonial matrix of power and the sustained processes of the coloniality of knowledge, this analysis has thus far examined the role of market-subjects Indigenous populations are expected to assume. The colonial scripts of Indigenous infancy, irrationality, and inappropriate land management regimes have been employed through the colonial matrix of power and allowed the normalization of modernity and development to proliferate. However, another aspect of the colonial matrix of power and the processes of coloniality which is a direct manifestation of the neoliberal system is environmental protection and conservation.

The Arctic, as previously mentioned, is an environmental formation project which seeks to produce a specific identity for the constructed enclosures of the Canadian territories, with explicit human-land relation guidelines. By doing so, the Canadian government hopes to secure recognition of its Arctic sovereignty “wherein [they] can exercise [Canada’s] sovereign rights over the resources of the seabed and subsoil [as] most known Arctic natural resources lie within the exclusive economic zones of the Arctic states...States have sovereign rights to explore and exploit living and non-living marine resources in their respective exclusive economic zones” (Foreign Policy 2010). However, in near contradiction to this statement of intent to claim and
exploit the Arctic region, Canada’s strategy for the North also includes recognizing the environmental fragility of the region, albeit through a colonial lens. Visitors from all over the world come to Canada’s Arctic North to experience its “spectacular scenery, unique fish and wildlife and unequalled opportunities to explore its Arctic wilderness” (Northern Strategy, 2009: 24). Therefore, there is a need, according to the state, to protect the fragile ecosystems and wilderness for future generations. As such, “Canada is taking a comprehensive approach to the protection of environmentally sensitive lands and waters of [its] North, ensuring conservation is keeping pace with development” (Northern Strategy, 2009: 26). When examined more closely, conservation, such as that being conducted in several areas of the Canadian Arctic, is in itself a neoliberal colonial institution.

The creation of environmentally protected areas, such as national parks wildlife reserves, is a response to negative environmental effects caused by human industrial activity and processes of modernity. The mass degradation of the earth through industrial pollution and its contributions to climate change has an adverse effect on the environment and wildlife. Ironically, the neoliberal development/modernity regime increasingly employs strategies of conservation in an effort to protect the environment and effected wildlife. Meanwhile, environmentally exploitative practices through the same regime, especially in environmentally fragile ecosystems such as the Arctic, are continuing. Canada’s Northern Strategy acknowledges the impacts of climate change, the Arctic’s sensitive ecosystems, and quick melting ice covers, and thus outlines the implementation of a “number of conservation initiatives such as the creation of new national parks in the East Arm of Great Slave Lake and in the Sahtu Settlement Area. Canada also committed to a major expansion of the Nahanni National Park Reserve” (Northern Strategy, 2009: 26). At the same time, as this discussion has explored,
Canada’s strategy for the North is heavily in favour of expanding the very same extractive industry activity which harms the environment: “The NWT mainland, Mackenzie Delta and offshore holds discovered recoverable 1.2 billion barrels of oil and 16.2 trillion cubic feet of natural gas. Ultimate recoverable potential is estimated around 6.873 billion barrels of oil and 81.2 trillion cubic feet of natural gas” (NWT and Canada, 2013: 10). However, the simultaneous degradation and protection of the environment by the modernity project ignores the livelihoods, sustenance, and sovereignty of Indigenous populations within these constructed spaces. The environmental protectionism which is cited to offset the destruction stemming from non-Indigenous industrialization ignores the fact that Indigenous populations have existed within and beyond these constructed spaces while exercising their own worldviews. As such, these populations, who have employed practices which are inherently sustainable, are now subject to regulation and boundaries instituted by the neoliberal state and its Western-centric conservation.

In turn, national parks and reserves are designed to serve the interests of the White settler society. Reserves and conservation efforts strive to protect nature from human activity which is perceived, by virtue of Western-centric human-land relations, as inherently destructive. However, tourism and the regulation of nature through reserves and national parks are profitable for the neoliberal regime. Additionally, such efforts strive to protect romanticized imaginaries of White settler society where “tourists [can] escape the forward movement of progress and access both traces of a past era and the nostalgia associated with the passing of a previous time” (Thorpe, 2011: 202). Modernity, however, rather than being seen as a culprit of these destructive practices, is regarded as necessary and environmental destruction is perceived as mere collateral damage. Creating such environmental formations and regulating or restricting Indigenous access
to sustenance through conservation are a part of the Westerncentric notion of sustainable development.

Under neoliberalism, the coloniality/modernity paradigm has undergone an inevitable reconfiguration. As new sites of privatization and commodification are being explored under neoliberal policies, “economic development is no longer measured by the material levels of industrialization, but in terms of the capacity of a society to generate and preserve human capital” (Castro-Gomez, 2007: 437). This ties closely with the coloniality of knowledge, in that development under neoliberalism largely depends on the hegemonic control over not only the spatial, temporal, and epistemic, but also the mentalities of individuals to ensure that narratives of development are sustained. Rather than land and resource appropriation, “sustainable development places the generation of ‘human capital’ at the center of its concerns, that is to say the promotion of knowledge, aptitudes and experiences that convert a social actor into an economically productive subject” (Castro-Gomez, 2007: 437). At the same time, neoliberal sustainable development of human capital depends on the commodification of these power relations. In particular, Indigenous knowledge is recognized insofar as it can be exploited or contribute to the exploitation of those who ascribe to it. With this in mind, the neoliberal coloniality/modernity project in the Canadian Arctic—particularly through its self-governance recognition strategies with Northern Indigenous communities—can be conceived as an investment in human capital; to reproduce market-subjects through hegemonic colonial discourse.

The coloniality/modernity project undertaken by the Government of Canada and its corporate allies has resulted in increased attention to the Arctic region. While climate change is producing drastic changes to the environment, particularly in the Arctic, the
Coloniality/modernity capitalist paradigm is constantly in need of new sites of conquest. Melting ice covers, while detrimental to livelihood of humanity and the earth itself, represent opportunity for institutions founded on Western-centric knowledge. The assumption that Western-centric knowledge is a universal and objective truth around which all of humanity should be oriented is inherently destructive. Western-centric knowledge is based in self-serving human-land relations, racism, and exploitative colonial practices. Processes of coloniality, founded on White supremacy, are not limited to historical colonial contexts but rather are sustained through the neoliberal system in contemporary Indigenous-settler state relations. Indigenous knowledge, culture, language, and epistemologies are consistently homogenized with nature itself and rendered anti-modern. As this discussion has shown, however, as the capitalist economic system has evolved into the neoliberal system, so too have evolved the systems of colonialism. In particular, the coloniality of knowledge is imperative in the maintenance of White settler society’s control over the world’s natural resources, while Indigenous populations continue to be subjected to misrecognition and environmental injustice. However, Indigenous knowledge can serve as an important epistemic tool by which the destructive effects of coloniality/modernity seen through climate change can be stopped.
Bibliography


