

Indigenous collage: Reimagining Indigenous politics in the Yukon

Lianne Charlie

When I think about my personal experiences and my identity as a Northern Tutchone woman who has grown up away from her homelands and largely within a mainstream, urban setting, collage helps me reimagine what it means to return to the home of my ancestors after being away for almost thirty years. Collage creates a space where the seemingly irreconcilable — home/away, insider/outsider, new/old, native/non-native, city/bush — can be reconciled. I make collages using photographs and digital techniques mostly for fun and as a form of artistic expression. Recently, however, while studying Indigenous politics at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, my supervisor suggested I explore collage as theory. What follows is my first attempt at putting these thoughts on paper. While the idea of collage as theory emerges out of my personal life, here it is being applied to the political context of the Yukon. I have been studying Indigenous politics for a few years now, but only recently did I have the opportunity to experience *the realities* of Indigenous politics on a new level. This experience has invited me to think differently about our past, our contemporary circumstances, and our future(s) as Indigenous peoples.

Overview of political context

Under the landmark *Umbrella Final Agreement (UFA)*, 11 of 14 First Nations in Yukon negotiated land claims and comprehensive self-government agreements with the territorial government and the Government of Canada. Since a number of First Nations' comprehensive self-governing agreements have been ratified, the communities have been transitioning from "Indian Bands," a governing body designed and administered under the authority of the Minister of Indian Affairs and the Indian Act, to a political system that is, in theory, designed and administered by the Yukon First Nation. In practice, however, there remains a fundamental divide between the ways the Yukon First Nation *must* govern itself and the ways it *desires* to govern itself. This disconnect raises questions about Indigenous self-determination and what it looks like in theory and practice in a post-land claims/self-governing era in the Yukon and under extreme environmental, economic and other socio-political pressures.

Celebrated as a "modern day treaty," the *UFA* exemplifies the recent trend in Aboriginal rights

movements in Canada that use land claims settlements, economic initiatives, and self-government agreements to negotiate renewed legal and political relationships based on mutual recognition and reconciliation between Indigenous peoples and the Canadian state. According to Alcantara (2013), for the provincial, territorial, and federal governments, comprehensive land claims agreements are important for "establishing certainty" because they replace ambiguity surrounding Aboriginal rights with defined treaty rights and title (3). However, rather than liberate the Indigenous nations that engage in such approaches, the "politics of recognition" — a label given to approaches that seek recognition of Aboriginal rights — are state-serving at their core and merely extend the colonial project by repackaging land dispossession as "self-determination" (Coulthard 2014; Nadasdy 2012). At stake in the negotiation and implementation phases of the agreements is First Nations' ability to stave off the energy industry and the federal government's interest in and demand for access to natural resource extraction in the North. Whereas recognition politics appear to be a radically new approach to Aboriginal rights and positions the Canadian settler state as benevolent, this process only extends the reach of the state deeper into Indigenous lives and politics. How to navigate this new political landscape as it relates to land, the health and well-being of Indigenous communities, and self-determination has become the focus of much scholarship and community debate. Some argue that self-determination emerges out of more effective Aboriginal participation with and in the settler-state structure. Others call for total disengagement from state-controlled political and legal frameworks, arguing that self-determination emerges out of resurgent Indigenous politics.

What are the implications of historical and modern treaties on First Nations' ability to exercise their self-determination? What challenges and obstacles do Yukon First Nations face as they work to develop governance models that are rooted in an Indigenous ontology (worldview) while also being effective enough to stave off continued settler encroachment? How can Indigenous communities express their self-determination beyond the recognition and colonial frameworks? What new condi-



tions of possibility are opened up when governance is framed by resurgent politics? While these questions ultimately guide my future research, they are posed here to help frame the following description of a proposed Indigenous collage methodology for reimagining Indigenous Politics in the Yukon.

The Indigenous methodology or framework that is described here emerged out of my own practice of creating digital photo collages Davis (2008) in her work on collage as a method of inquiry, writes that it might be more useful to view “collage as an organizing principle, conceptual strategy, or method rather than an art form per se” (246). What follows is a description of an Indigenous collage theory that extends some of the ideas presented by Davis (2008) and others on collage as a research methodology by embedding it within an Indigenous context. Collage is an arts-based practice, but in my work it is expanded into an Indigenous theory and research methodology with corresponding research methods that will be used to recast our understandings of Indigenous self-determination as a process: how it is enacted, the ways we engage it, and the contexts within which it must maneuver.

Indigenous collage as theory

Collage is widely employed as an expressive and illustrative exercise in educational, therapeutic, and recreational contexts (Davis 2008). A collage in its

most common and accessible form is the result of combining together an assortment of images and texts, like photographs or those cut out of print media, into an entirely new and reimagined image. As such, collage, which is “created from a synthesis of shattered fragments, realized in an emergent, often randomized composition, arrives at meaning in a very different way—accidentally, capriciously, provocatively, tangentially” (Davis 2008, 250). It is inherently suited to generate and accommodate sometimes contradictory elements. “In honoring the disconnected, inexplicable, irresolute and relative,” writes Davis (2008), “collage process engenders an inclusive reality where disintegration, disorder, and even destruction can be coincidental paths to meaningful renewal, and insists that restoration and insight are not easily rationalized and prescribed” (250). Collage has been used as a qualitative research method in visual arts, education, psychology, and behavioral science. Until now, however, it has not been applied to, and or reimagined within, an Indigenous context.

Indigenous collage invites us to work with the fragmented realities of Indigenous identities, families, communities, cultures, and lands that have been created (sometimes violently, often intentionally) by historical and contemporary colonialism. It offers a space for Indigenous historical realities, present realities, and desired futures to intersect in innovative and unexpect-

ed ways. Collage accounts for and accommodates the chaotic, contained and often contradictory life-worlds that have been left in the wake of continued settler colonialism by creating a space for Indigenous Peoples to navigate them in creative and empowered ways. It brings seemingly unrelated and diverse pieces—people, places, texts, contexts, experiences, practices, histories, traditions, ontologies—into purposeful and productive juxtaposition (Allen 2012); essentially allowing for multiple and sometimes incommensurable elements to be placed within new proximities to one another. According to Allen (2012), we can see or understand differently by juxtaposing these distinct and diverse elements.

Collage is being offered here as one way of augmenting our current view of our political context in a way that better reflects the realities of our communities; while also accounting for the distinct and diverse contexts we must navigate and the tools (i.e. theories and practices) we have to do so. For Yukon First Nations, for example, collage captures the fact that communities are having to navigate a political world that is made up of diverse and incommensurable pieces. On a broad level these can be summed up as: an ontological divide between Indigenous and Western political systems and our relationship to/with the land; polarity between Indigenous scholars' stances on the politics of recognition and theories informing participation versus disengagement and reconciliation versus resurgence (as addressed above); as well as a desire for justice that continually abuts and/or is stifled by "shape-shifting" contemporary settler colonialism (Alfred and Corntassel 2005). Current socio-economic pressures—like poverty, lack of housing, and pervasive substance abuse—and the territorial and federal government's insistence on expanding natural resource extraction in the North, is also forcing Indigenous communities to compromise and redefine their relationship with their land. The result is very real tension between two incommensurable values: the sacred and capitalism.

Collage allows for the seemingly irreconcilable realities of Yukon First Nations political climate to exist together or in close proximity to one another on one theoretical plane. This is possible because, as Davis (2008) writes above, a collage is inclusive of all its pieces. Yet, inclusivity gives the impression that these pieces are occupying the plane as welcomed equals. This is not the case in reality. Chadwick Allen's (2012) use of purposeful and productive juxtaposition is important to restate here, as his language alludes to a place for agency and empowered/informed decision making as to *how* the pieces are placed within the collage. For example, collage making as an art form requires manipulating images into any shape or size that is desired by the collage-maker. She chooses the pieces and how they interact with each other in

the layout and the design; choice is available at every stage of the collage making process. Pieces can be added, removed, reshaped, cropped, and expanded with the addition of new materials. There is a continuous, active engagement with the collage elements that happens at both a purposeful (conscious) and emergent (unconscious) level.

From a theoretical standpoint then, as described by Davis (2008) "The artistic creation of collage may thus furnish *a means to take back a measure of power* over spectacular representations and renegotiate them versus everyday experience" (emphasis added, 247). In theory, Indigenous collage reveals new access points into seemingly incommensurable political, social and cultural divides. Outside of collage, there is disorder, confusion, disempowerment and exclusion; within collage, there is now purposeful engagement and empowered, creative productivity. Just as collage as an art form requires a collage-marker, Indigenous collage theory requires active and creative agents to engage in the process of identifying the pieces and their placement within the larger, theoretical collage. Indigenous collage as theory positions anyone from the individual to the family; the collective to the nation as the "collage-maker," which not only invites, but requires their creative and subjective input in order for incommensurability to be disrupted and for an alternative reality to come into existence.

Indigenous collage, as theory, invites us to maneuver with(in) a political context that has, in some cases, been cast as fixed, rigid, and too massive to unsettle. In Indigenous collage theory, the "collage-makers" are outfitted with tools and optics that enable them to dismantle and reconfigure the pieces in ways that reflect their needs, desires, and responsibilities as Indigenous peoples. At the same time, collage acts as a metaphor for the emergence of alternative governance forms and a means to creatively extend our understanding of Indigenous contemporary politics and Indigenous research.

My future research aims to bridge the gap between the theory of Indigenous resurgence and the practice of restoring Indigenous communities in a way this is relevant to our current political contexts *and* that aligns with our desires. It will extend scholarship that questions the limits of state-centered approaches to govern Indigenous nations. The challenges facing Yukon First Nations today have been predicted by scholars such as Glen Coulthard, James Tully and Paul Nadasdy. The latter and others suggest that achieving some sort of political autonomy/sovereignty with our homelands accessible and intact will require our communities to rethink and (re)build our governing practices based on our own ontologies (worldview) rather than those of the settler colonial state (i.e. Canada). The extent to



View near Mayo, Yukon.

which Indigenous ontologies can be expressed and/or practiced politically and that land-bases and waterways can be protected from settler encroachment, remains divisibly unclear both in the scholarship and in communities. For Indigenous nations in Canada that wielded their Aboriginal rights via comprehensive lands claims agreements with the federal government, and that are now self-governing—as is the case with Yukon First Nations—very real and fundamental challenges remain. How we ensure our continuation as distinct, place-based peoples that would be recognizable to our ancestors is perhaps one of our biggest challenges.

In a year, I will move from Hawai`i to the Yukon. We left Whitehorse when I was six years old; although I have visited numerous times since, this will be the first time in my adult life that I will live there. While I am very excited about returning home, I realize that it will not come without its challenges. Blood-ties and memories will fuel the initial reconnection with my relatives and the broader community; but there will be a lot to learn about life in the North and a lot of people, places and things to be reacquainted with. It is precisely because of these challenges that I find the lessons embedded in collage so helpful. Collage brings pieces together to create something new and unforeseen. When our communities or our political lives are looked at as collages, there is room for the addition of new pieces. These new pieces play a role in changing the

composition of the collage. They can spur re-ordering, fill gaps, or serve as connectors between other pieces that are disconnected. There is a place for new pieces, regardless of how different or similar they may be and regardless of how much time has passed. ●

Lianne Marie Leda Charlie is a descendant of the Tagé Cho Hudän (Big River People), Northern Tutchone speaking people of the Yukon. She is the granddaughter of Leda Jimmy of Little Salmon River and Big Salmon Charlie of Big Salmon River on her dad's side, and Donna Olsen of Denmark and Benjamin Larusson of Iceland on her mother's side. She was born in Whitehorse to her father, Peter Charlie and her mother, Luanna Larusson. She is currently pursuing a PhD in Indigenous Politics at the University of Hawai`i at Mānoa.

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