Racism manifests in multiple, overlapping, and systemic ways. The subtleties of racism, micro-aggressions, and the day-to-day realities of being othered or tokenized are the impetus for this commentary. I live on Haida Gwaii—islands of the people—a beautiful archipelago off the coast of Northern British Columbia in what is now called Canada. Haida territory includes parts of southern Alaska; however, this commentary focuses on Haida Gwaii. Haida Gwaii and its surrounding waters are Haida land—our jurisdiction is outlined in the Constitution of the Haida Nation in which the preamble states “the Haida Nation is the rightful heir to Haida Gwaii” (Council of the Haida Nation, 2018, p. 1). The Haida Nation—of which I am a citizen—have called Haida Gwaii home since time immemorial. Precontact estimates of the Haida population are upwards of 30,000—following introduced disease our population was decimated and fell to “less than a thousand people by the turn of the century” (Steedman & Collison, 2011, p. 17). Haida peoples who occupied various villages across Haida Gwaii are now concentrated in two main centres—which under colonial governance were deemed reserve lands. Manuel (2017) suggests that the formation of the reserve system in Canada meant that Indigenous peoples went “from enjoying 100% of the landmass, were reduced by the settlers to a tiny patchwork of reserves that consisted of only 0.2% of the landmass of Canada . . . with the settlers claiming 99.8% for themselves” (p. 20). These two Haida communities are Gaw Tlagee (Old Massett) in the north and HiGaagilda (Skidegate) in the south. However, the historic settlement of Haida Gwaii is not the main point of this commentary. Instead, I seek to unravel the present-day realities of multiple overlapping forms of racism that manifest in the current racial tensions that exist on Haida Gwaii. The term settler in this context is utilized when referring to non-Indigenous peoples who live on Haida territories. Racism will continue to impact generations of Haida peoples if we do not call it out and encourage settlers to recognize their place of privilege and their complacency in oppression. Today, there are multiple settler communities—in which many Haida citizens live—including Masset, K’il Kun Lnagaay (Sandspit), Daajing Giids (Queen Charlotte), Gamadiis Lnagaay (Port Clements), Tl.aal (Tlell), and other smaller communities in between. In this commentary, I argue that the day-to-day realities of racism operate as contemporary colonial roadblocks to resurgence and reclamation of self and place.

When settler communities are in proximity to Indigenous reserves, racial tensions and unaddressed settler guilt manifest in racism evidenced through polite greetings and exchanges. The vulnerability of living in a remote location manifests in complacency with the existence of racism out of fear of “rocking the boat.” Denis (2015) suggests that these silences are perpetuated as a means of self-protection noting that “the lack of anonymity in small town settings is a powerful countervailing force” (p. 236). Calling out racism could be seen as disrupting the façade of peaceful coexistence. Settlers benefit from the status quo and the
maintenance of inequality and structurally embedded systems of oppression and injustice (Davis et al., 2017). Canada is portrayed in public rhetoric as a place of acceptance and multiculturalism (O’Connell, 2010). However, the inequality, racism, discrimination, and inadequate reparations for historic and ongoing harm counter this public rhetoric. Razack (1998) suggests that we have moved towards an outright “denial of racism” (p. 60) in both its overt and covert forms. The existence of racism then calls into question White superiority and subsequently propagates settler guilt. This settler guilt operates to mask any culpability for the continuation of harm (Zanussi, 2018).

In this commentary—racism, as it applies to the specific localities of the settler communities bordering colonially imposed reserves—within Haida territories—will be examined. Racism is multi-dimensional “taking on new forms . . . and adapting to changing circumstances and conditions” (Kline, 1994, p. 452). Palmater (2018) contends that “Canada’s racism is targeted, violent, and often lethal to Indigenous peoples” (p. 5). Overt racism is often characterized as being of the past (Lashta et al., 2016); however, Robertson (2015) notes that Indigenous peoples in North America are routinely subject to overt racism. Upon closer examination, it becomes clear that Canada’s settlement and occupation are rooted within wilful blindness to continued racial oppression. As Coates (2008) explains covert racism operates in more “subtle, subversive . . . undetected” (pp. 211–213) ways, as it becomes “shielded by institutions, culture, stereotypical assumptions and tradition” (p. 225). Covert racism is normalized and embedded within hierarchical social structures that view Indigenous peoples as inherently inferior (Razack, 1998). Covert racism is often left unaddressed while its implications manifest in feelings of inferiority, shame, self-hate, mental illness, and so on.

When I was a child Haida Gwaii was my safe place—my retreat from the daily racism I experienced living in the city. The subtleties of racism here on Haida Gwaii are disguised by polite conversation and interrelationships. However, multiple incidents awakened me to the realities of the racial divide on Haida Gwaii. In one such instance, I went to a house party in a neighbouring community and an acquaintance who had Haida friends, and whom I had not perceived as a threat, revealed the underlying toxic racism that exists here. With no consciousness of the pain inflicted or to the vulnerability that I felt as one of two Haida people in the room, he reiterated stereotypes about lazy, good for nothing Indians—the term Indian is racist—who got everything for free and seemed to never take responsibility for themselves. Of course, in his view, I was an exception to that rule as were his Haida friends. Denis (2015) notes that this exception of one or more good Indians, operates to reinforce “whites’ superior sense of group position” (p. 220). I remember another instance where a friend told me that their settler friends were not allowed on the reserve. This is representative of the continuation of racialized boundaries grounded in colonially imposed borders. Other forms of racism are less overt and operate in the whispered voices, stares, and judgement that are masked by pleasantries.

Contemporary colonialism is similar to covert racism in that it remains unseen and is embedded in societal structures. AlFred and Cornassel (2005) note that contemporary colonialism is “more subtle [in] accomplishing [its] objectives” (pp. 597–598). The rhetoric of reconciliation is evident in contemporary colonialism in that it historicizes injustice without “holding anyone accountable for ongoing injustices” (Corntassel, 2012, p. 93). Reconciliation rhetoric maintains the hierarchical imposed societal structure that continually marginalizes and oppresses Indigenous peoples. Reconciliation perpetuates the notion that harm is historical, apologies have been given, and reparation made (Coulthard, 2014). Reconciliation rhetoric acts as a smokescreen for continued harm inflicted through Canadian policy, lack of action, lack of culpability or responsibility, underfunding, and ultimate lack of care or attention to ongoing colonial harm. Contemporary colonialism and reconciliation rhetoric allow for the marginalization, structural inequality, and racism Indigenous peoples face to continue unquestioned.

The normalization of racism is rooted within the construction of Indigenous peoples as less than human. Robertson (2015) coined the term legitimized racism to refer to the racism experienced by Indigenous peoples in the USA. Legitimized racism refers to the normalization of racism and its embeddedness into societal structures. As racism is normalized it subsequently becomes both “simultaneously overt and invisible within social norms and social institutions” (Robertson, 2015, p. 141). This notion of legitimized racism applies to the racism on Haida Gwaii. There exists an old-school crowd in the settler communities on Haida Gwaii who are more likely to be the ones that opt for more overt racism. However, day to day experiences of racism operate more covertly through exclusion or micro-aggressions. Razack (1998) argues that denial of “racialism and genocide” has severe implications leading to the denial of the inherent “right to exist as sovereign nations and viable communities” (p. 61). This racism is just below the surface—scratch and it will rear its ugly head. Ask a question, get into a conversation, hand someone some alcohol, and their underlying true feelings will come out.

Racism will continue to cause harm until settler complacency is called into question. A recent debate over a request to change the name of the Haida Gwaii municipality Queen Charlotte to its original name of Daajing Giids is evident of the wilful blindness, ignorance, and racism that exist here. Davis et al. (2017) suggests that this settler complacency stems from the fact that “Canadians have a deep emotional and cultural investment in the status quo and are the beneficiaries of past and present injustices, particularly with respect to the occupation of Indigenous lands which settlers consider to be their own” (p. 399). The contention and racism that this simple request caused was a reminder of how deeply seated settler complacency is on Haida Gwaii. Settlers could not fathom the inconvenience of having to change their mailing addresses or to admit that they were settlers on Haida land. This is evidence of contemporary colonialism which Denis (2015) notes, “does
not require categorical reject of an entire outgroup, but rather thinking and acting in ways that reinforce structural inequity” (p. 222). Attitudes of superiority, unquestioned privilege, and what can only be termed wilful ignorance bubbled up from under the surface of pleasantries. I use the term wilful ignorance because settlers on Haida Gwaii simply cannot excuse their ignorance as there exists a plethora of research, writing, and opportunities to learn about Haida Gwaii and the Haida Nation. Convenient amnesia to historical and continued impacts of colonialism and genocide perpetuates wilful ignorance. This wilful ignorance further protects settler dominance and perpetuates racialized hierarchies while undermining the authority of the Haida Nation.

Racism on Haida Gwaii continues to exist because Haida peoples and settlers to Haida Gwaii have allowed it to continue unquestioned for far too long—this complacency in not addressing racism perpetuates harm. To face the ugly realities of long-standing racism embedded over generations is no small feat. Redneck mentalities rooted within previous and ongoing resource extraction operate to perpetuate racialized divides in which “homogenized rural spaces” (O’Connell, 2010, p. 556)—of mostly White settlers—are separated from the reserve. O’Connell (2010) outlines the changing definition and narrative of redneck identities from an insult to being reclaimed as a term used with pride. O’Connell (2010) notes that despite “redneck identity attempts to shed its association with racism, contemporary cases of racial violence in rural areas reveal” (p. 553) the limits of racial tolerance and multicultural rhetoric. A redneck identity is often claimed with pride by those who benefit from colonialism. Furthermore, there exists a clear delineation between civilized—mostly White—and uncivilized—reserve—space. This divide may not be labelled as racism but, instead masked by “political avoidance” of discussing uncomfortable subjects (Denis, 2015, p. 234). Zanussi (2018) notes that “comments about [Indigenous peoples] being lazy drunks, [or] government freeloaders” (p. 213) are often made by people who have Indigenous—in this case, Haida—friends. This but I have Haida friends and family rhetoric operates to tokenize our identities to suit settler needs.

Tokenism is the surface level portrayal of diversity and acceptance (Thompson, 2014), while underlying inequality and discrimination remain. Unbeknownst to them, the tokenized Haida friend is an excuse for racist, ignorant, and discriminatory behaviours. This tokenization can also be applied to assuming that the one Indigenous person in the room is going to know everything about Indigenous peoples and issues. Tokenism combined with wilful ignorance leads settlers to excuse themselves from the responsibility to learn more about Haida Gwaii or Haida peoples. A superficial appreciation of Haida culture while not supporting Haida rights or jurisdiction is another way legitimized racism and tokenism manifests. For instance, attending events that celebrate Haida culture or ceremonies and potlatches while remaining complacent with the racism that exists on Haida Gwaii. These individuals stop short of meaningful action demonstrating superficial allyship while never peeling back the layers of genocide, colonialism, and resultant trauma that exist here.

There have been a few recent instances of legitimated racism during the COVID-19 pandemic that stem from wilful ignorance as to Haida jurisdiction and National power. Many of us on Haida Gwaii received a letter that was written under a pseudonym. This letter served as a reminder to all of us in the Haida community of how pervasive racism is here. It was a wake-up call to what hides behind the polite smiles and small talk in the grocery store. A cowardly individual reinforced discriminatory, ill-researched, and denigrating views of the Haida and called out Haida leadership and jurisdiction during the present pandemic. The letter asked who gave the Haida Nations National government—the Council of the Haida Nation—jurisdiction over Haida Gwaii? Without stopping to think about that question in relation to the imposition of Canadian law and governance on the Haida without consent; or the fact that Haida Gwaii is Haida land—and therefore, of course, our National government can assert jurisdiction over our territory. The appalling lack of education that exists in some of the settler communities here reinforces complacency and indifference. Even though this letter was written incoherently—its racist, angry, and ignorant sentiment cut through the walls of our armour and left us feeling unsafe on our territory. I waited for the non-Haida settler community to step up in our defence but, they went on with their lives while we sat back feeling the pain of a 1,000 papercuts and unsafe in our territory. This was a violent, outright ignorant, and ultimately thoughtless action by an angry settler who has been taught to view the Haida—and all other Indigenous peoples—as less than human. This wilful ignorance and abhorrent behaviour cannot be excused based on age as my settler grandmother is 97 and she has educated herself and continues to educate herself, she does not assume to know what it is like to be Haida but instead asks what she can do to support us. This legitimized racism and outright privilege left me disheartened, angry, and disappointed.

When societies and social status are structured along racial lines, White privilege becomes embedded and goes unquestioned. Mascarenhas (2016) describes White privilege as interwoven with other forms of racism and argues that it manifests “by consenting to everyday policies and practices that work to the benefit of white people at the expense of minority populations” (p. 10). In other words, White privilege reinforces racialized difference and hierarchical social structures while disadvantaging the Indigenous racialized other. White privilege is often denied and ignored as recognition of ones’ privilege requires dismantling deeply embedded ideals and racialized boundaries. DiAngelo (2018) identifies this kind of racial stress as “White fragility” which operates to uphold White supremacy, racialized hierarchies, and to maintain “superiority and entitlement” (p. 2). Moreover, White privilege operates to mask the continued implications of racism through blindness to the implications of racial inequality (Denis, 2020; Mascarenhas, 2016). Bonds and Inwood (2016) add that White supremacy is interrelated
with White privilege noting that “if privilege and racism are the symptoms, white supremacy is the disease” (p. 720). DiAngelo (2018) suggest that White supremacy is an “overarching political, economic, and social system of domination” (p. 28). White supremacy and White privilege operate similarly to covert or legitimized racism in that they are constructed as normalized aspects of life. Thus, when racist incidents happen here on Haida Gwaii, there may be a slight outcry, a moment of concern, and then life goes on as usual. Those who have privilege can ignore the harm that is caused or demonstrate superficial allyship through posting on social media and moving on.

There has been a long history on Haida Gwaii of contested battles over protecting the land and waters. This history includes the battle to protect Athlìi Gwaii (Lyell Island) and the resultant court cases, legislative changes, and co-management agreements (Collison, 2018). Divisive societal structures have embedded racial divisions through the normalization of Whiteness and the othering of Indigeneity.

During the COVID-19 pandemic when Haida Gwaii closed to visitors, some recreational sports fishing lodges, including the Queen Charlotte Lodge (QCL) and West Coast Fishing Club, ignored the Haida Nation’s rights and jurisdiction. The erasure of Indigenous jurisdiction is often utilized by resource extractive industries as a tactic of resource exploitation or control (Pasternak & King, 2019). The alienation, displacement, and dispossession of Indigenous peoples from their land and waters have been integral to the formation and maintenance of the Canadian state (Pasternak & King, 2019). Haida jurisdiction and resistance to destructive industry and resource extraction undermine the legitimacy of fishing lodges on our territory. Re-occupying the land and waters of Haida Gwaii is completely within our jurisdiction as a self-determined people (King & Yesno, 2019). We are a sovereign Nation; we did not cede to Canada—and private or crown land is stolen land.

Gaandlee Guu Jaalang (Daughters of the River)—a group of Haida and non-Haida women and their allies came together to exercise their right to harvest in their territories—and to spend time on the lands and waters of Haida Gwaii (Brown, 2021). The QCL staff responded to Gaandlee Guu Jaalang’s presence on the water, fishing and harvesting, while displaying the Haida Nation flag and occupying Haida territory by harassing Haida citizens and their allies while also “engaging in unsafe boating practices” (Council of the Haida Nation, 2021, para. 25; Wilson, 2020), flying Canadian flags, and disparaging the Haida Nation. On 13 August 2020, “A Haida Nation flag [was] found desecrated in the vacant Gaandlee Guu Jaalang camp” (Council of the Haida Nation, 2021, para. 29). This reaction to Haida assertion of jurisdiction and occupation of ancestral lands by the QCL and whoever desecrated the Haida Nation flag demonstrated the aforementioned White privilege and supremacy in which racism is reinforced and maintained.

When Indigenous Nations assert their jurisdiction, they are portrayed as the unruly other and deemed in need of state control (Yellowhead Institute, 2020). This back-and-forth portrayal of Haida protesters as angry, unruly people that needed to be controlled was the rhetoric portrayed by the lodge and some news media. This subsequently reinforces racialized boundaries and solidifies legitimized racism in which settlers continue to benefit at our expense (Denis, 2020). After years of contested battles over Natural resources in Canadian courts, through protest, and by asserting our jurisdiction, we are continually faced with risking our livelihoods, and sometimes our lives, to protect our territories and culture from decimation. The ongoing battles over natural resources have “exposed underlying tensions and heightened divisions” (Denis, 2020, p. 83) within Indigenous communities to which Haida Gwaii is no exception.

The continued legitimization of racism, White privilege, White supremacy, and discrimination keeps us—the Haida Nation—in a place of oppression struggling to push forward and maintain our self-determination, while grappling with the internalization of the harm that continues to be inflicted. While settlers have the privilege of denying the harm caused to us through wilful ignorance and legitimized racism we are in a precarious position. Colonial imposition has had and continues to have devastating implications on our lives. However, the present manifestations of colonialism and genocide can be ignored by settlers who tend to individualize responsibility deflecting from societal inequality and settler culpability (Brockman & Morrison, 2016). In other words, there is “little to no regard for the root causes of the social problems” (Brockman & Morrison, 2016, p. 31) that Indigenous peoples are grappling to overcome, while being continually subject to racism and discrimination. Some of the settlers on Haida Gwaii have been socialized over generations to view the Haida as non-human, as undeserving, and/or lesser than. This socialization results in unquestioned negativity towards the Haida Nation that is ingrained intergenerationally within families. If we allow this wilful ignorance and racism to continue then the next generation of Haida peoples will have to grapple with the anger and frustration that comes with combatting racism and White privilege.

Over the past few months, I have become critically aware of the undercurrent of racial tensions between Haida and non-Haida populations on Haida Gwaii. As we strive for self-determination, we must not allow the continuation of wilful ignorance on Haida Gwaii. However, I do not think it is my job to educate settlers so that they can understand our oppression but, something needs to change. We must stop making allowances for this level of blatant disregard for our Nationhood while we grapple to reclaim our rightful place in the world. The recreational sports fishing lodges and mysterious keyboard warriors are symptomatic of a much larger problem of ignored and embedded racial tensions that have been allowed to continue for generations. The recreational sports fishing lodges and mysterious keyboard warriors are symptomatic of a much larger problem of ignored and embedded racial tensions that have been allowed to continue for generations as a result of intergenerational trauma in our communities and intergenerational racism and ignorance within settler communities.
The denial of racial tensions on Haida Gwaii results in “the denial of the right to exist as sovereign nations” (Razack, 1998, p. 61). As we continue to grow as a Nation in terms of our critical consciousness, understanding of decolonization, and reclamation of our Nationhood, we must strive to disrupt the settler colonial narrative that has been embedded on Haida Gwaii over generations. As I have argued elsewhere—“reasserting our nationhood is a necessary step towards reclaiming what is rightfully ours” (McGuire, 2019, p. 2). Settler complacency and ignorance stand in the way of our assertion of Nationhood and ignoring this issue will only embed it further into the social structure on Haida Gwaii. Not addressing the pervasive racism that exists will only compound existing harm. Decolonization and resurgence require that we “stand up and fight colonialism in all of its manifestations” (Manuel & Derrickson, 2015, p. 171). The survival and reclamation of our Nationhood and place in the world embodies the need to question and deconstruct existing hierarchical social and power structures that reinforce our societal marginalization. Resurgence of our Nationhood must begin with a deconstruction of harmful racial hierarchies and tensions that exist on Haida Gwaii.

Glossary

| Athlji Gwaii  | Lyell Island |
| Daajing Gwids | Queen Charlotte municipal village |
| Gamadis Llnagaay | Port Clements |
| Gaankol Saa Gwaay | Daughters of the River |
| Gaw Tlagee | Old Massett |
| Higaangida | Skidegate |
| Haida; also Xaayda | The Haida people as in the Haida Nation |
| Haida Gwaii; also Xaayda Gwaay | Islands of the people; an archipelago off the coast of Northern British Columbia in what is now called Canada; home to the Haida Nation |
| K’il Kun Llnagaay | Sandspit |
| Tl’aal | Tlell |

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