



**Contesting the promise of ‘nation-to-nation’ relations
within a settler-colonial state: A decolonial analysis of
Justin Trudeau’s reconciliation discourse with Indigenous
First Nations in Canada**

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Abstract

This dissertation employs a decolonial lens to critically examine how structures of colonialism persist within the Canadian state's contemporary relationship with Indigenous First Nations. This is examined specifically through the reconciliation project of the former Prime Minister, Justin Trudeau, by analysing his rhetoric regarding his project of 'nation-to-nation' relations in his speeches throughout his time in office from 2015-2025. Whilst Trudeau rhetorically committed to the image of a new era of reconciliation, my dissertation interrogates the disjuncture between the Canadian state's narratives of progress and the material realities of Indigenous dispossession. My decolonial analysis is structured by the methodological framework of Critical Discourse Analysis, allowing me as a researcher to expose Trudeau's subtle linguistic techniques which can be understood as having contributed to the continuation of settler colonial domination. My project begins by exposing the rhetorical techniques utilised by Trudeau to avoid responsibility for ongoing legacies of colonialism in the current day. This is followed by critical policy analysis of the content of Trudeau's speeches, particularly the promise of the implementation of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), arguing that the state caused colonial harm through bureaucratic delay, lack of Indigenous consultation, and ineffective implementation. Lastly, by drawing upon Indigenous scholarship, I re-centre Indigenous self-determination and resurgence as the alternative to current processes of state-led acknowledgement, exposing the limitations of the liberal politics of recognition, and advocating for Indigenous-led resurgence. However, going forward, I outline how processes of reconciliation and Indigenous resurgence can be supported by the state through meaningful *consent*-based approaches, alongside the termination of recognition-based rhetoric.

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Ethics approval

I declare that this research was approved by the SPAIS Ethics Working Group.

Methodology: Speech analysis.

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List of abbreviations

AFN: Assembly of First Nations

CDA: Critical Discourse Analysis

FPIC: Free, Prior and Informed Consent

MTI: 'Moves To Innocence' (Tuck and Yang, 2012)

UNDRIP: United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples

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Introduction

From the outset of Justin Trudeau's leadership in 2015 until the declaration of his resignation in January earlier this year, the concept of reconciliation remained a central tenet of Trudeau's political identity, the Liberal Party's messaging, and Canada's broader international image. Described as a period of "total renewal" in state-Indigenous relations (Trudeau, 2015), Trudeau framed his time in office as dedicated to addressing historical injustices faced by Indigenous communities, and for creating new state-Indigenous relations. Critically, Trudeau's promise of new "nation-to-nation" relations (2015) between the federal government and Indigenous peoples became a pivotal part of his greater reconciliation project, symbolising a significant shift in political discourse compared to previous administrations that have historically resisted meaningful engagement with Indigenous sovereignty claims. Trudeau's promise of reconciliation emphasised inclusivity, diversity and multiculturalism, but most relevant to this essay: the promise of recognition of Indigenous peoples as their own distinct 'nations', *in parallel with* the federal government, as opposed to being units belonging to – and existing as sub-groups *within* – the settler state.

However, whilst Trudeau rhetorically framed his leadership around reconciliation, significant disparities persisted between Trudeau's symbolic discourse and the substantive policy measures required to establish truly equitable nation-to-nation relations. Whether it be the continued dismissal of Indigenous land rights through major state-led energy projects on Indigenous territory, the prioritisation of federally-structured bodies – such as band councils, or the Assembly of First Nations (AFN) – over Indigenous self-governance systems, or the militarised policing of blockaders, such as in the case of the Wet'suwet'en land defenders in

2020, material action has for the most part remained limited, ineffective, and – oftentimes – oppressive.

There is an unsettling lack of critical engagement with Trudeau’s smokescreen rhetoric itself throughout his time in office, and the subsequent rhetoric-policy gap. Little literature analyses the Canadian state’s techniques for avoiding responsibility for ongoing colonial legacies, alongside the disparity between state promises and lived reality. This lack of engagement is deeply concerning, exposing a significant gap in Indigenous studies, nationalism studies, decolonial studies, and Canadian political scholarship. Addressing Trudeau’s rhetoric regarding Indigenous self-governance is crucial for understanding the colonial underpinnings of Trudeau’s governance, and the colonial nature of the Canadian federal administration as a whole. This dissertation thus critically examines the settler colonial techniques used by Trudeau in his political rhetoric regarding First Nations in particular, and the disparity between his promises and rhetoric.

My analysis focuses upon the past decade, from Trudeau’s inauguration in 2015, to his resignation this year (2025). This study both *exposes* his settler colonial techniques, and subsequently *interrogates* the impact of them upon Indigenous nationalism, seeking to uncover the extent to which Trudeau’s rhetoric and policy meaningfully supported Indigenous-led governance, land rights, and self-determination. My thesis proposes that whilst Trudeau has made important moves towards increasing dialogue between Indigenous peoples and the nation-state, he remained an active agent in the perpetuation of settler colonialism, strategically employing symbolic rhetoric to obscure the federal government's ongoing refusal to cede power. I argue that settler nation-building in Canada operates at the expense of Indigenous nationhood through the elimination of Indigenous land, obscured

through the politics of recognition. I will outline how this necessitates a fundamental reimagining of the settler-Indigenous relationship, by prioritising Indigenous resurgence as the solution.

I utilise a decolonial theoretical perspective, allowing me to analyse the reproduction of colonial power structures through Trudeau's discourse, supported by certain Indigenous scholars' perspectives that outline what 'nation-to-nation' relations should look like on Indigenous terms. Underpinning my decolonial analysis is a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework. This encouraged me to recognise subtle linguistic techniques used by Trudeau; to situate his language and behaviour within the relevant context; to contrast his language with policy implementation over the past decade; and to discuss the impact of his words (and silences) upon Indigenous resurgence efforts.

Statement of Positionality

It is important to note that I am a non-Indigenous student of British nationality. I recognise that my position has both advantages and limitations within my research. I do not speak for Indigenous peoples, but seek to amplify their voices within my research project.

Literature review

Settler colonialism

The role of land dispossession as a tool for settler colonial power accumulation has been discussed extensively by Indigenous academics across the world. Numerous academics have outlined the history of Indigenous land dispossession as deeply rooted in the colonial doctrines of *terra nullius* (“land belonging to no one”) and the Doctrine of Discovery. These historical tools have been used for colonial domination of Indigenous peoples in multiple Commonwealth settler colonies, such as Australia (Hardy, 2024), New Zealand (Miller et al, 2010), and Canada (Gaudry, 2016, p.46). This mythology of ownership has been utilised throughout history to legitimise and claim rights to regions that settlers claimed to discover (Mahoney, 2017), framing Indigenous-owned land as empty, and subsequently, erasing Aboriginal time and space. As a result, colonised peoples were ultimately “dispossessed in their own homelands” (Bell, 2008, p.851), shaping modern-day relations between the state and Indigenous communities.

Whilst settler colonialism has deep historical connections to land dispossession, contemporary Indigenous academics have highlighted the importance of understanding settler colonialism beyond an event rooted in history, and instead, as an ongoing structure of domination that continues to shape the relationship between Indigenous peoples and settler colonial states today (Wolfe, 2006, p.388). The historical dispossession of Indigenous peoples from their land has relegated Indigenous communities to the position of what Will Kymlicka (2008, p.218) describes as “nations within”, as opposed to nations with their own sovereignty *in parallel* with the settler colonial state. In the context of Canada specifically, settler colonialism is embedded within the settler nation-state’s political, social and economic

spheres, and is rarely subject to critical analysis, due to the naturalisation of settler domination within Canadian political life (Gaudry, 2016, p.47).

Canadian politics has thus shifted from an explicit project of assimilation, to the incorporation of rhetoric which emphasises “mutual recognition” (Coulthard, 2007, p.438). However, this liberal recognition-based approach has not only failed, as outlined by Glen Coulthard, but now reproduces the very forms of colonial power that Indigenous demands for recognition sought to transcend (2014, p.24), disciplining Indigenous resistance by leaving it dependent upon state institutions and acknowledgement *within* the system. Within this politics of recognition, Indigenous demands are assimilated into state frameworks, relegating nations to positions within the Canadian settler nation-state, as opposed to alongside it (Kymlicka, 2007, p.147; Coulthard, 2014). This takes place through the state’s ‘granting’ of rights, or through symbols of recognition. This was exemplified within the symbolic 2013 Idle No More (INM) meeting between the Governor General (David Johnston) and Indigenous leaders, acknowledging Indigenous grievances towards Bill C-45 (which threatened Indigenous land rights) without pressurising the Harper government to make substantive policy changes such as reversing the bill. Ultimately, as outlined by Coulthard (2007), symbols have remained subordinate to the federal government’s political agenda.

Thus, taking place through a process described by Professor Mark Rifkin as “settler common sense”, Indigenous peoples have remained subordinate within settler-Indigenous negotiations – particularly in regards to land rights – where “the legal and political structures that enable non-Native access to Indigenous territories [have] come to be lived as given” (2013, p.323). Whilst writing from a non-Indigenous perspective, Rifkin makes a critical which highlights how Indigenous understanding of the ‘self’ and their autonomy have been manipulated

through settler domination of the political and economic systems within the Canadian state. Thus, whilst historical documents, such as the Indian Act or the 1969 White Paper were utilised to explicitly assimilate Indigenous peoples into the settler community for organisation purposes (Simpson, 2014, p. 56), contemporary academics have highlighted the continuation of settler hegemony and governmentality through *hidden* processes of manipulation and access to land. This requires further critical examination.

'Nation-to-nation' reconciliation within a settler colonial state

The concept of a 'nation-to-nation' relationship has long been a demand made by Indigenous peoples in settler colonial states (for example, see Robbins, 2010). Through the recognition of Indigenous peoples as sovereign political entities, Indigenous-state relations is thus reframed within the domain of International Relations as opposed to solely domestic politics, resulting in appreciation of the rights of Indigenous peoples to self-determination, land, and governance as sovereign bodies (Shrinkhal, 2021). This challenges colonial assumptions which position Indigenous communities as belonging to – and within – Canadian domestic law. Indigenous academics such as James ('Sa'ke'j') Youngblood Henderson (2008) and Robert Williams Jr (1990) have both highlighted how historical treaties between Indigenous nations and European colonisers were not merely domestic contracts, but rather, foundational documents that recognised the land rights of Indigenous peoples. The Royal Proclamation of 1763, for example, has also been argued by scholars such as John Borrows (2002) to provide the legal basis for contemporary nation-to-nation demands, which acknowledged Indigenous land rights and established protocols for treaty-making. This perspective is a critical contribution to Indigenous academia and Canadian political work, critiquing the state-centric model of traditional IR theory, emphasising the agency of Indigenous peoples as equal partners in political relationships upon the global stage.

Instead, the notion of ‘recognition’ has largely overcast that of authentic nation-to-nation relations and has unsurprisingly been rejected for the most part by Indigenous academics. One of the rare supporters of recognition is that of Charles Taylor, Professor Emeritus at McGill University, who outlines recognition’s positive role in connecting individuals to a sense of identity in his essay ‘The Politics of Recognition’ (1995). However, numerous Indigenous scholars have countered this, arguing that recognition entrenches existing power dynamics by empowering the settler state to ‘grant’ acknowledgement, forcing Indigenous peoples to identify with the “non-reciprocal” forms of recognition distributed by the colonial-state (Coulthard, 2007, p.439). Throughout Trudeau’s time in office in particular, there has been little literature critically analysing the former Prime Minister’s own politics of recognition and its implications. The lack of critical engagement exposes a deep gap within the existing literature, outlining how more analysis must be undertaken on Trudeau specifically, and how Indigenous nationhood is rhetorically framed by the Canadian Government within the modern day.

Finally, my review of Indigenous academic literature has highlighted how Indigenous sovereignty and nation-to-nation relations do not have fixed contours. Rather, scholars have attributed varied meanings to what the process of reclaiming sovereignty could and should look like. For some Canadian Indigenous scholars, self-determination involves a revival of land-based practises (Simpson, 2017). For others, Indigenous self-determination must incorporate feminist and queer empowerment, as outlined by Kim Anderson (2016), who emphasises women’s leadership in particular. However, my dissertation prioritises the rejection of state recognition in particular, outlining the importance of meaningful consent which the majority of Indigenous academics have supported in their work, as I have come to

recognise within my research. In my project, I incorporate the specific perspectives of Glen Coulthard (2014) and Taiaiake Alfred (2005) regarding Indigenous resurgence and state-led recognition; however, Indigenous perspectives are – of course – not limited to these two academics.

I therefore ask not *if*, but *how* Trudeau's reconciliation rhetoric has reinforced settler colonial domination over Indigenous populations. Existing scholarship has already interrogated the ongoing settler-colonial dimensions of reconciliation. My dissertation instead joins the *very* recent collection of academics who have begun to critique the empty reconciliation rhetoric espoused by leading settler actors, critiquing the impact upon Indigenous resurgence.

My theoretical and methodological framework

This section examines the utility of the decolonial lens for exposing and challenging ongoing legacies of settler colonial domination. I then briefly note the inclusion of decolonial understandings of Indigenous national resurgence in particular, as already outlined in the literature review, which establishes differences between settler understandings of nation-to-nation reconciliation versus Indigenous perspectives.

Theoretical framework: Decolonial lens

The description of Canada as a ‘settler colonial’ state in my dissertation title points to the continuation of colonial legacies in the current day, emphasising how colonialism cannot be framed as a historical problem. Decolonisation is thus a critical component of my dissertation, driving my research and analysis around the task of exposing colonial continuities in the recent Prime Minister’s rhetoric. Importantly, Indigenous scholars today do not unanimously find the postcolonial approach useful, with colonialism still ongoing in many contexts. Instead, the decolonial tradition, oriented towards addressing continuities (Constantinou et al, 2024), is more relevant to the Canadian context, and is what my dissertation focuses on.

Within my decolonial lens, I incorporate Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang’s work, ‘Decolonization is Not a Metaphor’ (2012), to create a theoretical framework for organising both my textual data collection and analysis. Tuck and Yang’s perspective describes the various ways that settlers attempt to alleviate guilt or complicity in colonialism without actually dismantling settler colonial structures – otherwise framed as settler ‘Moves To Innocence’ (MTI) (ibid). Within this, Tuck and Yang identify six core ‘Moves’ for achieving ‘Innocence’, as follows: settler nativism; fantasising adoption; colonial equivocation;

‘conscientization’; ‘at risk-ing’ Indigenous peoples; and finally, re-occupation and urban homesteading (ibid). This approach acted as a coding template for my research.

This dissertation critically considers the impact of Trudeau’s settler MTI techniques and his rhetoric-policy gap upon Indigenous nationalism. Thus, my decolonial approach later incorporates the theoretical perspective of Coulthard in ‘Red Skin, White Masks’ (2014) which allows me to discuss the impact of empty state rhetoric upon colonial power structures, reinforcing them rather than dismantling them. This perspective compliments Tuck and Yang’s (2012) theory by critiquing the *effect* of MTI techniques upon Indigenous self-determination. I also draw upon Taiaiake Alfred’s decolonial nationalist theoretical insights (1995) into the distinction between traditional ‘nation-state’ versus Indigenous forms of nationalism, in order to outline what ‘nation-to-nation’ relations *should* look like on Indigenous terms. Alfred’s work provides a foundational lens for understanding the tensions inherent with reconciling Indigenous self-determination *within* the structures of the existing Canadian state.

Methodological framework: Critical Discourse Analysis

My decolonial lens is embedded within my broader methodological framework of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). As Audra Simpson argues (2007, p.69), nation-building in settler colonial contexts is dependent upon “categorical forms of recognition and misrecognition [that] are indebted to deep philosophical histories of seeing and knowing”. Thus, through text and speeches in particular, colonial power is reproduced through discourse as common sense (Rifkin, 2013). CDA is a useful framework for structuring my analysis of relations between discourse and social structures, exposing how discourse is both shaped by – and in itself, shapes – institutional structures and mechanisms (Fairclough, 2013, p.9).

Within CDA, there is a well-recognised methodological division between the empirical-linguistic and the post-structuralist branch. In my research into CDA, it became clear that the empirical-linguistic branch was preferable for three main reasons: firstly, because of its systematic, methodological framework; secondly, for its known usefulness for analysing political elites specifically; and lastly, for exposing subtle linguistic micro-practises, and its ability to connect these to the greater context (van Dijk, 1993). The latter two advantages are particularly critical for my analysis of Trudeau's rhetorical techniques, along with identification of the greater structural colonial legacies embedded within Canadian political systems. Norman Fairclough's Three Dimensional Model (1989) in particular inspired my methodological framework, encouraging me as a researcher to analyse what Trudeau says and how he says it; how his words are produced, distributed, and consumed; and finally, the structural context in which his discourse operates (2013[1989]).

Thus, my first section analyses Trudeau's rhetorical structures, where I extract MTI's within my textual analysis. My interpretation phase, where I focus upon the context in which the text was produced and consumed, and considering the context along with the audience's supposed decoding of it, frames the second part of my essay. Lastly, the final phase of Fairclough's Model: evaluation of social practise and explanation (1989), allows me to contrast Trudeau's nation-to-nation reconciliation project with what Indigenous First Nations actually demand – discussing Alfred's (1994) Indigenous-based self-determination demands, and outlining how the Canadian state must change in order to empower Indigenous communities.

Whilst decolonial theory and CDA are independent disciplines, they complement each other. As CDA drives my analysis of hidden power structures and techniques of power manipulation, my decolonial lens allows for a critical analysis of Canadian settler colonialism specifically within the modern state. Along with its explanatory function, CDA contains a

normative role: evaluating existing realities, and assessing the impact of these upon groups (ibid : 9). Within this, Trudeau's construct of a 'nation-to-nation' relationship is critiqued, allowing me to explore how his rhetoric is incompatible with Indigenous understandings of what true self-determination could – and *should* – look like.

Data collection

I have strategically selected five of Trudeau's speeches regarding 'nation-to-nation' relations with First Nations as part of Trudeau's wider reconciliation project (as referenced under 'speeches' within the bibliography). These speeches have been filtered in a number of ways to ensure contextual relevance to my analysis. This rational data collection considered the date the speeches were made, the audience, and significance to Trudeau's reconciliation project. These have all ensured that my speeches are relevant and microcosmic of Trudeau's policy promises made throughout his time in office in relations to First Nations. I have collected speeches as broadly as possible from across the decade – selecting speeches from 2015, 2017, 2018, 2020, and 2024. This is important for my analysis, allowing me to pick up on potential shifts in Trudeau's behaviour, rhetoric and techniques over time, rather than focusing upon one particular shorter period. In regard to audience, I have included three critical settings: the UN General Assembly (2017), the AFN'S Special Chiefs Assembly (2015 and 2024), and Parliament (2018 and 2020). This was done in order to understand whether Trudeau's language and techniques shifted according to the audience. I have included Trudeau's response to the critical Wet'suwet'en blockades in Parliament in 2020, in order to analyse how his rhetoric shifted here in particular when defending the Liberal government's major energy project.

Within my textual analysis, I employed a pragmatic method of template analysis, which allowed for the flexible focus on particular themes from Tuck and Yang's theory (2012), as

they emerged throughout my research in relation to their prevalence, recurrence and importance. Coding thus became part of my process of analysis, with codes being removed or added based upon emerging patterns in the data (Brooks, McCluskey, Turley and King, 2015). Similarly, within my process of transcribing and coding Trudeau's speeches, I also extracted policy promises made, which contributes to my contextualisation chapter.

The two fundamental research questions guiding my analysis were: 'What settler 'Moves To Innocence' are revealed through decolonial CDA of Justin Trudeau's reconciliation rhetoric within his speeches?'; and secondly: 'How is Trudeau failing to support Indigenous self-determination and nationhood through his rhetorical 'Moves To Innocence' and their gap with policy, and what is the impact of this upon Indigenous self-determination?'.

Limitations

While my data collection is as broad as possible, a gap exists between 2020-2024, meaning that my data collection was not entirely even. However, this was largely due to Covid-19, where Trudeau's speeches became more oriented towards the pandemic, as opposed to his reconciliation project, from 2020-2022. Second, though Indigenous perspectives on resurgence are included in my discussion, their pre-2015 publications are not directly connected to Trudeau's tenure in particular, and therefore cannot account for recent developments in Indigenous mobilisations, such as the Wet'suwet'en crisis. However, my dissertation hopes to contribute to filling this gap. Lastly, there are three overarching Indigenous groups within Canada, composed of Metis, Inuit and First Nations groups. My decision to focus upon First Nations is driven by the need for specificity within this dissertation, and the distinct historical and political contexts that shape their relationship with the federal government. Future research could build upon this work by conducting similar

analyses of Métis and Inuit relations with the Canadian state. Attempting to address all three groups comprehensively would exceed the scope of this dissertation.

However, these limitations do not undermine my central focus on how Trudeau's rhetorical techniques avoid addressing settler colonial legacies today, and my examination of the potential impact upon Indigenous self-determination.

Exposing Trudeau's settler 'Moves to Innocence'

There were three particular MTI's which were rejected within my coding process. In the case of settler nativism, where settlers locate or invent a long-lost Indigenous ancestor, this technique was not prevalent in any of Trudeau's speeches I examined – both within the five under consideration, and within my broader research. Secondly, 'at risk-ing' was also rejected: the practise of grouping Indigenous nations as "populations" in social science research, by educational and social science researchers specifically. This was irrelevant to my focus upon Trudeau as a politician. Lastly, 're-occupation and urban homesteading' was also removed: the settler-led process of 'reclaiming' urban spaces under the guise of progressive or environmentally conscious movements. This was not found within the speeches.

The three techniques that were recurring throughout Trudeau's speeches were as follows: firstly, 'conscientization' (and the subsequent aestheticisation of decolonisation within this); secondly, colonial equivocation; and lastly, settler adoption fantasies (and attributing the problem to an evil past within this). My first research question: 'What settler 'Moves To Innocence' are revealed through decolonial CDA of Justin Trudeau's reconciliation rhetoric within his speeches?' is explored within this section.

Theme 1: 'Conscientization': The aestheticisation of decolonisation

For Tuck and Yang (2012, p.19), the aestheticisation of decolonisation, or, 'conscientization', is centred on the belief that merely learning about colonialism, or symbolically *acknowledging* Indigenous land dispossession, is enough to count as meaningful action. This technique thus replaces the more uncomfortable task of relinquishing stolen land or providing material reparations. The use of certain buzzwords is incorporated into settler language in

order to create an aesthetic and performative display of unity. Three sub-codes were developed through my coding process under this major technique: that of land acknowledgements, the framing of reconciliation as on a future-facing path, and the deflection of responsibility away from the Canadian nation-state and onto Indigenous peoples.

Firstly, land acknowledgements were the most common technique in Trudeau's aestheticisation of decolonisation within his speeches. This consisted of recognising the land that the speech was made on as belonging to First Nations, or Indigenous peoples more broadly. This was utilised across all locations under consideration. For example, in the House of Commons: "I would like to begin by recognising that we are – as we are everyday in this house – on the ancestral land of the Algonquin people"; similarly, at the UN: "Canada is built on the ancestral land of Indigenous peoples", and lastly, at the AFN: "This morning, I'd like to recognize the Algonquin nation on this traditional territory we are gathering. We acknowledge them as the past present and future caretakers of this land". This technique was found in four of the five speeches. He utilised this technique consistently throughout his time in office: in 2015, 2017, 2018 and 2020; the only time it was not used was at the 2024 AFN meeting. However, this is unsurprising, given that this speech was not a formal speech, but rather, part of a more informal Q-and-A interaction. Whilst land acknowledgements raise awareness regarding Indigenous histories, it is clear within Trudeau's rhetoric that acknowledgements followed a predictable, formulaic structure, always taking place at the outset of his speeches. By ritualistically approaching acknowledgement as an obligatory formality, a significant silence regarding land restitution and material action remains.

The second most prominent example of Trudeau's aestheticisation of decolonisation was his framing of reconciliation as on a path "moving forward". This is exemplified within four of the five speeches, as follows: "...that's not an aspiration, that's a way forward" (2015); "a future we can build if we work together" (2017); "Moving forward, this framework gives us the opportunity to build new mechanisms..." (2018) and "As we move forward on this path of reconciliation" (2024). By framing reconciliation as on a "path" forwards, Trudeau tactfully framed the process of reconciliation as ongoing, and subsequently, requiring time. This allowed Trudeau to avoid taking material action here-and-now, delaying real change into the future, and never fully committing to material action. This metaphorical euphemism creates a sense of passivity, removing state accountability, and neutralising colonialism as an external force of oppression. This rhetoric allowed for Trudeau to avoid framing where the 'path' ends, how long the 'path' will be, and what obstacles may be in the way.

Within the framing of reconciliation as a continually evolving journey, the 'path' was consistently shaped as a joint one – one which both the federal government *and* Indigenous peoples are walking down together. The incorporation of words such as "together" and "we" blurred the distinction between the federal government and Indigenous nations, subsequently rejecting inherent power imbalances, and allowing Trudeau to avoid taking responsibility for the government's ongoing perpetuation of colonialism. This language of shared responsibility went even further as Trudeau's time in office developed, where Trudeau's rhetoric within his 2020 Wet'suwet'en Conflict speech in particular saw a major shift in tone, displacing responsibility onto the shoulders of Indigenous peoples alone. In this speech, Trudeau began by outlining how "everyone has a stake in getting this right", in line with his earlier language. However, later on in the same speech, he described how "the reality of populism, Mr Speaker ... in our democracies these days, is a desire to listen only to ourselves and ... not with

people of another perspective”. Here, Trudeau began by outlining a sense of shared responsibility, but then shifted to political framing, to describe the blockaders as belonging to “another perspective”. By categorising the protest under the broad umbrella of “populism” within the existing political system, and incorporating political terminology such as “democracies”, Trudeau negatively framed Indigenous defence of land rights by linking Indigenous self-determination to populism and as an obstacle to effective democracy. Moreover, Trudeau also argued how “on all sides, people are upset and frustrated again. It’s understandable, because this is about things that matter: rights and livelihoods, the rule of law, and our democracy”. Once again, Trudeau utilised political framing, adding “rule of law” to the political jargon checklist, whilst creating an antagonistic division between “sides”. Interestingly, Trudeau departed from the collective “we” and the image of symbolic unity which had framed his rhetoric at the outset of his time in office in 2015, instead establishing a political antagonism between “sides” of settlers-versus-Indigenous blockaders. There is an interesting pattern to be found here, where Trudeau’s desire to unite with Indigenous peoples appeared to only take place when Indigenous peoples were not causing disruption to settler hegemonic rule. This shall be explored further in the next chapter.

Trudeau’s deflection of responsibility shifted to outright rejection by the end of Trudeau’s tenure, where the Prime Minister’s 2024 address at the AFN meeting saw Trudeau describe how “there’s a really, *really* important reflection that everyone in this room has to have about how Indigenous peoples, and First Nations specifically in this case, want to organise themselves” (emphasis added). Rather than upholding a commitment to shared responsibility, Trudeau adopted a paternalistic tone, effectively lecturing Indigenous leaders on the need for self-reflection in order for self-determination. This stance is particularly ironic, given that Indigenous leaders have long articulated their demands through clearly defined channels,

including the Royal Proclamation of 1763, through resistance documents to the Indian Act of 1876, or through Truth and Reconciliation Calls to Action, alongside extensive scholarly work by Indigenous academics, as outlined in my literature review.

In summary here, it is unsurprising that Tuck and Yang “respectfully disagree[d]” with George Clinton and Funkadelic who asserted the claim that when you “free your mind, the rest (your ass) will follow.” (1970, cited in Tuck and Yang, 2012, p.19). Critical consciousness – even when authentic – is largely unhelpful, despite the argument that it encourages discussion regarding Indigenous-settler relations (Andrews, 2024). By itself, critical consciousness and aesthetic symbolism merely “waylay[s] decolonisation” (Tuck and Yang, 2012, p.19). Without the repatriation with land, Trudeau’s recognition of Indigenous rights to land fails to translate into action, or to disrupt settler colonialism.

Theme 2: Colonial equivocation

A more nuanced MTI was “homogenizing... various experiences of oppression” through colonial equivocation (ibid, p.17). This strategy conflates differing forms of oppression under one singular broad umbrella, diluting the specific focus on Indigenous oppression, and shifting discourse away from ongoing legacies of settler colonialism. By incorporating other forms of oppression, such as sexism, or by universalising inequalities, such as poverty, discussion regarding Indigenous empowerment is conveniently avoided. Whilst this MTI was the least common technique within Trudeau’s speeches, it was still found across all five of the sources, remaining an important insight into Trudeau’s manipulation of settler responsibility, critically deflecting attention away from land restitution and supporting Indigenous demands.

Gender inequality was the most commonly referenced alternative form of oppression noted by Trudeau throughout his speeches. In his 2017 speech at the UN, Trudeau began by discussing Indigenous-specific inequalities, particularly that of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG), but then shifted his focus to discuss gender inequality at the national, and subsequently global, level. Trudeau stated that “supporting women and girls will lead to economic growth, and then peace and cooperation will take root. [...] When we do that, we don't just grow our economies - we live up to our values”. Whilst a shift in focus to the global-level is understandable given the location of the speech being made within a global forum, the conflation of an Indigenous-centred issue with global gender inequality exposes Trudeau’s liberal universalism (Beland et al, 2019, p.3), or rather, the recognition of Indigenous-specific issues as of equal importance with international cases. By framing Indigenous issues as part of a broader justice agenda, First Nations’ sovereignty is undermined, avoiding addressing Canada’s specific legal obligations such as following (and, at the time of this speech in 2017, *implementing*) UNDRIP in particular. On the other hand, by linking gender equality to economic prosperity, we are provided with yet another insight into Trudeau’s policy hierarchy, where economic gain is positioned as of equal importance to his “values”, further reflecting the lack of regard for Indigenous rights to land in comparison to opportunity for economic gain.

On the other hand, a slightly less prominent – but still prevalent – example was that of poverty and hunger, which was also incorporated within Trudeau’s UN speech. Trudeau referenced how “poverty and hunger knows no borders. We cannot pretend that these solvable challenges happen only on distant shores”. This time, his focus was more oriented towards recognition of inequality within the territory of Canada. However, the topic of Indigenous poverty was positioned within the greater national issue of poverty. Trudeau

concluded that “everyone of us must do everything possible to ensure that everyone, including Indigenous peoples, have the best opportunities”. By positioning Indigenous poverty as an afterthought within the greater national project of ensuring better “opportunity” for all, Trudeau dismisses the need for Indigenous-specific discussions to take place regarding how Indigenous peoples must be supported in order for enhanced quality of living.

Finally, alongside these two specific themes, Trudeau’s rhetoric within his other speeches was commonly oriented towards the future liberation of all children across *all* of Canada’s communities. Whilst this does not explicitly reference oppression or inequality *per se*, this example can still be regarded as an expression of colonial equivocation, shifting focus away from the oppression of Indigenous children specifically, conflating them with non-Indigenous children across the country. For example, in 2015, Trudeau argued that “every child and young person living in Canada deserves a real and fair chance”, and that “all of our communities, all of our children, deserve a better future that we can offer them by working together”. His use of “all” assimilates Indigenous communities into the singular nation of Canada, as opposed to their own distinct, sovereign nations, in parallel with the settler nation.

Ultimately, whilst his speeches understandably addressed nation-wide issues affecting populations across Canada, what is problematic was his discussion of Indigenous issues within a greater national framework, significantly contradicting the nation-to-nation relationship promised. By describing Canada as “a country that is built on different cultures, different religions, different languages, all coming together” (2017), Trudeau depicted Canada as a diverse nation on the global stage, compiling together distinct, sovereign nations within one homogenous population, reinforcing assimilatory attitudes which have dominated settler-Indigenous relations throughout history. Similarly, by describing how “we’re in a very,

very imperfect world, and are reminded of it regularly” (2024), Trudeau universalises the oppression of Indigenous First Nations throughout Canadian history. True ‘nation-to-nation’ reconciliation with First Nations requires the acknowledgement of Indigenous-specific issues as the first step in achieving Indigenous self-determination and truly equitable relations.

Theme 3: Settler adoption fantasies: Attributing the problem to an evil past

The final MTI that was found to be recurring throughout my selection of speeches was that of settler adoption fantasies – or, in other words, the “desire to *become [Indian] without becoming [Indian]*” (Tuck and Yang, 2012, p.14). This fantasy involves adopting Indigenous practices and knowledge, despite being non-Indigenous. Underpinning this is the settler desire for the “Native” to “hand[s] over his land, ... his very Indian-ness, to the settler for safe-keeping” (ibid), thus rendering language of empathy or unity as performative. Within Trudeau’s rhetoric, this technique was exposed through his empathetic language – which was present in all five of his speeches – and by the common move of positioning himself as on the same ‘side’ as Indigenous peoples, distancing himself from the Canadian political systems and the institutions that he is inherently a part of.

Within my coding, Trudeau’s collective and unifying language, such as the aforementioned “we”, “together” and “I feel the same... as you do”, was the most prominent example of Trudeau’s attempt at unification with Indigenous peoples. This kind of rhetoric served to position Trudeau as part of the Indigenous fight for self-determination. However, this language was developed to an even greater level through his framing of reconciliation as a deeply personal project, and one which extended beyond the formalities of his role as Prime Minister, resulting in a consistent personalised tone from 2015 to 2024. In his 2015 AFN speech, he made a number of promises: “*I promise* you that I will be your partner in the years

to come” and “Today, I *promise* that this relationship will be transformed and will be respected”. Likewise, in 2024, he declared: “I feel the same urgency as you do to move forward”. Trudeau’s repetition of “I *promise*” personalises reconciliation, constructing Trudeau as a trustworthy individual, while avoiding specifying *how* or *who* will enact radical change. On the other hand, by describing himself as a “partner” in 2015, Trudeau framed himself as an equal agent in the reconciliation process, ignoring the political and economic asymmetrical power relations which underpin the relationship. From 2015 to 2024, there is also a clear continuity of delay, where in 2015, he promised personal commitment “in the years to come”, whilst by 2024, he was still outlining the urgency to “move forward”. By continually looking forward, Trudeau framed himself as the harbinger of change, adopting the image of progress, without actually allowing for scrutiny of ongoing failures, or outlining deadlines for reconciliation policy or material change.

Trudeau clearly attempts to distance himself from previous governments through his unifying language and his “urgency to move forward”. This is particularly critical, considering his relationship to his father, Pierre-Elliot Trudeau – the 15th Prime Minister of Canada from 1968 to 1979, and from 1980 to 1984. His desire to separate himself is unsurprising, given his father’s reputation for having severely damaged Indigenous relations through attempts at assimilation, such as the 1969 White Paper, which has been widely regarded as “cultural genocide” by Indigenous scholars, such as Harold Cardinal (1999, p,102). Trudeau’s statement in his 2018 speech in the House of Commons exemplifies this: “The government of the day, led by my Father, did not intend to include these rights at the outset. It was the outspoken advocacy of First Nations, Inuit and Metis peoples that forced the government to reconsider”. Here, Trudeau frames his father’s government as responsible for wrongdoings, absolving himself and the current government of direct culpability. However, he avoids an

explicit critique of Pierre Trudeau's policies – particularly the 1969 White Paper. By passively framing his father's government, but failing to go into depth, he avoided addressing the core wrongdoings which require discussion and dissection, whilst benefitting from the act of confining wrongdoings to the era of his father. At the same time, Trudeau also positions Indigenous peoples as the sole driving force behind change, within this example. "It was the outspoken advocacy of First Nations, Inuit and Metis peoples that forced the government to reconsider" ultimately projected Indigenous peoples as responsible for creating change, reflecting a neoliberal logic where marginalised groups are viewed as the agents of reconciliation, as opposed to the settler colonial government (MacDonald, 2011). By framing Indigenous peoples – as opposed to the state – as responsible for Indigenous self-determination, Trudeau deflects attention away from his settler colonial position, and instead, towards Indigenous responsibility.

Lastly, Trudeau appeared to avoid responsibility within his *own* government. Alongside locating colonial wrongdoings in the past, particularly within the era of his father's government, he frames himself from the outset as an outsider to the Canadian political system and its institutions – useful for pre-emptively avoiding responsibility for potential (and likely) future wrongdoings. In 2015, he described how: "In the mandate letters given to my government ministers, my expectations were clear: I told them that no relationship is more important to me and to Canada than the one with First Nations, Metis nations, and Inuit peoples". Similarly, he also described that "This is a responsibility that I take seriously. I have instructed my entire government to do the same" within the same speech. It is unsurprising that this paternalistic language was most prevalent in 2015, given how this was at the outset of his time in office, and was therefore critical for setting the tone for the rest of his time as Prime Minister. In these examples, Trudeau positions himself as above even his

own government, already equipped with an understanding of how the relationship with Indigenous peoples should work, “instructing” his staff members to act accordingly. By adopting this tone, Trudeau conveniently separates himself from his own government, previous governments, and the entire Canadian political system as a whole.

By attributing Indigenous oppression and inequality to the past, and by covering for future wrongdoings under his government, Trudeau personally detaches himself from responsibility. These deflection techniques are subsequently masked through his symbolic unifying language. In this way, responsibility for injustice becomes impossible to locate, rendering reconciliation impossible when recognition of injustice is necessary for healing and recovery amongst Indigenous populations. The impact of Trudeau’s deflection of responsibility is discussed in more depth within the second part of my project.

Contextualising Trudeau's reconciliation rhetoric

This chapter involves bridging my textual analysis to sociocultural analysis through examination of the context in which the speeches were produced, distributed and consumed (Fairclough, 1989, p.26). This has already been partly incorporated within my textual analysis, but is developed further in a three-fold manner: outlining the reality of the empty policy promises made; discussing the institutional processes obstructing authentic 'nation-to-nation' relations; and analysing Indigenous reactions within the speeches recordings. Here, I begin to answer my second research question: 'How is Trudeau failing to support Indigenous self-determination and nationhood through his rhetorical MTI's and their gap with policy, and what is the impact of this upon Indigenous self-determination?'.

Rhetoric-policy gap

Trudeau's discourse involved a number of strategically ambiguous policy promises which allowed for the presentation of progress without actually addressing Indigenous demands. Unsurprisingly, Trudeau's 2015 speech to the AFN involved the largest quantity of these promises, being delivered just weeks after the Liberals took office. These vague pledges involved: "significant investments in First Nations education", "reforms to the criminal justice system" for fair Indigenous trials, and "review[ing] and monitor[ing] major resource development projects". Problematically, these pledges were vague and open-ended, failing to expand upon the details of the policy promises. For example, "significant investments" and "reforms" failed to outline the specific actions that would take place, alongside the quantity of investment and reform, or the timeline of these projects. Similarly, "review[ing]" and "monitor[ing]" development projects does not provide any sense of the processes that would be put in place, who would oversee 'monitoring', and what would happen once the results

from the reviews were produced. By avoiding specificity within his policy promises, Trudeau allowed himself to project an image of efficiency and productivity, whilst avoiding accountability to specific goals.

Even in the rare case of more specific promises made by Trudeau, the gap between rhetoric and reality still remained. The promise in 2015 to “immediately” lift the “2% funding cap” which was present under the previous government was actually not implemented until late 2016 (CBC, 2016), highlighting the bureaucratic, settler-dominated institutional obstacles to efficient implementation of nation-to-nation relations. The most striking example in this speech, however, was the Prime Minister’s promise to implement all 94 of the recommendations from the Truth and Reconciliation report, beginning with the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). This was the most significant pledge made throughout his time as Prime Minister, yet has also, like the above policy promises, been limited in its implementation and effectiveness. Despite having already been delayed since 2007, after Canada opposed UNDRIP when it was adopted by the UN (Flanagan, 2020, p.3), domestic implementation was slow. In July 2016, then-Justice Minister Jody Wilson-Raybould (*Kwakwaka ’wakw*) stated that adopting UNDRIP was “unworkable” (ibid, p.5). In response, private member’s Bill C-262 sought to align Canadian law with UNDRIP, only to die in the Senate in 2019 when Parliament was dissolved (Government of Canada, 2021). It therefore wasn’t until June 2021 when UNDRIP was finally implemented.

The implementation of UNDRIP was also inherently exclusionary in nature through its top-down creation of Bill C-15 in Parliament. Despite how the incorporation of UNDRIP into Canadian law originally consisted of collaboration between Indigenous and non-Indigenous commissioners through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), its implementation

makes explicit how institutional and bureaucratic processes obstructed implementation of the TRC's work from the very moment change was proposed (Gualtieri, 2016, p.188). The passing of Bill C-15 was a government-controlled process, consisting of only six weeks of selective engagement with Indigenous leaders (Government of Canada, 2021). This was also virtual (Government of Canada, 2021), limiting the outreach to those able to access the internet only. Similarly, the bill was led by federal officials within the House, as opposed to construction through a joint and equal partnership. The policy's slow implementation, coupled with the state-led implementation process, exemplifies how the state's own political timeline ultimately controlled the bill's construction.

As my core case of Trudeau's rhetoric-policy gap within his speeches, UNDRIP reflects how even concrete state promises were still restricted to the bureaucratic hurdles and settler colonial political timetables of the Canadian government. With UNDRIP still requiring further laws and policies for its implementation in cases today, UNDRIP does not hold overarching powers to veto extraction projects. Instead, Indigenous communities must subsequently put themselves through the costly and slow process of fighting in courts to defend their rights, ultimately maintaining the state's control over the contestation process. There remains the routine bypassing of Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) – a significant element of UNDRIP – as exemplified through recent resource extraction projects. As a result of the *Kebaowek First Nation V Canadian Nuclear Laboratories* in particular, a 2025 case (CanLII, 2025), FPIC has now been outlined as the “right to a robust process”, as opposed to a veto over decision-making, as declared by the Federal Court. Whilst UNDRIP now serves as an important lens informing Canadian law, including the Crown's Section 35 constitutional obligation of the duty to consent (Government of Canada, 2025), the *Kebaowek* case exposes how UNDRIP still remains an interpretive framework for resource

extraction companies (JFK Law LLP, 2025). UNDRIP thus does not exceed Canadian domestic law, but applies only to rights already established in Canadian law (Hamilton, 2018, p.104).

There are clear, distinct correlations between the Liberal government that entered in 2015, and the Conservative government that existed before it. Both governments stressed that UNDRIP was not legally binding, and that implementation would take place within the limits of the Canadian Constitution and law. There is clear continuity to be found across the Canadian governments, relegating UNDRIP's international protection of Indigenous First Nations under the jurisdiction of Canadian domestic law, therefore subjecting it to the settler-dominated legal and political institutions, such as the courts and Parliament.

Place-based implementation of MTI's

Aside from the rhetoric-policy gap, another important contextual consideration of Trudeau's reconciliation rhetoric in his speeches was the shifting use of Trudeau's MTI's which were used to varying degrees, depending on the locations where each of his speeches were made. Subtle changes in Trudeau's language and tone reflects the performativity of Trudeau's nation-to-nation agenda, as seen across the AFN, the House of Commons, and the UN.

Within the AFN, there was a clear adoption of Indigenous language – such as that of “nation-to-nation” (2015) reconciliation. Trudeau's technique of co-opting Indigenous language was the most significant case in point, where the use of Indigenous terminology contributed to the perception of Trudeau as personally engaged in meaningful reconciliation. This was reinforced by aligning himself with respected sources such as the TRC and UNDRIP.

However, with the AFN being a structure dependent upon the government for the majority of its funding (AFN, 2025), whilst also being modelled upon the UN General Assembly, the assembly is inherently settler-constructed. Trudeau's interaction with FN's through this platform, particularly through his language of co-optation, reflects the limitations of the promise of a 'new' relationship, when relying on forums which failed to include Indigenous peoples in its construction. Critically, his message in 2024 regarding the "reflection that everyone in this room has to have about how ... [they] want to organise themselves" reflects a deflection of responsibility away from Trudeau's reliance on historical institutions and processes such as the AFN, positioning Indigenous peoples as instead responsible for removing themselves from settler-dominated constructs.

On the other hand, Trudeau's rhetoric at the UN in 2017 showcased the performativity of his progressive rhetoric, incorporating language of diversity, such as "different cultures", "different religions", "different languages", all...together", in order to present Indigenous rights as part of a project of unity through diversity. This tone does not appear in any of the other speeches. This differed from the speeches in the House of Commons, which saw a clear shift to the incorporation of more politicised language. His rhetoric in Parliament framed the protest in 2020 as an obstructive 'populist' movement preventing Canadian prosperity and contributing to nationwide "frustrat[ion]", exposing how Trudeau departed strongly from the diversity-as-strength argument made at the UN, and the deeply personal relationship, as outlined at the AFN. His creation of "sides" within Indigenous-federal relations significantly departs from his language at the UN which prioritised cohesion along a united path. Thus, when it came to responding to Indigenous political blockades, Trudeau's language shifted to that of political antagonism. There is a clear conditional nature to Trudeau's reconciliation,

where support is only expressed when Indigenous peoples appear to not be causing disruption to the settler economic projects of extraction.

There is a clear malleability to Trudeau's reconciliation across each of the locations of his speeches. By shifting his incorporation of MTI's according to the location, such as co-opting Indigenous terminology at the AFN, incorporating political language in the House of Commons, or outlining liberal, progressive terms at the UN, Trudeau's reconciliation project appears a political tool for the development of his own image as Prime Minister. There is a clear correlation between his MTI's and the audience present, or the extent to which Indigenous peoples were disrupting and challenging settler colonial hegemony, such as in the case of the Wet'suwet'en conflict. This ultimately reflects inconsistent support for Indigenous self-determination.

Indigenous reactions within the speeches

Finally, when contextualising Trudeau's MTI's, it is important to recognise the clear shift in Indigenous de-coding of Trudeau's language throughout the decade, reinforcing the understanding that Trudeau's rhetoric has been unable to ease tensions over attitudes towards truly equitable nation-to-nation relations throughout his time in office.

Initially, Trudeau's 2015 speech was received with much positivity, where Indigenous representatives were shown to be smiling and nodding along with Trudeau as he spoke at the AFN. The language of "new" possibilities and the tone of hope was visibly successful with the audience. Trudeau's vow to lift the 2% funding cap in particular resulted in Indigenous leaders' hopeful reception, with the national chief Perry Bellegarde describing how "nothing will have a more immediate impact in helping to close the gap than lifting that two per

cent cap” (CBC, 2015). However, there is a critical contrast between the reaction at the 2015 AFN meeting and the one almost a decade later at the 2024 AFN meeting. There is a considerable shift in tone, where Indigenous representatives are seen in the recordings to be physically crying and shouting at Trudeau, with one particular woman declaring “It’s enough. [...] It’s time to sit down with us, and it’s time to start making those changes”. Similarly, Kelsey Jacko, Chief of Cold Lake First Nations, stated in the same recording: “Mr Prime Minister, when you were first elected, you made the statement that no relationship is more important than the one with Indigenous First Nations. Yet your government has done everything to undermine our treaties, including co-developing legislation that impacts our inherent treaty rights without rights-holders at the table”. Here, Jacko highlights both the lack of Indigenous consultation, alongside the gap between rhetoric and reality. By contrasting these two AFN meetings, both at the outset and at the end of Trudeau’s time in office, a clear contrast between Indigenous demands and federal action is exposed, as recognised by Indigenous representatives, reflecting the limited success of his MTI’s and policy.

Contesting Trudeau's reconciliation rhetoric and policy implementation

Some Indigenous scholarship acknowledges that state-led apologies and symbolic language can serve as valuable entry points for dialogue regarding reconciliation (for example, see Turner, 2006). However, scholars have continually emphasised how *meaningful* reconciliation requires going beyond empty rhetoric, and instead, addressing the structurally-embedded inequalities of colonialism which continue to operate both explicitly and implicitly within Canada's institutions and systems which render consent meaningless (Simpson, 2011; Alfred, 2010; Manuel, 2015; Corntassel & Bryce, 2012). This argument dominates Indigenous scholarship regarding self-determination, reflecting a continual dissatisfaction with the limitations of state acknowledgements – as also exposed through Indigenous leaders' frustrated reactions, as seen in the 2024 AFN speech recording. In this final section of my dissertation, I situate Trudeau's MTI's and his rhetoric-policy gap within greater institutional power dynamics, in line with the final stage of Fairclough's Three Dimensional Model (1989), and contest this with demands outlined by certain Indigenous authors.

The failure of the politics of recognition

Dale Turner (2006, p.5) acknowledges what he frames as an unfortunate but unavoidable truth: as the settler-colonial polity controls the courts alongside the political institutions, Indigenous peoples must strengthen their own position within the existing system in order to achieve self-determination. From this perspective, land rights battles, such as the aforementioned Kebaowek case (JFK Law LLP, 2025), become framed as strategic efforts at securing resources and legal leverage – essential for contesting sovereignty from within. However, Turner's argument here is deeply problematic, feeding into a greater neoliberal project of domination, framing Indigenous peoples as responsible for their own advancement

within oppressive systems. From this perspective, recognition from the state is framed as essential, equating self-determination with state-led recognition, inadvertently validating the very systems that dispossess Indigenous peoples. Instead, as outlined by Indigenous scholars, particularly Glen Coulthard (2007) and Taiaiake Alfred (1994), it is *consent* which is essential in order for Indigenous self-determination, whereby government policy or extraction projects require *truly* free and informed prior consent.

The limitations of Turner's argument have been exemplified through the findings of this dissertation, where the politics of recognition has been shown to be a continual obstacle to meaningful reconciliation, even when Indigenous peoples involve themselves within the settler system, such as in the Kebaowek case. In the first instance, in the case of Trudeau's policy, extracted from the speeches, there is a clear tension between Indigenous peoples' full participation, as demanded within the TRC Calls To Action, and mere 'consultation', prior to resource extraction projects. For example, the aforementioned Wet'suwet'en pipeline expansion, forced through despite Wet'suwet'en territory opposition, highlights the state's failure to implement UNDRIP's FPIC clause, demonstrating how recognition and acknowledgement of Indigenous rights in Trudeau's speeches operated as a "spectacle" (Estes, 2019). Similarly, by forcing Indigenous peoples to exhaust themselves in court battles in order to reclaim land, such as the Kebaowek case (JFK Law LLP, 2025), it becomes possible to understand state understandings of Indigenous self-determination in line with Dale Turner's viewpoint (1995), which presents Indigenous reconciliation as Indigenous *survival* within the system, as opposed to meaningful self-determination.

Secondly, in regard to his linguistic choices within his reconciliation discourse, Trudeau's MTI's expose the limitations of the politics of recognition, and the need for meaningful

dialogue with specific Indigenous communities and their unique demands. Importantly, Indigenous national self-determination efforts can be found across a spectrum, where various communities' assertions can vary in form and intensity over time, shifting from "localised goals", to "reformative ones", to "final sovereigntist missions" (Alfred, 1994, p.145). There is therefore more nuance to the specific requirements for Indigenous nations' self-determination than Trudeau frames there is within his speeches. Through colonial equivocation in particular, Trudeau failed to address specific Indigenous communities, homogenising Indigenous groups into one body. There is a significant silence regarding recognition of the numerous stages of Indigenous self-determination in his rhetoric, where differing conversations need to be had regarding federal funding, reparations, and state language. Instead, as Taiaiake Alfred (1994) outlines, there must be differing approaches to specific Indigenous self-determination efforts regarding funding and state programmes of support.

Similarly, within this, Trudeau's aestheticisation of decolonisation exemplifies his politics of recognition most clearly, allowing for the state to avoid the critical task of initiating meaningful dialogue, or of creating policy which centres Indigenous self-determination. Land acknowledgements in particular merely reinforce settler domination, by positioning acknowledgement as an end *in itself*. On the other hand, by attributing responsibility to an evil past, and most importantly, by co-opting Indigenous language, the antagonism between the state's wrongdoings and Indigenous communities' fight for self-determination is blurred, making it difficult for Indigenous peoples to fight for their rights against an antagonistic force.

By situating Trudeau's rhetoric in the context of Turner's argument, deep theoretical flaws are once again exposed. Navigating the colonial system from within is not necessarily the best course of action when state rhetoric works to encourage Indigenous peoples to internalise colonial recognition as natural, ultimately shaping their identities within the system, and assimilating themselves into the settler colonial polity, as outlined by Glen Coulthard (2007, p.42).

From Coulthard's perspective, we can expose a continuity in Trudeau's liberal politics of recognition which follows a similar pattern to previous Prime Ministers of Canada, reconciling Indigenous nationhood with settler-state sovereignty through symbolic acts and language. Ultimately, Indigenous self-determination should be supported by policy which creates conditions allowing for "a break with existing relations of domination" (Jessop and Sum, 2016 in Laruffa and Hearne, 2023). Self-determination ultimately means departing from recognition-based approaches and tick-box consultation, and moving towards meaningful consent-based processes and land reunification in particular.

Indigenous resurgence

Processes of internal Indigenous resurgent politics have been outlined as the solution to countering the empty politics of state-led recognition, through critical reconstruction of Indigenous cultural practises (Coulthard, 2014, p.24; Corntassel & Bryce, 2012, p.161). Indigenous aspirations for self-determination therefore do not necessarily mean full secession or independence from the nation-state, or taken to the extreme, anti-state aspirations such as complete annihilation of the settler nation-state altogether (Robbins, 2010, p.259). Instead, from this perspective, a movement away from performance, to everyday cultural practises, is understood as a means for reclaiming power, separate from the settler state. This perspective

is echoed by Professor Dianne Otto (1995, p. 83), who asserts that true resurgence requires Indigenous communities to be able “imagine themselves, to be creator of themselves as subjects rather than objects of [international] law and history”. Such reimagining allows for the reconceptualisation of Indigenous identities as rights-bearing nations, with control over their own futures. The Kahnawake Mohawks have been cited as an example of how adversarial interactions with the state have fuelled a resurgence of radical Indigenous nationalism, leading to the revival of traditional Iroquoian institutions as the foundation of Indigenous nationalism (Alfred, 1994, p.179). Here, the antagonism created between the settler state and Indigenous communities – as a result of the empty politics of recognition – acted as a catalyst in the past for spurring cohesive internal nation-building.

However, whilst internal Indigenous resurgence is taking place *in spite* of state failures, this dissertation has shown how the immediate termination of MTI techniques and empty, limited policy promises, can be instrumental in accelerating and supporting Indigenous resurgence. Indigenous empowerment can be supported by major shifts in state rhetoric, away from the empty politics of recognition, and towards – critically – *consent*-based approaches.

Ultimately, Indigenous resurgence is a continual process. By stopping the use of MTI’s, and by implementing truly consent-based approaches, strides towards truly equitable nation-to-nation reconciliation can be made. Thus, whilst many Indigenous communities are independently reclaiming sovereignty, it is not too late for the Canadian state to undertake meaningful rhetoric and policy-based change which accepts settler responsibility, listens to Indigenous demands, and implements material change.

Conclusion

My research project was designed to contribute to the growing body of decolonial studies working to expose how ongoing legacies of settler colonialism persist today. By combining a decolonial theoretical lens within Critical Discourse Analysis of Justin Trudeau's reconciliation rhetoric from 2015-2025, I have exposed how settler hegemony is being sustained in more obscure ways. Whilst colonial power used to be an explicit structure reinforced through assimilatory policies, settler domination can now be understood as masked behind reconciliatory discourse and institutional practises that emphasise diversity and accommodation. By exposing Trudeau's settler 'Moves To Innocence' (Tuck and Yang, 2012), it becomes possible to understand how, behind the symbolism of cooperation along a future-facing path, a deeper neoliberal project of domination which frames marginalised communities as responsible for their own self-determination becomes apparent. By contextualising Trudeau's rhetoric with the slow and ineffective implementation of his policy, particularly that of UNDRIP, we can better understand how a power imbalance in favour of the Canadian state continues to dominate the nation-to-nation relationship.

It is important to note that my study has been primarily concerned with Justin Trudeau's time in office specifically, despite briefs links made to Stephen Harper's tenure or Pierre Elliot Trudeau's, and to the greater Canadian state more broadly. Further research should develop this, by contrasting Trudeau's techniques to previous administrations, or by analysing future Prime Ministers' rhetoric, to understand how settler colonial domination manifests in alternative ways. This is critical for Indigenous resurgence efforts, whereby understanding forms of oppression is critical for self-determination and resistance.

This project has thus highlighted how Indigenous reconciliation demands are not being adequately met by the government. Whilst important strides are being made in comparison to previous governments, particularly considering the government's implementation of the TRC Calls to Action and UNDRIP, it is vital that the government follows through on necessary power-sharing and rights recognition stipulation within the documents and bills, rather than symbolically framing implementation as the be-all and end-all of reconciliation. Ultimately, Canada remains entrenched in colonial structures, and there is still a significant disparity between performative ally-ship and material change – reducing performative reconciliation to a branding exercise, as opposed to truly meaningful and equal nation-to-nation relations. Alongside this, state rhetoric itself remains deeply problematic, containing numerous techniques for avoiding responsibility, or for acknowledging ongoing legacies. A resurgent politics of recognition, where Indigenous peoples collectively redirect their struggles away from a politics of recognition and towards self-actualisation is taking place on the Indigenous side of the relationship; what is required now, on the side of the Canadian state, is open and honest dialogue, and truly consent-based approaches to new policy.

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