

Situating Ruptures

Indigenous Resurgence and the Frankfurt School as Non-Repressive Epistemological Alternatives to the Imperial Paradigm

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As a result of a long history of Indigenous resistance against colonialism, Canadians are increasingly being forced to acknowledge both the extreme violence upon which our¹ occupation of these territories rests and the futility of any attempt to erase Indigenous presence from the land. Indigenous nations, as well as their legal and political orders, are here to stay; but as Michael Asch has pointed out, so too are the settlers.² The task now is to find some way of coexisting on these territories in a way that respects the Indigenous legal orders and diplomatic principles which govern them.³ Anishinaabe writer Leanne Simpson emphasizes that Indigenous peoples “do not need the help of Canadians. We need Canadians to help themselves . . . to find a way of living in the world that is not based on violence and exploitation.”⁴ Settlers have been called upon to rediscover those aspects of our own heritage that might point the way towards a more accountable mode of relating. The present paper responds to such a task, arguing that the epistemological approach of first-generation Frankfurt School Critical Theory demonstrates several crucial points of compatibility with Indigenous epistemologies. The holistic, relational, self-reflexive, and negative theological inclinations demonstrated throughout their writings suggest that the Frankfurt School’s approach to critique might be a well-suited and culturally appropriate theoretical launching point for Euro-American scholars seeking to work in tandem with Indigenous resurgence theorists in generatively refusing anti-relational, delocalized modes of knowing and being in the world. Key writings by the Frankfurt School’s guiding theorists, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, will be interwoven with the insights of scholars from a wide range of Indigenous nations across North America towards elucidating the mechanisms of a deracinating imperial

¹ I use “our” and “we” throughout, as I wish to make explicit my intended audience for this work is other Euro-descended settler Canadians.

² Michael Asch, *On Being Here to Stay: Treaties and Aboriginal Rights in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014).

³ Taiaiake Alfred, *Peace, Power, Righteousness: An Indigenous Manifesto*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 53.

⁴ Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom through Radical Resistance*, Indigenous Americas (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 101.

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paradigm, various tactics for refusing its violent mode of (anti)relation⁵, and some core features of non-repressive epistemologies capable of responding to the dynamic flux of relational tensions without recourse to violence.

SITUATING THE RESEARCHER

According to both Horkheimer and the various Indigenous research paradigms consulted here, the first and most important step in any intellectual undertaking is to explicitly situate oneself relationally and identify how the task at hand emerges from and responds in service to that situation.⁶ Deracination, the uprooting and dispersal of peoples from their places of belonging, and rupture, dramatic shifts in the relational matrix of existence, have played a major role in shaping the lands and relationships that inform my experience of the world. I am a settler of British descent, born on the traditional territories of the Ahondihronon people; although, by the time of my birth European colonization and warfare had largely eradicated this Iroquoian-speaking community. Through a complicated series of contact-fuelled relocations, the Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee peoples of the region were eventually squeezed onto a joint reservation in the Haldimand Tract as the settler cities of Hamilton and Toronto engulfed the western shores of Lake Ontario.⁷ As settlers, my family was complicit in the colonial processes which displaced the Indigenous populations of this region. In exchange for the material benefits of such complicity, my great-grandparents also relinquished our own ancestral connections to any particular place, and today—like many second- and third-generation settlers—I cannot say for certain where we came from, nor can I provide any details about the specific land-based knowledges and traditions we might have practiced there. The settler-colonial culture that I was born into, therefore, rests upon an ongoing cycle of strategic disruptions in place-based relationships for personal material gain within an imperial-capitalist economic system.

SITUATING THE PROJECT

In all the writings by Indigenous scholars reviewed for this paper, there was a consistent emphasis on the non-inevitability of the imperial paradigm that fuels settler colonialism. They agree that there is nothing biologically inherent about Europeaness that necessitates a violent way of relating to the world. Lakota scholar Russel Means makes this very clear when he writes that “when I use the term ‘European’ I’m not referring to a skin color or a

⁵ I use “(anti)relation” throughout because the defining feature of this relational mode is precisely its disavowal of relationships.

⁶ Max Horkheimer, “The Present Situation of Social Philosophy and the Task of an Institute for Social Research,” in *Between Philosophy and Social Science: Selected Early Writings of Max Horkheimer*, trans. John Torpey (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), 12–14.

⁷ Susan M. Hill, *The Clay We Are Made of: Haudenosaunee Land Tenure on the Grand River*, *Critical Studies in Native History* 20 (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2017).

particular genetic structure. What I'm referring to is a mindset, a worldview which is a product of the development of European culture. People are not genetically encoded to hold this outlook; they are acculturated to hold it.”⁸

Mohawk scholar Taiaiake Alfred agrees with Means on this point and stresses that the tendency to set up dichotomies based on racist essentialisms is, in fact, a central feature of the imperial paradigm that led Europeans to colonize Indigenous lands in the first place. Alfred argues that such dichotomous thinking is antithetical to an Indigenous worldview:

It is more hopeful to listen to the way traditional teachings speak of the various human families: they consider each one to be gifted and powerful in its own way, each with something different to contribute to the achievement of peace and harmony. Far from condemning different cultures, this position challenges each one to discover its gift in itself and realize it fully, to the benefit of humanity as a whole. It is just as important for Europeans as it is for Native people to cultivate the values that promote peace and harmony. The value of the Indigenous critique of the Western worldview lies not in the creation of false dichotomies but in the insight that the colonial attitudes and structures imposed on the world by Europeans are not manifestations of an inherent evil: they are merely reflections of white society's understanding of its own power and relationship with nature.⁹

I have quoted this passage at length because I feel it perfectly articulates my rationale for the present research. If there is nothing inherently evil about Europeans, and if, according to an Indigenous worldview, all cultures ought to find a way to respect and acknowledge the gifts we can each contribute towards a common goal of peaceful co-existence, then it follows that European settlers ought to (re)search¹⁰ within their own intellectual heritage for something true to that aim. Once (re)located, such insights might be leveraged towards what Leanne Simpson and Dene scholar Glen Coulthard call a “critical co-resistance against the convergence of forces that divide and conquer us and the Earth on which we depend.”¹¹

⁸ Russell Means, “The Same Old Song,” in *Marxism and Native Americans*, ed. Ward Churchill (Boston: South End Press, 1982), 30.

⁹ Alfred, *Peace, Power, Righteousness*, 21, emphasis added.

¹⁰ The use of parentheses around “re” has emerged as a popular practice among decolonial and Indigenous scholars seeking to emphasize the cyclical nature of human knowledge and experience. I use “(re)search” and “(re)located” here to emphasize a process of searching again for something that can only be found by recovering its locality, that is, its situation within a nexus of temporal, spatial, interpersonal, and affective relationships that give it meaning.

¹¹ Glen Coulthard and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, “Grounded Normativity / Place-Based Solidarity,” *American Quarterly* 68, no. 2 (2016): 250, <https://doi.org/10.1353/aq.2016.0038>.

(RE)LOCATING THE FRANKFURT SCHOOL

During my early research into Indigenous critiques of Euro-settler culture, I came across several references to “Frankfurt School Critical Theory.” It was presented as one of few European intellectual traditions that, according to Yuchi scholar Daniel Wildcat, “saw in one respect or another [what] Indigenous peoples all over the world experienced.”¹² I would suggest that we might attribute this alignment of insight and experience to the dramatic role played by the forces of rupture and deracination in the history and thought of both the Frankfurt School and Indigenous peoples. The Frankfurt School is the name given to a group of scholars associated with the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt am Main, Germany, during the directorship of Max Horkheimer, from 1930 to 1953, and Theodor Adorno, from 1953 to his death in 1969. During this time, the Frankfurt School’s predominantly German-Jewish members experienced the rise of fascism in Europe and were forced to flee to North America for the duration of the Nazi regime. During their time in the United States, they observed how capitalism was producing socio-cultural tendencies that were alarmingly reminiscent of those undergirding Nazism. Further still, the emergence of Stalinism in the Soviet Union had demonstrated that even the Left was not immune to authoritarian tendencies. The thinkers of the Frankfurt School were surrounded by totalitarianism on all sides, and yet each of these ideologies claimed to be operating in the name of freedom. In addition to these historical circumstances, the Frankfurt School was also responding to the productive tensions they saw between various major thinkers of the German intellectual tradition, namely Kant, Hegel, Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche. It is my contention that this unique positionality of the Frankfurt School enabled them to penetrate the veil of liberal rhetoric to see the dark side of the Enlightenment and its attendant myths at the core of European epistemology.

RUPTURED KNOWLEDGE

One of the crowning achievements of the Frankfurt School was a book co-authored by Horkheimer and Adorno, titled *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.¹³ In this work Horkheimer and Adorno identify a thread of self-serving instrumentality in the Western¹⁴ intellectual tradition that can be traced back as far the writings of Homer and

¹² Vine Deloria and Daniel R. Wildcat, *Power and Place: Indian Education in America* (Golden, CO: Fulcrum Publishing, 2001), 38.

¹³ Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott, *Cultural Memory in the Present* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002).

¹⁴ I will, in following common usage, resort to the shorthand “the West” in reference to the imperial paradigm from time to time; however, I want to highlight that I am aware of the imprecise and amorphous nature of this catch-all term, especially once one moves beyond the continent of Europe to map its imperial manifestations in the colonies.

beyond. This form of rationality, they argue, was driven by a fear response to that which is incomprehensible in nature, those great forces of change (which I have named here “ruptures”) that can be as destructive as they are creative. While it is perfectly rational for the fragile human body to react with fear to its potential annihilation by these forces, the particular form of rationality that came to dominate Western thought, according to Horkheimer and Adorno, is marked by a willful denial of this vulnerability, a delusion of complete control that can only be maintained through the devouring of any and all information about the source of fear: nature—or, as Russel Means would put it, the despiritualized “other.”¹⁵ This information can enable one to harness the objectified other—be it dehumanized people (slavery), despiritualized lands (resource extraction), or decontextualized knowledge (positivist science)—for personal economic gain, but the control is never complete, and so the quest is endless. Horkheimer and Adorno also highlight how such an approach to knowledge denies that we¹⁶ are ourselves part of the very nature we seek to dominate. Given the amount of denial at the heart of such an epistemology, it can hardly be said to constitute “true knowledge” at all; rather, it is an elaborate and calculating story told in the name of self-preservation, a narrative that is clung to despite every new atrocity it engenders—even as it brings about real, existing situations of self-annihilation.

Horkheimer and Adorno’s insights into the epistemological foundations of a European tendency towards dominating (anti)relational modes resonates exceedingly well with Indigenous critiques of colonial logic. In my review of the literature for this paper, Enlightenment rationalism was consistently identified by Indigenous scholars as a highly problematic framework informing the (anti)relational mode of the European imperial paradigm. Indigenous authors have repeatedly pointed to the contradiction between Eurocentric claims to progress and the depravity of the violence leveraged towards that goal. Compare, for example, the Lenape scholar Jack Forbes’s observation that “what we have actually seen in the past 2000 years is not the rise of civilization, but the rise of brutality and barbarism”¹⁷ to Horkheimer and Adorno’s frank assessment that “the wholly enlightened earth is radiant with triumphant calamity.”¹⁸ Richard Atleo, of the Nuu-chah-nulth peoples, has also commented on this apparent contradiction in the mythology informing the Western self-conception: “People who consider themselves

¹⁵ Means writes, “the European materialist tradition of despiritualizing the universe is very similar to the mental process which goes into dehumanizing another person.” See Means, “The Same Old Song,” 22.

¹⁶ Again, the “we” here refers specifically to individuals, inclusive of myself, that have been acculturated within such a framework.

¹⁷ Jack D. Forbes, *Columbus and Other Cannibals: The Wétiko Disease of Exploitation, Imperialism, and Terrorism* (1979; repr., New York: Seven Stories Press, 2008), 47.

¹⁸ Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 1.

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the most advanced and most progressive have brought the earth to its most advanced state of peril.”¹⁹ Indeed, even Norman Davies, a Welsh-Polish historian and author of *Europe: A History*, begins his chapter on the twentieth century with an acknowledgment that, “At a time when the instruments of constructive change had outstripped anything previously known, Europeans acquiesced in a string of conflicts which destroyed more human beings than all past convulsions put together.”²⁰ Tellingly for our purposes here, Davies frames the period as a sort of anomaly, “the era when Europe took leave of its senses”²¹; he continues to state that only with the end of the Cold War “could the people of Europe resume the natural course of their development so rudely interrupted in that beautiful summer of 1914.”²² This move is a rather common one in contemporary European and Euro-American historiography and popular opinion, and yet many Indigenous scholars do not view the violence of twentieth-century Europe as a radical departure from the logic that had propelled the preceding century. In 1955, Martinique author Aimé Césaire argued forcefully that Nazism cannot be understood apart from Europe’s colonial history and is, in fact, the homecoming of violent tendencies cultivated and honed in practice against non-Europeans.²³ Césaire’s point can be reinforced by noting the admiration Adolf Hitler held for the British Empire, which inspired his settler-colonial schemes for German *lebensraum* (“living space”) in the Slavic territories of Eastern Europe.²⁴ A further connection can be observed in Heinrich Himmler’s suggestion for segregating the Roma population on reserves modelled after the reservation systems in North America.²⁵ While it is important to acknowledge the historical specificity of Nazism in Germany and European colonialism in North America, a striking resonance between the Frankfurt School’s analysis of fascism and Indigenous critiques of colonial logic strongly suggests that these forms of violence are not unrelated, nor are they mere anomalies in an otherwise glorious history of liberal progress. Both, I would argue, arise from the dominating epistemic practices at the heart of the imperial paradigm they share.

As pointed out by both the Frankfurt School and the Indigenous scholars cited, one of the principal features of Enlightenment/colonial logic is a cyclical pattern of relational disruptions fuelled by an instrumentalizing response to fear. In *Power and Place*, a text oriented towards the resurgence of Indigenous pedagogies, co-authors

¹⁹ Richard E. Atleo, *Tsawalk: A Nuu-Chah-Nulth Worldview* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2004), xix.

²⁰ Norman Davies, *Europe: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 897.

²¹ Davies, 897.

²² Davies, 900, emphasis added.

²³ Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, trans. Joan Pinkham, 2nd ed. (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000).

²⁴ John Toland, *Adolf Hitler* (New York: Anchor Books, 1992).

²⁵ Michael Burleigh and Wolfgang Wippermann, *The Racial State: Germany, 1933-1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

Vine Deloria and Daniel Wildcat describe how the dominant Western approach to science is “reduced to essentially taking things apart—dissection.”²⁶ The theme of epistemic deracination, the removal of knowledge from its context, is echoed by Horkheimer’s observation that the disciplinary tendencies of the Western academy can only lead to a chaotic, partial, and destructive form of knowledge. By contrast, he argues that a critical philosophy must seek to uncover, maintain, and strengthen the relationships which provide meaning to isolated facts: “Reason exists in the whole system of ideas, in the progression from one idea to another, so that every idea is understood and applied in its true meaning, that is to say, in its meaning within the whole of knowledge. Only such thought is rational thought.”²⁷ It is important to clarify a crucial distinction between the holistic methodologies advocated for here and the dominating concept of “totality.” Holistic knowledge practices seek to emphasize relational connections without sacrificing the importance of that which is individual and distinct; indeed, heterogeneity is understood to be a vital source of the dynamic tensions that animate any holistic relational framework.²⁸ Furthermore, holistic insights are understood to be the product of a collaborative effort between many situated (and therefore limited) individual perspectives. By contrast, a totalizing paradigm isolates and scrutinizes a particular and then attempts to extrapolate a grand theory that is articulated from a falsely omniscient and singular vantage point. In the process of converting the particular to the universal, heterogeneity (and the dynamism it fuels) is sacrificed on the altar of the total system. Such systems are often rigid and non-responsive towards any new information that might undermine their pretense to totality. Horkheimer and Adorno were, for their part, attempting to carve out an alternative to a totalizing Hegelian-Marxist paradigm which they felt had failed to adequately respond to the historical realities of the twentieth century, in particular, the popularity of fascism among the working class in Germany and the non-inevitability of socialist revolution.²⁹ As such, an integral component of the holistic—that is, the relationally-focused—method they proposed was its commitment to remain open and responsive to the particularities of changing and diverse experiences. This commitment accounts for the dynamism and ongoing relevance of Critical

²⁶ Deloria and Wildcat, *Power and Place*, 11.

²⁷ Max Horkheimer, *Critical Theory: Selected Essays* (New York: Continuum, 2002), 266.

²⁸ For a clear articulation of how Anishinaabe politics and pedagogy, for example, balance the interests of the individual and the collective, see Simpson, *As We Have Always Done*.

²⁹ For a fascinating and thorough treatment of how the Frankfurt School came to rebel against “totality” as a motivating concept in Marxist methodology, see Martin Jay, *Marxism and Totality: The Adventures of a Concept from Lukács to Habermas* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

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Theory; it also provides the methodological imperative for contemporary critical theorists to engage with Indigenous perspectives and collaboratively theorize the connections between capitalism, fascism, and colonialism.

RUPTURED EXPERIENCE

Horkheimer's insistence upon a holistic, relational approach to knowledge is consistent with the intervention posed by Sioux author and theologian Vine Deloria. Deloria describes the Indigenous epistemological principle of correlation as "searching for the linkages that experience had taught them existed in these situations."³⁰ The importance of experience emerges as a major theme across the writing of both the Frankfurt School and Indigenous authors, and Deloria offers an excellent clue as to why: "experience is the undeveloped and untheorized site where the divisions between subjective and objective, material and spiritual, and an entire series of dichotomies disappear."³¹ Experience cannot be integrated within the imperial paradigm precisely because it threatens to bring relationships, and all their attendant tensions, to the fore. For this reason, speaking about one's experience of deracination has emerged as a powerful tactic for challenging and disrupting the (anti)relational mode of imperialism.

Indigenous experiences of colonialism are consistently described in terms of broken relationships. The diplomatic agreements set out in treaties with European newcomers were broken. In Canada, Indigenous peoples' relationships to place were broken through forced relocations, reserves, and the pass system³². Kinship relations were broken as Indigenous children were forced to attend Indian Residential Schools.³³ Anishinaabe scholar Kathleen Absolon uses the term "dismemberment" to describe the effects of these schools and "to evoke an image and meaning of a forced disconnection."³⁴ Haida scholar Sara Davidson describes how the Canadian government's 1884 to 1951 potlatch ban was "an attempt to sever authentic connections to our history, as well as the genuine expressions of our Indigenous identities."³⁵ Blackfoot scholar Leroy Little Bear describes the epistemic effects of colonization as "a heritage of jagged worldviews . . . a site of overlapping, contentious, fragmented, competing

³⁰ Deloria and Wildcat, *Power and Place*, 27.

³¹ Deloria and Wildcat, 34.

³² This policy, enforced from 1885 to 1951, ensured Indigenous people could not leave reserves without the express approval of the local Indian agent, thereby limiting access to their traditional territories.

³³ Indian Residential Schools operated from 1894 to 1997 and intentionally sought to "kill the Indian in the child" by isolating them from their families and the cultural knowledge they possessed.

³⁴ Kathleen E. Absolon, *Kaandossiwin: How We Come to Know* (Halifax: Fernwood Publishing, 2011), 21.

³⁵ Sara Florence Davidson and Robert Davidson, *Potlatch as Pedagogy: Learning Through Ceremony* (Winnipeg: Portage and Main Press, 2018), 27.

desires and values.”³⁶ The language of illness and pathology was another common thread across descriptions of both deracinating behaviour and its impact. Both Forbes and Friedland describe colonizers as having caught and spread the wetiko illness among their victims.³⁷ Alfred writes, “the celebration and defence of imperialism and its intellectual underpinnings is the worst sickness of the colonial mind.”³⁸ Césaire declares, “a civilization which justifies colonization—and therefore force—is already a sick civilization” and “calls for its Hitler.”³⁹ Adorno also observes how “collective delusions such as anti-Semitism confirm the pathology of the individual who shows that he is psychologically no longer able to cope with this world and is thrown back upon a purely illusionary inner kingdom.”⁴⁰ These observations offered by both the Frankfurt School and Indigenous scholars seem to suggest that the imperial paradigm itself arises out of an original relational disruption (either inflicted by others or self-induced) that establishes deracination as a normative framework for relating to the world.

TRAUMATIC RUPTURES

In trying to understand the psychology behind totalizing⁴¹ paradigms, I look to the trauma theory of psychologist Judith Herman. Herman argues that situations of extreme vulnerability (wherein one feels helpless in the face of an overwhelming force) can induce predictable psychological reactions: namely, denial and repression.⁴² I want to argue that “rupture” can be perceived as just such a force. Within a totalizing paradigm even benign ruptures trigger a trauma response because they underline the vulnerabilities inherent to being-in-relationship as part of a dynamic whole marked by plurality. Such a paradigm is ill-prepared to confront these vulnerabilities because of its rigid dependence on control. Herman posits that all forms of trauma share one commonality: they arise from and produce disrupted connections. She writes that the repression of trauma is an ambiguous mechanism. On one hand, it is a merciful self-preservation reflex in response to an experience that one is not psychologically prepared to confront. On the other hand, psychological repression can lead to dysfunctional ways of relating, such as obsessions

³⁶ Leroy Little Bear, “Jagged Worldviews Colliding,” in *Reclaiming Indigenous Voice and Vision*, ed. Marie Battiste (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2000), 85.

³⁷ Forbes, *Columbus and Other Cannibals*; Hadley Louise Friedland, *The Wetiko Legal Principles: Cree and Anishinabek Responses to Violence and Victimization* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018).

³⁸ Taiaiake Alfred, *Wasáse: Indigenous Pathways of Action and Freedom* (2005; repr., Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 102.

³⁹ Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, 39.

⁴⁰ Theodor Adorno, “What Does Coming to Terms with the Past Mean?,” in *Bitburg in Moral and Political Perspective*, ed. Geoffrey H. Hartman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 124.

⁴¹ “totalizing” in that it must annihilate anything which cannot or will not be incorporated into—or which challenges—its ossified and delusional self-conception as a unified and homogenous totality (for example, a pure Aryan German race or a “great” nation of hardworking white settlers).

⁴² Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery* (1992; repr., New York: Basic Books, 2015).

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with control or the severing of relational ties in an effort to secure some sense of safety through isolation. Building on this observation from Herman, I suggest that totalizing paradigms seek to re-establish a sense of control and safety by disavowing relational accountability to anything perceived as a threat to the current order. The potential source of rupture is marked as “other,” and those who cling to the totalizing paradigm are deluded into a false sense of security and belonging within a perfectly frictionless and united totality of their own artifice.

Having articulated the proposition that we might trace the (anti)relational, deracinating tendencies of the imperial paradigm to a repressive trauma response, I feel compelled to offer several clarifications on what this does not include, namely the willful denial and obscuration of reprehensible social realities and acts of violence for which one is responsible or from which one benefits. As Tuck and Yang have acutely noted in their writing on what they call “settler moves to innocence,” there are numerous mechanisms through which settlers seek to absolve themselves of complicity in the settler-colonial enterprise and the attendant burden of guilt that this might impose on their conscience.⁴³ Although not discussed explicitly by Tuck and Yang, one such mechanism is the downplaying or outright denial of both historical and contemporary situations of blatant violence. Such obscurantism has been and continues to be a pervasive phenomenon within Canada, from the insidious claim to “good intentions” that inevitably surfaces following every public forum on Indian Residential Schools, to the cultivated obliviousness which pervades everyday settler life, enabling Canadians to “forget” the coloniality of their state and thereby naturalize their presence on Indigenous territories. Alfred writes:

I am convinced that most settlers are in denial. They know that the foundations of their countries are corrupt, and they know that their countries are “colonial” in historical terms, but still they refuse to see and accept the fact that there can be no rhetorical transcendence and retelling of the past to make it right without making fundamental changes to their government, society, and the way they live. For no other reason than a selfish attachment to the economic and political privileges they have collectively inherited as the dominant people in a colonial relationship, they, by cultural instinct and imperative, deny the truth.⁴⁴

This “need to deny” is acutely distinct from the involuntary repression of a traumatizing memory in the mind of a victim or witness to atrocity (for example, the violent disruption of a life-sustaining relational nexus) or the

⁴³ Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, “Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor,” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education, and Society* 1, no. 1 (2012): 1–40.

⁴⁴ Alfred, *Wasa'se*, 107.

repression of a traumatizing fear one is not prepared to confront (which is the epistemological core of the totalizing paradigms that I am concerned with here), and in no way is this paper to be interpreted as collapsing the distinction between the repression of trauma and the suppression of guilt. In 1959, Adorno wrote an essay reflecting on the notion of “coming to terms with the past,” a phrase which had been enthusiastically taken up in post-war Germany and leveraged to facilitate a studied amnesia amongst Germans who had been complicit with Nazism. He firmly asserts, “the forgetting of National Socialism should be understood far more in terms of a general social situation than in terms of psychopathology . . . The effacement of memory is more the achievement of an all-too-wakeful consciousness than it is the result of its weakness in the face of the superiority of unconscious processes.”⁴⁵

Accordingly, I want to emphasize that although the anti-relational modes of the imperialist paradigm may arise from repressive reactions to trauma, the repressive move does not include the denial of self-incriminating facts, nor does it excuse the violence of deracinating behaviours. Such a framework does, however, provide useful insights as to how one might interrupt the cycles of deracination and thus force a generative rupture within the imperial paradigm. Repression is not the only possible response to fear, and even if a traumatic response has been induced, the traumatic episode can be worked through and integrated, thereby re-establishing healthy relational modes.⁴⁶ Based on her clinical practice as a psychologist working with patients suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, Hermann notes that healing is achieved through a radical acceptance of vulnerability, the extension of good faith to others, and the instigation of one’s own life-affirming ruptures⁴⁷ where necessary, all of which, are characteristics shared by the Frankfurt School and the Indigenous epistemologies researched for this paper. These are intellectual traditions committed to relationality, self-reflexivity, and epistemic humility.

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As noted previously, the Frankfurt School’s willingness to interrogate its own conceptual foundations and uncover the contradiction at the heart of “Enlightenment” led them to not only see that truth, which Indigenous people experienced⁴⁸, it also led to a methodological approach that meaningfully integrates and acknowledges the

⁴⁵ Adorno, “What Does Coming to Terms with the Past Mean?,” 117.

⁴⁶ Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*.

⁴⁷ For example, leaving an abusive relationship or disrupting patterns of self-harming behaviour. Audra Simpson’s notion of generative refusal is an excellent example of a more explicitly political manifestation. See Audra Simpson, *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life across the Borders of Settler States* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 11, 22.

⁴⁸ My emphasis here is intended to recall the earlier quote by Wildcat, but it also gestures towards the crucial role played by vision and experience.

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subjectivity of the knower. Amy Allen has argued convincingly that the call for such self-reflexivity was, in fact, the primary argument of the Dialectic of Enlightenment. According to Allen,

On [Horkheimer and Adorno's] understanding, the concept of enlightenment is not in itself barbaric or totalitarian; rather, it is deeply ambivalent, in the sense that it contains the potential to descend into barbarism and totalitarianism. But it contains other potentials as well, including the potential to reflect on its own regressive tendencies, to hold up a mirror to itself, and to break through its own limits.⁴⁹

In other words, without self-reflexivity and epistemic humility, the quest to confront fear through the acquisition of knowledge will be doomed to continually recreate the very conditions of fear it sought to overcome through blind domination. This brings to mind Atleo's telling of the Nuu-chah-nulth story about Son of Raven, who sought to acquire light for his community from the sacred box in which the Creator kept it.⁵⁰ Atleo tells us that this light is "a symbolic representation of a way of life, embodying the supreme constitution for all life forms."⁵¹ After several failed attempts, spoilt by Son of Raven's tendency to act brazenly on account of his strong desire to do great deeds, he is finally able to succeed by becoming "a tiny, insignificant leaf."⁵² Atleo writes that this story is an illustration of how to best approach knowledge acquisition using the oosumich method, which he translates as "'careful seeking' in the context of a 'fearsome environment'."⁵³ Once Son of Raven brought this light back to his community, "they found that this light enabled and illuminated as many lifeways and points of view as there are life forms."⁵⁴ Through this story, one can see how epistemic humility leads to forms of knowledge which are intimately bound to a respect for ontological plurality, inclusive of spirituality. Building off the insights offered by Indigenous scholars and the Frankfurt School, we might suggest that it is precisely such plurality which a totalizing paradigm, like that which drives imperialism, cannot tolerate because it has no sublimating epistemic mechanisms for coping with the fear engendered by encounters with that which is unknowable to the paradigm in its extant form. A totalizing paradigm refuses to accept the attendant rupture that such encounters demand of it, and instead seeks to violently suppress its fear through posturing as a self-sufficient, all-knowing unity apart from and superior to whatever stokes its fears.

⁴⁹ Amy Allen, *The End of Progress: Decolonizing the Normative Foundations of Critical Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 21.

⁵⁰ Atleo, *Tsawalk: A Nuu-Chah-Nulth Worldview*, 7–10.

⁵¹ Richard E. Atleo, *Principles of Tsawalk: An Indigenous Approach to Global Crisis* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2011), 7.

⁵² Atleo, *Tsawalk: A Nuu-Chah-Nulth Worldview*, 71.

⁵³ Atleo, 74.

⁵⁴ Atleo, *Principles of Tsawalk*, 8.

Forbes observes that, rather than embrace a holistic analysis inclusive of spiritual aspects of existence, Europeans “allow myths and dogmas to distort or predetermine their conceptions,” concluding that, “many Europeans cannot tolerate mystery.”⁵⁵ Embracing unknowability, then, becomes an integral part of refusing the (anti)relational mode. In the story about Son of Raven, Atleo emphasizes that the specific contents of the Creator’s box of light “must remain unutterable”⁵⁶, a remark which suggests a further point of resonance with the Frankfurt School. Adorno and Horkheimer’s later writings exhibit a theologically-inspired turn towards negation, wherein the task of critique is to approach knowledge not through the hubristic positing of universal ideals and objective facts but rather through a subjectively situated account of what it is not: “[philosophy] can profess its allegiance to a possible positive solution only by denouncing the conditions which make such a solution impossible . . . It cannot prescribe how people are to escape from the charmed circle of the status quo; it can only seek to give the charm a name.”⁵⁷ One cannot name the ideal form of anything, be it human relationships to the world or revolution. This epistemic tactic of generative negation simultaneously holds open the space for plurality while also keeping alive a hope for “something else”—another way, another world beyond the limits of what is currently known or experienced. The notion of an unnameable “something else” permeates the later writings of both Adorno and Horkheimer, and I would argue that their integration of this negative theological motif is one of the strongest points of alliance between the Frankfurt School and those Indigenous scholars for whom a relationship to the sacred cannot be excluded from a truly holistic understanding of the world, even if it must remain unutterable.⁵⁸

In this paper I have sought to articulate the contours of an imperialist paradigm fuelled by the denial, repression, and disruption of relationships—a process I termed deracination. I have also sought demonstrate how the positionality of the Frankfurt School, as German-Jewish scholars surrounded by the totalitarian tides of the 1930s and 40s, led them to develop Critical Theory as a methodological intervention, one which resonates well with the core principles of Indigenous epistemologies as they are presently being articulated and practiced by Indigenous scholars seeking to disrupt the dominating knowledge practices behind colonialism. Their shared commitment to holistic, relational, and self-reflexive forms of knowing makes the Frankfurt School a promising site of inspiration

⁵⁵ Forbes, *Columbus and Other Cannibals*, 183.

⁵⁶ Atleo, *Principles of Tsawalk*, 8.

⁵⁷ Max Horkheimer, *Critique of Instrumental Reason*, trans. Matthew J. O’Connell, *Radical Thinkers* (1974; repr., London: Verso, 2012), 32.

⁵⁸ See Atleo, *Principles of Tsawalk*; Deloria and Wildcat, *Power and Place*; Forbes, *Columbus and Other Cannibals*; Little Bear, “Jagged Worldviews Colliding.”

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for Euro-settler scholars looking to develop culturally appropriate and situated methodologies for their work alongside and in support of the projects of Indigenous resurgence and decolonization in the territories currently claimed by the Canadian settler state.

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