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## From Recognition to Agonistic Reconciliation:

## A Critical Multilogue on Indigenous-Settler Relations in Canada

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*[T]he resolve has to be there to give reconciliation its full expression to appreciate its highly textured demands. In practical terms, that comes down to an analysis that transcends a strictly legal debate but goes back to some fundamental questions over what Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians alike would like to see in a future harmonized relationship. Without that resolve and that analysis there is a significant risk that reconciliation will become just another lofty term, discussed in terms of high generality and ambiguity, much in the way of the historic treaties. Surely, there has to be a better way forward.*

-E. Ria Tzimas 2011, 527

## Introduction

In late October 2012, an Indigenous social movement was sparked in response to the federal government’s omnibus budget bill (C-45), which contained significant changes to the Indian Act, Navigation Protection Act, and Environmental Assessment Act (CBC News 2013). Known now as Idle No More, the movement gained strength in December as Chief Theresa Spence of the Attawapiskat First Nation began a hunger strike that lasted forty-three days. When she ended her protest, Chief Spence released a statement that began by declaring that she had secured “signed commitment from elected First Nations leaders and opposition parties to urgently carry forward our action plan to ensure that our Treaty Rights are *recognized*, honoured and fully implemented” (Wherry 2013a; emphasis added). In response to this statement and to the Idle No More movement more generally, opposition leaders in the House of Commons called on Prime Minister Stephen Harper to commit to *reconciliation* between First Nations and the Crown (APTN National News 2012; Wherry 2013b).

The invocation of the concepts “recognition” and “reconciliation” has become increasingly common for both political actors and for political theorists as they seek to address group marginalization and oppression in modern politics. Indeed, it is an increasingly accepted notion, particularly in academic, legal, and policy circles, that much work remains to be done in order to properly recognize Aboriginal rights and to build reconciliation between Indigenous peoples and settlers in Canada (Turner 2006; Coulthard 2007). However, if there is agreement that the politics of recognitionand the politics of reconciliationare central terms of reference for thinking about how to address Canada’s colonial history, the definition of these terms, and whether or not they actually hold promise for addressing the egregious injustices of colonialism, remain hotly contested sites of normative debate.

In this paper, I offer new insight to this debate by revisiting Charles Taylor’s essay “The Politics of Recognition” (1992). This groundbreaking work was celebrated for moving beyond difference-blind liberalism and demonstrating how marginalized groups – including Indigenous peoples – could be extended public recognition “both as human beings and also as bearers of particular social identities” (Markell 2003, 3). Taylor’s influence was such that Seyla Benhabib deemed recognition “the master concept for reflection upon what appeared at first sight to be a disparate array of sociocultural movements and struggles” (2002, 50). More recently, however, this “master concept” has faced a multifaceted critique. Critics argue that recognition has supplanted concerns for redistribution (Fraser 1995, 2000) and that mutual recognition – in its vain attempts to overcome “the risk of conflict, hostility, misunderstanding, opacity, and alienation that characterizes life among others” (Markell 2003, 28) – is ultimately both dangerous and illusory. In relation to Indigenous-settler relations, other scholars contend that state-driven recognition policies have forced Indigenous peoples into essentialized identity moulds that are untenable in present-day political contexts (Povinelli 2002) and that attempts at recognition (including self-government agreements and land claims) have actually reproduced the very structures of domination and colonialism that Indigenous peoples have sought to transcend (Coulthard 2007, 438-9).

Given the validity of these critiques, scholars have begun to move away from the recognition paradigm and in so doing have largely dismissed Taylor’s essay as holding any serious promise for improving Indigenous-settler relations in Canada. It is my assertion that although his critics raise important points that must be taken seriously, Taylor’s essay contains key elements that have enduring value in addressing the colonial relationship. Taylor’s critics have persuasively argued that his theory supports attempts at definitive and fixed solutions imposed on cultural and political ‘others’ by the state. However, such a conclusion can only be reached if it is assumed that Taylor is working from a state-centric and institutionalist position. This interpretation does not account for Taylor’s ultimate focus on how individuals of different cultures can come to understand one another through what he calls the *fusion of horizons*. In order to clarify my analysis, therefore, I have found it useful to create a conceptual separation between the *institutional* dimension and the *individual* dimension. This distinction allows me to show that while Taylor’s theory may have shortcomings at the institutional level, it remains significant when looking at how reconciliation can be built among individuals of diverse cultural and political communities.

This take on Taylor’s essay will be supported by connecting it to recent literature on the concept of reconciliation. While reconciliation also has its detractors, if it is properly conceived as an ongoing process of negotiation and re-negotiation – what I call *agonistic reconciliation* – it still holds great promise for transforming Indigenous-settler relations (Tully 2008). Ultimately, I will argue that if read through the lens of agonistic reconciliation, as opposed to state-centric recognition, “The Politics of Recognition” continues to hold valuable insight for how to build more just Indigenous-settler reconciliatory practices in Canada.

This paper is organized into two main parts. In the first part, I will provide a short summary of “The Politics of Recognition” and then review the critical literature on the essay, particularly *vis-à-vis* Indigenous-settler relations. In this section, I draw on the work of Dale Turner (2006) to provide a critical framework for analyzing the shortcomings of Taylor’s theory at the institutional level before turning to its ongoing relevance at the individual level. With the second part, I will introduce the concept of agonistic reconciliation and demonstrate how Taylor’s theory is deeply embedded in this way of thinking. The result is not to dismiss Taylor’s critics; their fundamental insight into the flaws of state-driven policies of recognition and reconciliation ought not to be ignored. Rather, it is to show that from a different vantage point, Taylor’s theory actually takes these criticisms seriously and shares in the hope for an ongoing and dialogical process of Indigenous-settler reconciliation in Canada.

## Taylor’s Theory as State-Centric Recognition

Taylor’s essay, “The Politics of Recognition” (1992), begins with the Hegelian premise that our identity is shaped by how others view us. Just as identities can be enhanced through proper recognition they can also “suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves” (Taylor 1992, 25). In this sense, misrecognition is not just disrespectful; “it can inflict a grievous wound, saddling its victims with a crippling self-hatred. Due recognition is not just a courtesy we owe people. It is a vital human need” (Taylor 1992, 26). The central point here is that our identities – and indeed our lives – are fundamentally *dialogical* in character (Taylor 1992, 32).

The fact that identity is shaped through dialogical relations with others raises serious political questions about how adequate recognition can be achieved. On the one hand, proponents of a “politics of equal dignity” argue that recognition can only be accorded if all individuals enjoy the same rights and entitlements. On the other hand, advocates of a “politics of difference” argue that individuals and groups – in all their diversity – can only be properly recognized through an acknowledgment of their distinctness from others (Taylor 1992, 37-40). Taylor proceeds to elaborate an approach that traces a middle ground between these two positions (Nicholson 1996, 1). Ultimately, he argues that “procedural liberalism,” which rigidly upholds undifferentiated individual rights is “inhospitable to difference because it can’t accommodate what the members of distinct societies really aspire to, which is survival” (Taylor 1992, 61). What is necessary, therefore, is a form of liberalism that – while still upholding basic rights like *habeas corpus* – is willing to diverge from uniform treatment if the survival of a minority culture requires it. In Taylor’s words, the challenge then becomes “to deal with their sense of marginalization without compromising our basic political principles” (1992, 63).

Taylor is careful to note that the imperative of cultural survival does not mean that all cultures are automatically owed equal respect (1992, 66). However, what is required is a *presumption* of worth. Based on this presumption, people must approach other cultures with a willingness to engage in what Gadamer called a “fusion of horizons” (quoted in Taylor 1992, 67). What Taylor means by this concept is meaningful engagement with the other so that one can make a judgement of value based (at least partly) on standards learned from the other culture. While there may be aspects that we choose to reject, we will almost certainly find other aspects worthy of our respect (Taylor 1992, 67; Schaap 2004, 528-9). Given the reality that, to an increasing degree, diverse cultures must find ways to live together, Taylor views this approach as both a practical and moral obligation.

I should note that Taylor’s central subject in this piece is not actually Indigenous peoples, but the people and culture of Quebec. How, then, does this theory apply to Indigenous-settler relations, and in what way is it objectionable? The simple response to this question is that despite his focus on Quebec, Taylor also specifically applies his theory of recognition to Indigenous peoples (Taylor 1992, 40; see also 1993, 180-3 and 1998). Moreover, in recent years, several scholars have applied Taylor’s essay to the question of Indigenous-settler relations and found it seriously problematic in this regard. It is to this important criticism that I now turn.

***The Institutional Dimension***

In order to outline the shortcomings in Taylor’s essay at the institutional level in a coherent way, I found it useful to draw on a framework developed by Dale Turner in his book *This is Not a Peace Pipe* (2006). In the first part of this work, Turner cogently critiques three liberal projects: the 1969 White Paper, Alan Cairns’ book *Citizens Plus*, and Will Kymlicka’s theory of minority rights. He argues that these various iterations of liberalism attempt to be “peace pipes” because they “claim to respect Aboriginal peoples and their differences and to define not only the meaning and content of their rights but also their proper place in Canadian society” (2006, 5). However, Turner ultimately rejects each theory in turn, finding that, “from an Aboriginal perspective, these three liberal theories are not peace pipes” (2006, 7). They are deficient for four fundamental reasons:

1. They do not adequately address the legacy of colonialism.
2. They do not respect the sui generis nature of indigenous rights as a class of political rights that flow out of indigenous nationhood and that are not bestowed by the Canadian state.
3. They do not question the legitimacy of the Canadian state’s unilateral claim of sovereignty over Aboriginal lands and peoples.
4. Most importantly, they do not recognize that a meaningful theory of Aboriginal rights in Canada is impossible without Aboriginal participation. (2006, 7)

Like the other theories that Turner criticizes, Taylor’s theory also endeavors to respect the differences of cultural groups (including Indigenous peoples) and create the grounds for justice. However, when held up against Turner’s framework, I see four interrelated ways in which Taylor’s theory is lacking when viewed from this institutional perspective.

First, in one of his more prescriptive moments, Taylor provides a glimpse into the kind of recognition Indigenous peoples might be liable to receive. He notes that a politics of difference may necessitate that “members of aboriginal bands will get certain rights and powers not enjoyed by other Canadians, if the demands for native self-government are finally agreed on” (1992, 40). These measures would help to diminish harmful misrecognition and allow Indigenous communities to “preserve their cultural identity” (Taylor 1992, 40). However, by invoking self-government Taylor points to a deeply flawed process where the state bestows certain limited rights to Indigenous governments “in exchange for extinguishment of the Aboriginal title it has only just begun to recognize” (Day 2001, 180; see also Povinelli 2002). As Stephanie Irlbacher-Fox (2009) has recently shown, self-government negotiations are often coercive as government negotiators refuse to acknowledge profound historical injustice and instead focus exclusively on the present. This process is, therefore, deeply at odds with the vision of fusion of horizons that Taylor presents later in his essay. James Tully notes that although Canadian policy *vis-à-vis* Indigenous peoples has shifted dramatically since the 19th century, what has remained constant is “the colonial assumption that Aboriginal peoples are subordinate and subject to the Canadian Government, rather than equal, self-governing nations” (2008, 227). By describing self-government as a successful enactment of recognition, Taylor, in essence, maintains this assumption in his work. In this way, Taylor does not respect Turner’s second principle that stipulates the *sui generis* nature of Indigenous rights that that “are not bestowed by the Canadian state” (2006, 7).

Second, entwined with the above problem is the more pervasive idea in Taylor’s theory that recognition is *given* to a subaltern group by a dominant group (Day 2000, 217). At multiple points in his discussion, Taylor seems to indicate that a privileged group holds the power to offer recognition to a marginalized group if it is appropriate. As Glen Coulthard argues, by speaking of recognition being “granted” or “accorded,” Taylor’s theory seriously limits the possibilities for transforming the colonial relationship (2007, 443-44). In her critique of Taylor’s essay, Himani Bannerji (2000) expands on this issue by outlining his problematic use of the pronouns “we” and “they.” In setting up a situation where a powerful “we” is able to choose how, when, and why to grant recognition to a marginalized “they,” Taylor creates an imbalanced power relationship that actually precludes the possibility of “establishing a dialogue among equals” (Bannerji 2000, 135). This formulation creates a situation where marginalized groups’ demands for value are subject to the approval of the state and limits the deeper questions that underlie them. As Linda Nicholson puts it, the “more challenging voices are not those saying ‘recognize my worth’ but rather those saying, ‘let my presence make you aware of the limitations of what you have so far judged to be true and of worth’ ” (1996, 10). This is precisely the possibility that Taylor hopes for in his discussion of a fusion of horizons among diverse cultures. However, at the institutional level, he seems to undermine his own hope with an oppositional power structure whereby the state gets to examine the other and then make its own determination as to what form of recognition would be appropriate. This idea does retain important reconciliatory potential at the individual level, though, as will be highlighted in the next section.

Further, although Taylor “supports everyone’s need for recognition and appeals to ‘us’ who are in a position to grant it, he does not question why ‘we’ have the power to grant or withhold it” (Bannerji 2000, 135-6). This oversight is particularly problematic in the context of a colonial settler state where Canada’s very sovereignty has been unilaterally declared and is deeply contested by Indigenous peoples (Alfred 2005; Tully 2008). Rather than creating a space where Indigenous self-determination could be asserted and respected, Taylor reinscribes a colonial power relationship where the ability to grant self-determination rests with the dominant (settler) group. If analyzed through Turner’s framework, Taylor falls short of both the second and third principles by failing to recognize the rights that are derived from Indigenous nationhood and by assuming the legitimacy of Canada’s unilateral claim to sovereignty.

A third issue[[1]](#footnote--1) is the way in which Taylor’s theory reduces Indigenous claims (and indeed all claims to recognition) to concerns over identity and culture (Honneth 2001, 52). He posits that the major problem with procedural liberalism is that “it can’t accommodate what members of distinct societies really aspire to, which is survival” (1992, 61). This sentiment makes some sense when dealing with the Québécois, for whom it could be argued that recognition as a distinct people is a political end in itself (Young 1997, 156). Surely, however, Indigenous peoples aspire to much more than mere cultural survival. Of course, survival is a necessary component of their demands and the fact that Indigenous peoples have survived a sustained barrage of colonialism is often celebrated: “Onkwehonwe [Indigenous peoples] have already demonstrated incredible commitment and courage simply in surviving the constant and vicious assaults from colonial forces on the their dignity and on the very idea of their existences over the past 500 years” (Alfred 2005, 179). More fundamentally, though, Indigenous peoples seek to exist not only as cultural communities but as *political* communities; their struggles are not just for cultural survival but for political self-determination (Alfred 2005). However, by reducing the politics of recognition to a politics of identity, Taylor obscures these political struggles that pose a more serious threat to the legitimacy of the Canadian polity and economy. Here again, then, Taylor is guilty of failing to question Canada’s unilateral claim to sovereignty over Indigenous lands and peoples (Turner’s third principle).

There are further difficulties with the way in which Taylor conceptualizes identity as rigidly linked to culture, especially in the context of Aboriginal rights in Canada. According to Taylor, not all group identities can be protected by individual rights alone. Using the example of Quebec, Taylor argues that Québécois culture creates a shared horizon of meaning that constitutes a fundamental aspect of Québécois identity. The French language, in particular, has to be protected to preserve an authentic identity. The Québécois people, then, must be able to enact policy that allows them to remain true to the culture of their ancestors and “actively seek to *create* members” of their community now and in the future (Taylor 1992, 58-9). The resonance for Indigenous communities, here, is clear. Many scholars argue that Indigenous languages and ancestral knowledge must be preserved or revitalized in order for “authentic” Indigenous identity to be maintained (see Alfred 2005; Alfred and Corntassel 2005). The danger here is that culture is narrowly construed as the “language and practices of a historical, linguistic community” and it is assigned a “certain fixity and stability” (Dick 2011, 45). The tendency with this understanding of culture is to create a list of fundamental cultural traits and find ways for those traits to be protected (Grammond 2009; Schouls 2003). With this formulation of culture, Taylor leans towards cultural essentialism and fails to adequately account for the diversity and constant negotiation of identity that exists both within and between cultures (Dick 2011, 46).

A brief look at the development of Supreme Court of Canada Aboriginal rights jurisprudence helps to highlight the harm that can result from an approach that too firmly links traditional culture to identity. In a recent work, Caroline Dick (2011) demonstrates that when the Court began outlining Aboriginal rights in cases including *Calder*, *Guerin*,and *Sparrow* it tied Aboriginal rights to the status of Aboriginal peoples as Canada’s first politically self-governing nations. However, in *Van der Peet* and *Mitchell* the Court took a dramatic turn and began to define rights based on the activities and practices that are integral to Indigenous cultures. Importantly, such activities must have existed prior to contact prior the arrival of European settlers (Dick 2011, 126-9). In effect, then, Aboriginal rights are frozen in time, and any cultural practices that have developed since contact – and may well be of crucial import to Indigenous groups – are not protected. Therefore, these rulings seem to deny that Indigenous cultures, laws, and traditions can (and ought to) evolve to remain relevant under changing circumstances – something that non-Indigenous peoples take for granted (Borrows 1998). In other words, this legal framework seriously curtails the protections that can be offered to Indigenous communities, while allowing a Canadian institution (filled entirely with non-Indigenous individuals) to continue defining what comprises “authentic” Aboriginal identity. Dick concludes that “this judicial effort to link the meaning and purpose of Aboriginal rights to the protection of Aboriginal identity or ‘Aboriginality’ and, in turn, to protect Aboriginal distinctiveness by safeguarding authentic cultural practices draws the same connection among rights, culture, and identity offered by Taylor” (2011, 131). In effect, for Taylor’s critics, by strictly tying culture to identity and failing to adequately consider demands for *political* self-determination, his theory may actually severely restrict the rights of a group his theory was designed to protect.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Taylor’s theory leaves the structure of the state and the economy intact because he does not adequately connect the damage caused by misrecognition to “the more overtly structural and/or economic features of social oppression” (Coulthard 2007, 445; see also Bannerji 2000). Sharing this assessment, Richard Day contends that, “Taylor’s theory of recognition is pragmatically motivated by a desire to maintain the current allocation of territories between nations and states” (2001, 178). With his focus on Quebec, Taylor is willing to allow for the existence of a multiplicity of identities and nations within a single state. Vitally, however, the state maintains its political dominance. In other words, Taylor’s theory “allows for diversity of culture within a particular state by admitting the possibility of multiple national identifications. It is less permissive with regard to polity and economy, however, in assuming that any subaltern group that is granted ‘national’ status will thereby acquire a *subordinate* articulation with a *capitalist state*” (Day 2001, 189; original emphasis). This obfuscation of the economic dimension deeply limits the analysis of exactly what kind of recognition would be required to rectify injustice (Zurn 2003, 525). This problem is relevant to any number of marginalized groups, from single mothers to recent immigrants. However, it is particularly salient for Indigenous peoples whose oppression is inextricably linked to the dispossession of land. For many Indigenous groups, a relationship to the land is integral not only for sustainable economies and a healthy environment, but for cultural and spiritual practices (RCAP vol. 1 1996, chap. 15). Any theory of justice that does not account for this monumental theft also fails to adequately address the legacy of colonialism, which happens to be Turner’s first principle.

Allow me to summarize this critique of Taylor (1992) by returning to Turner’s four principles. By invoking self-government as a solution and formulating recognition as something that is accorded by dominant settlers, Taylor does not respect the *sui generis* nature of Indigenous rights as flowing from indigenous nationhood, and instead sees them as bestowed by the Canadian state (principle 2). By reducing Indigenous claims to culture and rigidly linking authentic identity to culture, instead of recognizing the political demands for self-determination, Taylor does not question the legitimacy of the Canadian state’s unilateral claim to sovereignty (principle 3). For these reasons and for failing to account for economic oppression and the dispossession of land, Taylor does not adequately address the legacy of colonialism (principle 1).

The remaining principle is the need to recognize the importance of Indigenous participation (principle 4). On this point, Coulthard notes that, throughout his essay, Taylor fails to consider the voices of prominent Indigenous critics: “My point here is that an approach that is explicitly oriented around dialogue and listening ought to be more sensitive to the claims and challenges emanating from these dissenting Indigenous voices” (2007: 447). Perhaps, however, we should not be so quick to dismiss the normative potential of Taylor’s notion of a “fusion of horizons” (1992, 67). The value of this idea, particularly between *individuals* of different cultures, is the subject of the next section.

***The Individual Dimension***

In the previous section, I drew on many of Taylor’s critics (including Richard Day, Himani Bannerji, and Glen Coulthard) to highlight how – on an institutional level – Taylor’s theory has several flaws when applied to the colonial context in Canada. While their insights are no doubt valuable, these critics make several assumptions about how Taylor’s theory would be applied that lead to their critical conclusion. Most centrally, they assume that Taylor has a state-centric focus. If, however, we shift the focus from relations among institutions to relations among individuals, Taylor’s theory suddenly has new potential. To demonstrate this point, I will begin by laying out this key assumption of Taylor’s critics before reframing Taylor’s theory to highlight its ongoing importance for Indigenous-settler relations.

Some of Taylor’s most scathing critics work from the assumption that Taylor’s theory is built around how the *state* can more justly recognize minority cultural groups, including Indigenous peoples. For example, Coulthard notes that he defines the politics of recognition to be “the now expansive range of recognition-based models of liberal pluralism that seek to reconcile Indigenous claims to nationhood with Crown sovereignty via the accommodation of Indigenous identities in some form of renewed relationship with the Canadian state” (2007, 438). He concludes the same article arguing that Indigenous groups must turn away from the “assimilative lure of *statist* politics of recognition” (Coulthard 2007, 456; emphasis added). In these passages and throughout his argument, Coulthard makes clear that in his reading of Taylor, the primacy of the state goes unchallenged and the state maintains the power to grant or accord limited forms of recognition. Day (2001) shares this assumption, and (as noted in the previous section) argues that recognition is only granted to groups that can be subordinated under the current social, political, and economic structures. To put it another way, Coulthard and Day see Taylor’s theory as state-centric; he is asking what the state is obligated to provide minority groups. They are critical because for them, unless the state too is significantly altered, then colonial structures and relationships will stay in place.

This assumption about Taylor’s focus is certainly not unfounded. In his discussion of recognition and identity formation, Taylor demarcates the intimate and public spheres (1992, 36). In the intimate sphere, we are recognized by those individuals who matter most to us – our parents, our partners, our children – and those relationships have a profound effect on our identity formation. However, Taylor explicitly notes that his primary concern is with the public sphere (1992, 37). He then proceeds to discuss the Canadian state’s relationship with the Québécois and the laws and constitutional changes that would provide more adequate recognition to Quebec. As Connolloy, Leach, and Walsh point out, “in his essay, Taylor is largely concerned with *legal and institutional* recognition for equal worth of cultures” (2007, 4; emphasis added). Given Taylor’s acknowledged focus on the public sphere, and his use of state-driven policies as examples of recognition, it is easy to see why Taylor’s critics focus on his problematic conception of the state and its relation to minority groups. Indeed, the critique in the previous section worked from the same assumption to demonstrate why, on an institutional level, Taylor’s theory is a poor normative foundation for building reconciliation between Indigenous peoples and settlers in Canada. However, by assuming that Taylor’s theory is exclusively state-centric, we might miss other ways that it can be more successfully applied.

Given Taylor’s Hegelian foundations, it seems possible – if not likely – that Taylor’s public sphere contains relationships not only between institutions and societal groups, but between individuals as well. Indeed, in the last section (V) of his essay “The Politics of Recognition” (1992), Taylor moves away from his focus on the state towards a discussion of what is required of individuals. Of particular value here is Taylor’s discussion of the fusion of horizons in which individual members of different cultural groups approach the other by attempting to understand *their* norms, and not simply by applying one’s own norms to another culture. It is worth quoting this crucial insight at length:

What has to happen is what Gadamer has called a “fusion of horizons.” We learn to move in a broader horizon, within which what we have formerly taken for granted as the background to valuation can be situated as one possibility alongside the different background of the formerly unfamiliar culture. The “fusion of horizons” operates through our developing new vocabularies of comparison, by means of which we can articulate these contrasts. So that if and when we ultimately find substantive support for our initial presumption, it is on the basis of an understanding of what constitutes worth that we couldn’t possibly have had at the beginning. We have reached the judgement partly through transforming our standards. (Taylor 1992, 67)

This dialogical approach to difference seems to hold promise for moving away from stereotypes, prejudice, and other forms of misrecognition, towards some form of mutual understanding. It requires that we are willing to be “transformed by the study of the other, so that we are not simply judging by our original familiar standards” (Taylor 1992, 70).

Some commentators, however, have questioned whether the fusion of horizons actually offers the transformative possibility that Taylor claims. Following Bannerji’s (2000) critique (cited in the previous section) Rita Dhamoon (2006) argues that Taylor’s notion of the fusion of horizons actually forces the Other to fuse with the horizon of the dominant. While Dhamoon recognizes the value of Taylor’s theory in creating new vocabularies of comparison – which can call Eurocentric norms into question – she ultimately finds that the “dialogical practices” for which Taylor advocates are limited by a set of political principles that “stabilize rather than challenge the hegemonic order” (Dhamoon 2006, 364). In Dhamoon’s words, “even though Taylor attempts to avoid imposing standards of what he calls North Atlantic civilization, he collapses into a perspective that requires ‘them’ to fuse ‘their’ horizons with ‘ours’ ” (2006, 365).

Bannerji (2000) and Dhamoon (2006) both rely on a particular excerpt of “The Politics of Recognition” to make their point:

All societies are becoming increasingly multicultural, while at the same time becoming more porous….Their porousness means that they are more open to multi-national migration; more of theirmembers live the life of diaspora, whose center is elsewhere….The awkwardness arises from the fact that there are substantial numbers of people who are citizens and also belong to the culture that calls into question ourphilosophical boundaries. The challenge is to deal with theirsense of marginalization withoutcompromisingourbasic political principles. (Taylor 1992, 63)

Indeed, this passage does seem to create an “us versus them” conflict where – at the very least – the marginalized group (*they*) has the “basic political principles” of the dominant group (*we*) imposed on them. Dialogical encounters of this limited type are surely not what Turner has in mind when he expounds the necessity of Indigenous participation.

However, once again, this criticism of Taylor works from the assumption that Taylor’s aim is to justify the *institutional* imposition of certain political principles. My point, though, is that Taylor’s theory may be more usefully interpreted if we look at what it requires of *individuals* who engage in dialogical practices. I think that it is possible to read section V of “The Politics of Recognition” not as a justification of the imposition of dominant values, but rather as Taylor impelling dominant Canadians to enter into a genuine dialogue where those very values may be challenged and transformed. Taylor provides the framework through which Canadians could prepare themselves to enter into dialogue with another “civilization” (1992, 62). Importantly, this dialogue between civilizations does not require both sides to accept a Western tradition of dialogue. Taylor is using his own (Western) philosophical tradition in order to articulate to Canadians how a dialogue might take place. The other civilization (in this case Indigenous peoples), however, will enter the dialogue based on their own understandings of dialogical relationships.[[2]](#footnote-0) In this sense, Taylor’s focus is not on how the other ought to adapt, but on how Canadians (in this case settler Canadians) can open themselves to dialogue and change.

Applied to the example of Indigenous-settler relations, this reading requires that Canadians do *not* enter the dialogue with the presupposition that their own Eurocentric framework already contains the principles through which Indigenous peoples can be adequately recognized. Rather, the principles, values, laws, and political structures of Indigenous peoples are regarded as *presumptively equal* (Taylor 1992, 66-7). Once on this ground of equal standing, members of both groups begin to create what Taylor calls a language of “perspicuous contrast” (cited in Temelini forthcoming). This is a vocabulary through which individuals from both groups of people can come to explain the values and principles of the other not with their own terms, but in a new language that is both mutually intelligible and mutually acceptable. Michael Temelini eloquently describes this process:

Taylor’s proposal for recognition begins from the position that we are deeply motivated by sometimes conflicting values but understanding and recognition are possible in ongoing dialogue….For Taylor, reconciliation and recognition can be achieved conditionally, and in a mutually non-distortive manner, in a continuing conversation, negotiation and persuasion in which the differences and similarities are compared among people recognized as different. (forthcoming)

It seems possible, then, that Taylor’s theory does not force a marginalized group to accept a dominant horizon of meaning, but requires that the dominant group be willing to deeply question their own values and principles. In this light, when Taylor creates a division between *they* and *we*, it is not to show how Indigenous peoples must adapt, but rather to emphasize what the ethical obligation of settler Canadians is *vis-à-vis* Indigenous peoples. Temelini’s insight also begins to highlight how Taylor’s theory relates to the concept of reconciliation. The next section will more thoroughly articulate how the fusion of horizons may be more usefully thought of as a tool for *reconciliation* as opposed to merely *recognition*.

## Taylor’s Theory as Agonistic Reconciliation

***Reconciling Reconciliation***

In order to examine how Taylor might contribute to the project of reconciliation, it is first important to examine the concept of reconciliation itself. As Andrew Schaap has shown, a fundamental objection that many scholars have raised about reconciliation is its ambiguity (2008, 250-1). Schaap argues (as will I) that this ambiguity does not have to be viewed as entirely negative since disagreement on the term itself may actually promote dialogue and contestation that is actually a significant part of the reconciliatory process. In other words, “if reconciliation depends on a population within a state coming to think of itself as a people, then a particular conception of reconciliation cannot be determined in advance but must be worked out politically by those who would get together to reconcile in the first place” (Shaap 2008, 251). Nonetheless, this “ambiguity objection” highlights that there are multiple understandings of reconciliation. Thus, this section opens with a brief survey of various conceptions of the term. I will begin with a series of problematic versions that view reconciliation as a process that leads to closure, a final agreement, or some other kind of definitive end before arriving at Schaap’s (and others’) more fruitful agonistic model.

In the last two decades, there has been a burgeoning literature on reconciliation. However, the idea did not “burst into international prominence” (Bashir and Kymlicka 2008, 1) due to a focus on settler-colonial states like Canada. Rather, scholars of transitional justice began to home in on the concept of reconciliation as it was being used in post-apartheid South Africa. After a period of horrific violence and racial segregation, South Africans needed a way to transition from violence and division to some form of peace, unity, and democracy. The model employed – through various means including a Truth and Reconciliation Commission – was reconciliation. Several scholars have celebrated the successful transition that was achieved through this process (see Minow 1998; Tutu 1999). Others have more reservedly acknowledged that although reconciliation in the South African case cannot be considered a replacement for more traditional forms of justice (trial and punishment), it was the only reasonably available option, and still holds significant moral worth (see Dwyer 1999). Still others have been critical of the reconciliatory process highlighting that it was a state-driven initiative that sought to impose closure in demanding that citizens embrace forgiveness while accepting the singular version of historical events that was being collected (see Mamdani 2001).

More recently, scholars and political actors have applied the idea of reconciliation to the Canadian context. However, given the South African example and the critical literature surrounding it, several commentators have been skeptical about whether reconciliation can really lead to any kind of transformation in the colonial relationship. Indeed, there are good reasons for questioning the applicability of reconciliation to a settler-colonial state. To start with, it is important to acknowledge that in the South African context, reconciliation was used as a means to launch a project of inclusion and equal citizenship. In Canada, however, Indigenous peoples have actually been oppressed through attempts at inclusion and assimilation; they demand instead “some recognition and accommodation of their distinct identity” (Bashir and Kymlicka 2008, 7). Thus, reconciliation that is oriented towards unitary nationhood could actually perpetuate injustice by ruling out the possibility of Indigenous self-rule.

Moreover, much like critics pointed out was the case in the South African context, in Canada the word reconciliation has also been, to a large extent, co-opted by the state. Much of the state’s relationship with Indigenous peoples is now couched in the language of reconciliation. However, this state-appropriated reconciliation is not transformative, but instead “introduces a particular emphasis on history and the imperative of ‘moving on,’ as well as a renewed emphasis on legalistic conceptions of injury that conceive of harm explicitly or implicitly in relation to liberal individuals and property” (Henderson and Wakeham 2013). An abundance of recent scholarship shows how numerous state-driven measures including the 2008 residential schools apology (see Dorrell 2009; Henderson and Wakeham 2009), modern treaty negotiations (see Alcantara 2007; Woolford 2005), the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (see James 2010), self-government agreements (see Irlbacher-Fox 2009) and various Supreme Court decisions (see Borrows 1998; Macklem 2001) exemplify this closure-oriented form of reconciliation at work.

Yet, that the nebulous nature of the concept or reconciliation lends the term to problematic appropriation by governments does not render it an idea that ought to be dismissed outright. It does, however, demand a clear articulation of reconciliation that resists the imposition of closure and finality outlined in the examples above. The key point, eloquently articulated by Nikolas Kompridis, is that “we need to resist the still-seductive idea that there is some uncontroversial, ever-ready norm of impartiality that can serve as the single best problem-solving and conflict-resolving procedure for settling recognition claims and the ‘claims of culture’ ” (2007, 279). One promising avenue for thinking about this more open and ongoing notion of reconciliation is democratic theory, and specifically theories of *agonistic democracy*. Following Kompridis’ plea, agonistic democrats argue against the notion – held by deliberative democrats including Rawls and Habermas – that there is the possibility of arriving at a neutral norm of consensus. Both Rawlsian and Habermasian democrats seek a form of deliberation that privileges an ideal of “public reason,” which they contend can be accessed by all people, regardless of the diversity of their backgrounds. Their goal, then, is to create a “rational consensus based on the ‘force of the better argument’ ” (Bashir and Kymlicka 2008, 10). Agonistic democrats, by contrast, contend that nonviolent conflict and struggle is an ineradicable facet of democracy. The aim is not to avoid antagonism but rather to mitigate the imposition of any regulative ideal. Indeed, agonistic democrats are suspicious of “attempts to determine in advance what is to count as legitimate political action because this too often becomes a way of co-opting radical challenges to the dominant interests within a society” (Schaap 2006, 257). Instead, free individuals continually contest their relations with each other and the institutions that govern them.

Two key proponents of agonistic democracy are Chantal Mouffe (2000) and James Tully (2000b, 2008). In their work, both theorists are clearly attempting to move away from the orientation to finality and closure expressed above. In his commentary on recognition (a concept, which he explains is also prone to this problem), Tully argues that we must shift the focus away from uncovering “the just and definitive theory of recognition on which all citizens could reach agreement once and for all” (2000b, 472; see also Maclure 2003). Rather, the aim should be “an account of democracy in which the freedom to question and challenge, as well as to reply and defend, the prevailing norms of recognition is taken as one enduring aspect of democratic activity among many” (2000, 472). Mouffe shares Tully’s sentiment that our analytical focus should not be on an end state of democracy or justice (which can never actually be achieved), but on agonistic *practices of freedom* that allow for ongoing negotiations *over* justice in a pluralistic democracy. In her words:

What is specific and valuable about modern liberal democracy is that, when properly understood, it creates a space in which this confrontation is kept open, power relations are always being put into question and no victory can be final. However, such an ‘agonistic’ democracy requires accepting that conflict and division are inherent to politics and that there is no place where reconciliation could be definitively achieved as the full actualization of the unity of “the people.” (2000, 15-6)

Distinctions can surely be drawn between the work of Tully and Mouffe, but there are broad and important similarities between them as they resist the orientation to finality, and insist on the ongoing and contentious nature of democracy. However, the question remains: what are the implications of agonistic democracy for the concept of reconciliation? Bashir and Kymlicka note that, “while many theorists of reconciliation insist that redressing historic injustice is a step towards democratic inclusion, very few have looked at the way different models of reconciliation connect to broader political theories of deliberative democracy, agonistic democracy, and multiculturalism” (2008, 6). A small number of scholars, however, have begun to bridge the gap between these two literatures. It is in their work that the idea of “agonistic reconciliation” is emerging.

Reconciliation between Indigenous peoples and Canadian settlers, viewed through this agonistic lens, means that we must shift the focus away from any imposed final agreement towards an ongoing relationship. Andrew Woolford contends that many understandings of reconciliation are actually calls for all to be “*reconciled*” (2005, 180; original emphasis). “In contrast,” he argues, “*reconciliation* requires a process of ongoing engagement with the Other. This is not a melding of two worlds into a bland sameness, nor is it a mere act of tolerance whereby two parties grudgingly accept their differences. It is, rather, a living relationship that involves sharing and cooperation” (2005, 180; original emphasis). Similarly, Matthew Dorrell contends that the focus must shift from “reconciliation” to “reconciling” (2009, 38). Adopting the gerund form of the word “emphasizes the necessarily agential and iterative nature of processes of reconciling, distinguishing it from finalizing processes of reconciliation” (Dorrell 2009, 38). The priority, then, shifts from arriving at a final destination to pursuing an ongoing process.

Ultimately, then, reconciliation (especially for the purposes of what follows) cannot be thought of as some kind of goal or end state, but must be an ongoing process (Govier 2006, 206-8). A persistent desire for closure and finality has only led to repeated error and injustice. Reconciliation pursued in this vein will only reinscribe the coercive and colonial relationship that it is supposedly intended to remedy. As shown above, present efforts at reconciliation work to subsume First Nations under the banner of Canadian identity and sovereignty instead of properly acknowledging the self-determination agenda of Indigenous peoples (see also Corntassel and Holder, 2008; Egan 2011). Yet, reconciliation properly conceived “is neither a form of recognition handed down to Indigenous peoples from the state nor a final settlement of some kind” (Tully 2008, 223). Rather, it is an enduring relationship subject to ongoing negotiation by self-determining peoples. Having established exactly what agonistic reconciliation is, I will now return to Taylor’s essay to see how it might be linked to this vital project.

***Reconciliation in Taylor***

As alluded to in the first section, some of Taylor’s critics would be highly skeptical that Taylor’s theory could be part of such a project. For example, Brian Egan (who draws on Day and Bannerji) argues that Taylor presents a “fantasy of reconciliation” that “imagines Canada reaching a point of completion or rest, a time and place where identities and relations are fully realized and harmonized, and where there is a perfect congruence between individual, nation, and state” (2011, 136). Here, Egan presents Taylor as a theorist who subscribes to a form of reconciliation that I portrayed as deeply problematic in the last section. The first chapter also acknowledged – indeed demonstrated – that particularly from an institutional perspective, Taylor’s theory is vulnerable to this critique. How, then, does Taylor’s theory fit into the project of agonistic reconciliation sketched above?

The response lies in the idea that, when it comes to relations between individuals, Taylor does *not* subscribe to some fantasy where relations are “fully realized” and “relations are fully harmonized.” In fact, Taylor – in an agonistic manner – is highly aware that political struggle is ongoing and his theory is designed to resist the imposition of any definitive end point. In “The Politics of Recognition,” the key mechanism through which Taylor does this is the fusion of horizons. Properly understood, the fusion of horizons “is *an ongoing process* rather than a stable endpoint. Because our self-understandings are constantly changing as we rearticulate our conception of the good, so too is the horizon within which we recognize the other shifting” (Schaap 2004, 529; emphasis added). By its very nature, then, the fusion of horizons does not allow for the imposition of finality. Rather, it is the constant negotiation and re-negotiation of how we understand both ourselves and others.

Indeed, Taylor explicitly articulates that his theory of dialogical relations between individuals, though designed to promote understanding and reconciliation, should not be read as imposing a definitive norm or end point. Drawing on Taylor’s own language, Temelini brilliantly sums up this vision and it is, thus, worth quoting him at length:

In Taylor’s approach, political struggles…are never definitive, but continuing conversations. Talking is not just the best way to understand others, but in trying to understand others we might also understand something about ourselves, or we might become a little like the other, or be transformed in talking to others. In light of such struggles, Taylor typically describes contemporary democratic societies in terms of “tensions” that are “constitutive” and “ineradicable” for which there can never be a “definitive solution.” He talks about the “need” to negotiate and compromise, and to avoid the temptation of absolute and unchallengeable solutions or “once and for all” constitutional settlements….In light of its contested dialogical nature, reconciliation is always negotiated and periodic, never definitive. In political contests “neither side can abolish the other, but the line can be moved, never definitively.” In a sense “la lotta continua” – the struggle goes on – in fact forever. (forthcoming)

Clearly, there are strong links between this approach and agonistic reconciliation. Like agonistic democrats, Taylor resists the orientation to finality and closure. The type of reconciliation that can be built through the fusion of horizons, then, is an ongoing relationship that allows for continual contestation. In order to more fully illustrate how the fusion of horizons might actually function in practice, I will now turn to some examples of reconciliation that seem to demonstrate this Taylorian reconciliation at work.

***Case Studies***The potential power of transforming our standards in the way that Taylor describes is evident in an emerging literature on reconciliation. Roger Epp argues that, in approaching the question of Indigenous-settler reconciliation, we must shift our focus away from solving the “Indian problem” and instead begin to ask what might constitute the “settler problem” (2003, 228). For Epp, with this approach, perhaps counterintuitively, there is hope for reconciliation between rural settler communities and Aboriginal reserve communities. As Epp acknowledges, many who live in these rural areas would be incredulous at such a suggestion; indeed, rural Canada has been home to some of the most violent and racist conflicts between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples (2003, 228-9). Moreover, many settlers continue to inhabit a normative world that is thoroughly Lockean, individualistic, and ahistorical. This causes settlers to eschew their history, forgetting both colonial injustice and, importantly, periods of Indigenous-settler cooperation. However, along with the important cultural differences that divide these communities, there are also emerging similarities that point the way toward “bridges for coexistence” (Epp 2003, 240). Rural dwellers – Indigenous and non-Indigenous – face similar challenges as they both rely on government support, have largely been displaced by the global economy, and see their youth moving to cities in search of job opportunities (Epp 2003, 240). There also may be some cultural overlap as both groups value multigenerational family identity and a deep connection to the land and nature (Epp 2003, 240).

Epp’s point is that as these similarities are acknowledged, so too may there be a greater understanding of how to negotiate difference. Even within his own university classes, Epp has seen these similarities noticed and respected for the first time with students forced to consider their own judgements and normative foundations (Epp 2003, 237-8). To use Taylor’s language, Epp’s classroom setting may be an example of a place where Indigenous peoples and settler Canadians are developing a language of “perspicuous comparison.” As they learn from one another, they foster the possibility of a gradual transformation of their own standards and through that a hope for reconciliation.

Following Epp’s call to probe the “settler problem,” Paulette Regan (2010) outlines an “unsettling pedagogy” through which settlers can work to understand, question, and destabilize myths about the colonial foundation of Canada and their society. Regan argues that this vital process is possible if settlers engage in critical dialogue with Indigenous people who have survived the residential schools system. Transformation is not possible through monological self-reflection which “merely encourages passive empathy or a neutral distancing from the Other that is insufficient to effect social and political change” (Regan 2010, 51). For Regan, the ongoing Truth and Reconciliation Commission offers settlers an opportunity to fully engage with the realities of Indigenous peoples. This dialogical sharing has the potential to expand the horizon of meaning under which settlers live and engage them in the need for reparation, reconciliation, and justice *vis-à-vis* Indigenous peoples. Although Regan only briefly cites Taylor, the connections between her ideas and Taylor’s theory are clear. By engaging in critical dialogue, Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples can move towards a fusion of horizons, where settlers more fully understand the limitations of the norms and myths that have sustained a colonial relationship.

Finally, in a recent article on resisting the imposition of sovereignty in the Arctic, Gordon Christie argues that Indigenous peoples in Canada’s North can resist Canada’s imposition of sovereignty in two ways. The first way is to work from within the construct of Canadian sovereignty through institutions like the Arctic Council and the United Nations (Christie 2011, 334-37). However, Christie argues that Indigenous peoples should not lose sight of the fact that they can also challenge the normative assumptions of the sovereignty model with their own sphere of meaning. This raises the possibility that “two independent worlds of meaning can interact in a respectful manner. With differing narrative groundings, with different codes of conduct, different ways of thinking of human interaction and human-world interaction, two independent worlds must construct a bridge between themselves, each side working toward the other” (Christie 2011, 343). While Christie does not cite Taylor, there are certainly strong parallels between their two visions of interaction. Whether we use the metaphor of building a bridge or the fusion of horizons, Taylor and Christie share the goal of allowing two separate normative worldviews to understand one another.

In some ways it is risky to attempt to provide examples of real actions that demonstrate a theory in practice. Of course, theories tend to be designed to encourage certain practices, but it is often impossible to point to a situation that perfectly exemplifies the theory. The same is likely true for Taylor’s fusion of horizons. Moreover, the above examples provide only a small sample of the diverse literature that has been written on the potential for reconciliation through small-scale encounters between individuals and none of these scholars explicitly structure their arguments around Taylor’s theory of justice. Nonetheless, it is not a stretch to read Taylor into the various sites and methods of reconciliation that they propose. In each case, the authors discuss the very real possibility of reconciliation as Indigenous peoples and settlers engage each other in a dialogue where they are willing to work to understand the other based on the other’s standards. By engaging with Indigenous peoples in this way, settlers may not only come to understand Indigenous worldviews better, but to rethink the norms and myths that structure the worldview of settler society as well. This is a process that must be ongoing and ever-receptive to additional contestation as values, identities, and power dynamics are changed. Herein lies a crucial insight in Taylor’s theory as it relates to agonistic reconciliation.

This section began with a quotation from Brian Egan that argued that Taylor fantasizes an end point of final resolution for a perfect Canada. Contrary to this idea, Egan concludes his piece by arguing that, “Thrown together in common space, different peoples find ways of recognizing and reconciling with each other, without the need of political leaders or state programs telling them what that looks like” (2011, 141). My central point, throughout this discussion on Taylor, has been to demonstrate that his theory is actually in line with Egan’s sentiment. Taylor’s critics have read his theory with a state-centric focus in mind examining what Taylor may look to the state to enforce. However, if we ask, instead, what his theory offers to individuals of different worldviews and cultures who seek to understand one another, we can shed light on a different picture. It is a vision of ongoing reconciliation between individuals who can understand one another without giving up their own values and who can change through this understanding, instead of having change forced upon them. This dialogical relationship articulated by Taylor is one that points to an agonistic reconciliation that would help to establish more just relations between Indigenous peoples and settlers in Canada.

## Conclusion

A major aim of this paper has been to compare and contrast the visions and theories presented by Charles Taylor and critical Indigenous scholars including Dale Turner. Drawing on Turner’s work, I applied four fundamental Indigenous concerns to Taylor’s theory in order to assess how adequately it addresses this crucial issue in Canadian politics. In the first section of this paper, I found that from an institutional persepective, Charles Taylor’s theory does not question Canadian sovereignty, assumes Indigenous rights are derived from the Canadian state and thus fails to address the legacy of colonialism. These serious gaps in Taylor’s work show the significance of what can be learned when questions of Indigenous politics are moved from the margins of our analyses to centre stage (see Bruyneel 2012). This paper demonstrates how Taylor’s theory has to be reconsidered when directly brought to bear on the topic of Indigenous politics.

However, perhaps more important than these problems is a fundamental similarity that binds Taylor, Turner, and other critical voices together. This common ground is the deep commitment they hold to dialogue and participation. Working in this spirit, I endeavored to put these contrasting voices in a dialogue with each other. What resulted is a “critical multilogue” as the ideas from each theorist collided and revealed new possibilities. While this multilogue exposed the weaknesses cited above, it also revealed the strengths that remain in “The Politics of Recognition.”

In linking Taylor’s theory to the idea of agonistic reconciliation, I showed how the fusion of horizons serves as a powerful mechanism for building reconciliation and understanding between individuals. By engaging with Taylor in this way, this paper sought to provide a justification for why agonistic reconciliation is a better approach to Indigenous-settler relations than many of the failed attempts that have preceded us. At its core, however, this research not only advocates agonistic reconciliation, but is actually a form of agonistic reconciliation in practice. It demonstrates, in a theoretical setting, the vital importance of taking diverse perspectives seriously and allowing them to participate in a fruitful dialogue.

Before concluding, I think it is worth considering an overarching objection that recognition theorists may have regarding the above conclusions. Even if, they may ask, we acknowledge the value of an agonistic approach, why must we turn away from the idea of recognition? Put differently, why not just pursue agonistic recognition, instead of making the seemingly semantic shift to reconciliation?

As I have sought to show, the answer lies in an acknowledgement that agonistic recognition would actually be a contradiction in terms. The recognition paradigm is bound up in conceptions of fixed, authentic, or autonomous identities (Tully 2000b, 479). Recognition theorists argue that what is required is that we come to know – that we properly cognize – these particular and fully perceptible identities in order to mitigate misrecognition, and thus injustice. This view, however, fails to properly acknowledge that human identity is too mutable, multifaceted, and changing for recognition to ever take place. Therefore, an agonistic approach, which values open and ongoing contestation, requires a different theoretical underpinning; I have argued that the concept of reconciliation could provide such a foundation.

While reconciliation is not immune to the issues that render recognition problematic, it is less prone to the idea that a fixed identity must be recognized and fully understood. Rather, it is oriented towards cultivating shared spaces of understanding so that different individuals and groups can continually negotiate their relationships with one another. As shown in the second section, there is a diverse literature underlining the importance of constructing a project of reconciliation in this way.

As I increasingly come to grips with my own privilege as a settler scholar and with the history of colonialism in Canada, my hope is that these reconciliatory practices will continue both within, and perhaps more importantly, outside of academic research. With the Idle No More movement planning a “sovereignty summer” of organized non-violent direct action (APTN National News 2013) we can be optimistic that agonistic reconciliation remains more than a theoretical possibility. When confronted with this social movement, we can take either of two broad paths. We can seek to impose a monological view of justice that fails to take the values and understandings of the other seriously. On an individual level, we can content ourselves with limited and mythical knowledge of our colonial history (Regan 2008). Institutionally we can demand that difference fit within the model of Canadian rights and sovereignty as we have come to understand it (the position that Taylor’s critics accuse him of upholding). However, the failure of this approach – over centuries – has been demonstrated through its miserable record in practice (Tully 1995, 211; 2008, 256). Alternatively, we can embrace the notion of agonistic reconciliation, which surely includes engaging the other in a Taylorian fusion of horizons.

It is doubtful that this vision of agonistic reconciliation is complete – attempting to give it a final definition would belie its own intention and undermine the shift from recognition to reconciliation that I have traced out here. However, reading Taylor into this project gives us a new way to understand his work and a new way of thinking about how to approach reconciliation between Indigenous peoples and settlers in Canada. May the conversation – and reconciliation – continue.

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1. With this third critique, I detail how many scholars claim that Taylor narrowly conceives of culture in a way that marginalizes political and economic claims. This is a significant issue for Indigenous peoples who seek to pursue political, economic, and cultural claims simultaneously. However, such criticism may be better directed at narrow culturalist perspectives than at Taylor. It is true that in drawing very selectively from “The Politics of Recognition,” these deficiencies can be found in Taylor’s theory. However, his broader dialogical and hermeneutical approach (as I illustrate in the next section) undermines this critique and shows Taylor’s commitment to a more robust and flexible understanding of culture and to openly negotiated relations between different cultural and political groups. [↑](#footnote-ref--1)
2. One way of thinking about Indigenous understandings of dialogue is the treaty relationship (see Tully 2000a). For this insight, as well as the interpretation of Taylor’s dialogical practices employed here, I am indebted to James Tully. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)