

Counter-reading:

Climate Change and Climate Change Policy Through Relationality

The animate nature of land and other non-humans is central to Indigenous theories. The inception of many Indigenous origin stories relies on land as being full of desire, thought, and will (Watts, 2013, p. 23). In Haudenosaunee theory, Sky Woman falls from the sky, falling through the clouds; however, birds can see she cannot fly and support her, so she slowly lands in the water below.

Water is also an important more-than-human being. Water and rivers provide movement and are sources of histories and stories (Todd, 2016b). Water is also a connector, as the same water humans drink is the same water trees need to grow, salmon needs to breathe, and bears need to bathe in (Yazzie and Baldy, 2018).

Water is a sacred space that produces and harbours knowledge. However, water is also a site of industrial pollution and environmental racism (Lee, 2011). Simpson (2017a) describes this in a vignette from when she was a student walking through Black Creek in Toronto: “This river is lucky because, like me, it is still here. This river is lucky because [it] is not one of the dead” (p. 78). In Grassy Narrows, the English-Wabigoon river is contaminated with mercury, and fish from the river are also contaminated from industrial pollution.

Pollution and climate change is a threat to all humans and non-human beings, though the effects threaten unequally. Increasingly, international and Canadian governments are focusing their attention on environmental protection and fighting climate change; however, these perspectives are problematic, and policy solutions are limited. By centering the Indigenous concept of relationality, I will critique the arguments for combating climate change and the Pan-Canadian Framework on Clean Growth and Climate Change due to their absence of the concepts of reciprocal relations and responsibilities. First, I will provide an overview of the importance of relationality in Indigenous theory. Then, I will outline the current action on climate change, followed by a counter reading of Canada’s policy. By centering Indigenous theory and politics, not the Canadian state, I am refusing to erase Indigenous knowledge, especially in a policy area that disproportionately affects Indigenous communities.

### **Indigenous theory: Relationality**

Relationality is central to Indigenous knowledge. A relational paradigm is one that is built on relations and responsibilities to all beings. While Western knowledge looks to human-to-human relationships, Indigenous knowledge understands that other, non-human relationships cannot be separate from human-to-human relationships; instead, they are all innate and impossible to separate. Human-to-land, human-to-water, human-to-soil, and fish, and wolves are all inextricably connected and interdependent. For example, humans are connected to land

because humans are made from land: “our flesh is literally an extension of soil (Watts, 2013). Also, these relations are not anthropocentric – they were there prior to human involvement and will exist after human involvement. Humans do not have ownership over non-human beings, including land, water, and animals. In this way, humans are not the center of a relationship, but a part of a relationship.

While a settler view sees land as flat and bordered, a relational view to land sees land as dynamic. Human relations are played out on land, and place gives relationships meaning. Further, these relations are highly localization, and exist in relation specific to place and context (Altamirano-Jiménez and Kermoal, 2016; Starblanket and Kiiwetinepinesiik Stark, 2018). This means that knowledge is in specific landmarks, rivers, watersheds, and rocks, making it impossible to separate knowledge from place or to universalize knowledge. Further, as mentioned, humans are made from the soil and land, and are therefore connected. Watts (2013) points out that because of this, humans are extensions of the land. This means that there is an obligation to be in a relationship with land (p. 23).

Further, relationality is built on responsibilities. Obligations must not only be understood, but also lived. Todd (2016b) explains how one way to do this and live reciprocal obligations to non-human beings is to account for and think about waterways. Water beings contain fish; they harbour histories, stories, and knowledge; and they act as meeting places (Todd, 2016b). By thinking about water, it also encourages awareness of roles and responsibilities in relationships, and the need to protect and care for other beings. Simpson (2017b) argues that recognition builds resilient relationships (p. 181). She reiterates that recognition is about listening and presence. A second way to live obligations is to actively change the world one inhabits (Starblanket and Kiiwetinepinesiik Stark, 2018). Specifically, living responsibilities means embodying responsibilities, not remaining passive or neutral in face of crises. These responsibilities and roles extend beyond the anthropocentric to those that are more-than-human.

Humans have a responsibility to show respect to land. When living on the land, Indigenous theory suggests that humans do not take more than what is needed. Humans also have a responsibility to animals. Humans respect animals’ agency. A hunter will catch a deer if the deer allows it. If the hunter is not respecting their relationship with deer, the hunter will not catch the deer. Simpson (2017b) says that before hunting, she asks for the animal’s consent. If she does not see the animal, she does not have consent; if the animal appears, she has consent (p. 182).

Indigenous people also respect water bodies. They cannot contaminate water, because they need water to drink. They also understand that water is not renewable and is a special resource. Water circulates and ignores political borders. Indigenous peoples offer the water bodies tobacco before they enter the water with canoes (Starblanket and Kiiwetinepinesiik Stark, 2018) to show respect, care, and protection.

Another way to show respect is when entering into the territory of others. Indigenous peoples are also in respectful relationships with other nations. For Simpson (2017b) and the Nishnaabeg, this involves a specific way to introduce oneself. It also involves the embodied practice to act in a peaceful and respectful way for Dene sovereignty and to follow Dene practices (p. 64). Ultimately, all humans and non-human beings are active members of society (Watts, 2013, p. 23), which deserve respect.

Relationality is central to Indigenous knowledge. In analyzing the *Daniels* decision from the Supreme Court of Canada, Todd (2016a) explains the importance of reciprocal relations and respect for more-than-human beings. These relations are vital in living out what it means to live with care, and how to move through time and space. Further, relationality is the method to honour obligations within territories (p. 45). Living through relationality is part of Indigenous legal orders and is fundamental to understanding Métis governance. The erasure of human-animal relations in the decision shows the court's limited view of Métis as hunter-gatherers, ignoring the complicated and important relations outside of land. This ultimately can obscure Métis philosophies and laws (p. 53). Relations with land, water, animals, and other more-than-human beings provide a source of guidance for environmental, social and political change (Starblanket and Kiiwetinepinesiik Stark, 2018, p. 173). Relations and responsibility also dries radical relationality and a shift to decolonization.

### **Climate Change Responses: Internationally**

A major international focus is on emissions reductions. In the late 1980s, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) was approved. A major component of this treaty was the reduction of emissions. However, this reduction was seen as voluntary, and lacked any legally binding elements. In 1997, a number of nation-states adopted and ratified an addition to the treaty with more powerful and legally binding measures (Williams, 2011). This was called the Kyoto Protocol.

More recently, in 2015, nation-states involved in the UNFCCC reached the Paris Agreement. A key component of this agreement was the reduction of temperatures, at least to be maintained at 2.0C below post-industrial times.

## **Climate Change Responses: Canada**

Climate change action in what is now called Canada is often done intergovernmentally. A report from the 2007 Council of the Federation (COF) meeting on provincial and territorial updates on progress focused on energy conservation strategies including: “developing sources of renewable energy, creating a biofuels and hydrogen distribution system...encouraging energy efficiency and conservation, capturing methane gas, and adapting to climate change” (Canada’s Premiers, n.d.).

In this 2007 report, provinces each shared their progress on developing and expanding sources of renewable energy, including Ontario moving toward the development of hydroelectric projects. Building hydroelectric power such as dams is not consistent with Indigenous theories of relationality. Projects like this can flood communities, not only leading to forced displacement but also affect land-based relationships and the more-than-human relations people have with animals, water, and land. First, land can end up being submerged. This means a loss of land-based knowledge. Lee (2011) explains how place, including land and relationships, is where knowledge is learned and held. In fact, knowledge is placed in land, such as through ceremony. Therefore, Indigenous people understand who they are through an understanding of place.

Further, damming can affect more-than-human relations. Dams can affect migration of fish, a non-human being that would otherwise move freely and with agency. Dams can also affect birds who may have made their nests in the land prior to flooding, or who may have lost a key source of food. Further, dams can cause mercury poisoning, which can then poison fish, wildlife, and humans (Goeman, p. 105-106).

The Pan-Canadian Framework on Clean Growth and Climate Change was an agreement signed in December 2016 by what is now called Canada and the first ministers from: Newfoundland and Labrador; Prince Edward Island; Nova Scotia; New Brunswick; Quebec; Ontario; Alberta; British Columbia; Yukon; the Northwest Territories; and Nunavut. This agreement was meant to allow Canada to meet its reduction obligations under the Paris Agreement. Manitoba did not initially sign the agreement but joined in early 2018; Saskatchewan did not sign the Pan-Canadian Framework because of its inclusion of a carbon tax as the main approach to reducing emissions.

The main policy in this framework is to put a price on carbon. This policy is problematic as it commodifies climate change. First, those that are doing the damage are acting in closer collaboration with the nation-state. Instead of holding industry accountable, they are being theorized out of responsibility if they pay to pollute. In other words, if they cut some emissions,

or pay to pollute, they are seen as “doing their part”, although they are still benefitting from their own actions. Paying to pollute is not enough to show respect to the other beings. Industry is taking more than it needs in order to make a profit in the capitalist system.

Further, the policy commodifies both land and pollution. Land, water, trees, and the other non-human beings are seen as resources in a capitalistic system. Forests are viewed as needing to be saved from climate change because conserving a forest has anthropocentric health benefits. Further, forests have value because soil and trees can absorb and store carbon in carbon sinks.

There are many elements to this policy that are problematic. First, the concern for human health is anthropocentric. In relationality, humans have responsibilities to all more-than-humans in a place, including the land, the water, the trees, the soil, the fish, and the ecosystems, to name a few. Therefore, humans are responsible for ensuring the health of all non-human beings: a forest is not worth saving solely for the benefit of human health alone. In fact, the health of humans is interdependent on the health of the land. Ignoring this, and focusing solely on human health, erases the interdependent relationships in Indigenous knowledge. In addition to health, the forest is also a meeting spot for interrelatedness, reciprocity, and kinship. This is because humans are related to other non-human beings. The deer, wolves, and fish are all kin with humans. Todd (2016a) explains how these responsibilities are fundamental in explaining who Métis are (p. 53).

Second, it reinforces the idea that forests must be saved because they have value (i.e. to store carbon). Besides the removal of the tree’s agency, this view of a tree erases other value a tree provides. For example, the tree may allow for a bird to build a nest in its branches or provide shelter to other animals. However, this policy views trees only as a source to absorb pollution, further commodifying the non-humans Indigenous peoples have reciprocal relations with.

Further, pollution is commodified. For provinces and territories implementing a carbon price (instead of a cap-and-trade system), pricing starts at \$10 per tonne in 2018, with pricing rising to \$50 per tone in 2022. (Government of Canada, 2017). Power also rests with the nation-state who is collecting revenues from pollution. Then, it is deciding how to divide the income (through reimbursements and rebates). Ultimately, the whole system of carbon pricing revolves around a capitalist logic, maintaining and deciding what gives value.

Canada’s policy on climate change is also viewed as beneficial because of its effect on humans. First, the green economy is viewed as a great opportunity for jobs. In fact, the word ‘jobs’ appears 30 times in the Pan-Canadian Framework on Clean Growth and Climate Change (Government of Canada, n.d.). Specifically, the Framework argues that job opportunities will be

provided in construction, as people move toward more efficient buildings and investments in retrofitting. The Framework even specifically mentions that this will create economic opportunity for Indigenous people (p. 37). However, again, this is ignoring the more-than-human aspects, focusing solely on the benefit of climate change and the subsequent policy responses on anthropocentric arguments.

One measure absent from the Canadian framework is any mention of ending resource extraction. Again, industry is being theorized out of responsibility, especially if they end up paying a carbon tax. For example, if governments and conservationists can commodify how much trees can handle, and if industry 'pays' for their pollution, industry can keep working at the tar sands, extracting oil resources. Simpson (2017b) argues that Indigenous people have a unique view of capitalism because they can understand the destruction capitalism does on land, water, plant, and animal relations (p. 73). Viewed through the lens of relationality, resource extraction is very damaging. Resource extraction can poison water. Poisoning water harms the relationship that Indigenous people have with water beings, rivers, and watersheds. Resource extraction also changes the landscape and landmarks of place. Pasternak (2016) explains how a diamond mine near Attawapiskat triggered sewage backups, causing flooding in the Attawapiskat community, forcing people out of their homes (p. 323) and affecting 50,000 kilometers of wilderness (p. 330). Further, extraction is not solely about mining and drilling but viewing everything as a resource. Capitalism views resources as an ever-growing pie that can continually be extradited (Simpson, 2017b, p. 75). Therefore, the erasure of any mention of reducing resource extraction is not surprising in a capitalist system built to combat climate change.

### **Conclusion:**

Instead of looking at the impact of climate change and the policy responses through a relationality lens, responses thus far have been problematic and anthropocentric. There is a major element of culpability in responses, to determine who is to blame and who must therefore pay to be theorized out of any responsibility.

Despite this, resource extraction and increasingly changing land, temperatures, and waters continue to dramatically alter ecological habitats (Todd, 2016c, p. 208), thus affecting traditional patterns of harvesting, cultural products (p. 209), and relationality. Fiskio (2017) labels this a new form of dispossession. This is due to the health risks to human and other non-human beings and ecosystems. She says that this also violates treaty rights to hunt, fish and gather.

Simpson (in Harris, 2019) provides an alternative view of climate change: to think of climate change as part of a colonial structure that involves ecological catastrophes due to an accumulation-based society. In her solution, she relies on relationality: “Real solutions require a rethinking of our global relationship to the land, water, and to each other”.

While governments in Canada continue to repeal environmental protections and fight carbon taxes, Indigenous people and theories will continue to talk about and fight for resurgence, decolonization, and relationships and responsibilities to those more-than-human beings.

## List of References:

- Altamirano-Jiménez, I., and Kermoal, N. (2016). Introduction: Indigenous Women and Knowledge. In Altamirano-Jiménez, I., and Kermoal, N. (Eds.), *Living on the Land: Indigenous Women's Understanding of Place* (3-18). Edmonton: AU Press.
- Canada's Premiers. (n.d.). "Canada's Premiers: Taking Action on Climate Change". Retrieved from [https://www.canadaspremiers.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/cccommpiece\\_0718-final\\_august2007\\_2008.pdf](https://www.canadaspremiers.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/cccommpiece_0718-final_august2007_2008.pdf)
- Fiskio, J. (2017). Dancing at the End of the World: The Poetics of the Body in Indigenous Protest. In Monami and Adamson (Eds.), *Ecosystems and Indigenous studies: Conversations from Earth to Cosmos*. New York: Routledge.
- Goeman, M. (2016). "Ongoing Storms and Struggles: Gendered Violence and Resource Extraction." In Barker, Joanne (ed.) *Critically Sovereign*, Duke University Press.
- Government of Canada. (2017). "Pricing carbon pollution in Canada: how it will work". Retrieved from [https://www.canada.ca/en/environment-climate-change/news/2017/05/pricing\\_carbon\\_pollutionincanadahowitwillwork.html](https://www.canada.ca/en/environment-climate-change/news/2017/05/pricing_carbon_pollutionincanadahowitwillwork.html)
- Government of Canada. (n.d.). "Pan-Canadian Framework on Clean Growth and Climate Change". Retrieved from [http://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection\\_2017/eccc/En4-294-2016-eng.pdf](http://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2017/eccc/En4-294-2016-eng.pdf)
- Harris, M. (2019). "Indigenous Knowledge Has Been Warning Us About Climate Change For Centuries". *Pacific Standard*. Retrieved from <https://psmag.com/ideas/indigenous-knowledge-has-been-warning-us-about-climate-change-for-centuries>
- Lee, D. (2011). Placing Knowledge as Resurgence. *Tensions Journal* 2.
- Pasternak, S. (2016). The fiscal body of sovereignty: to 'make live' in Indian country, *Settler Colonial Studies*, 6(4), 317-338, DOI: 10.1080/2201473X.2015.1090525
- Simpson, L. (2017a). Life By the Water. In Burley, R. (Eds.) *An Enduring Wildness: Toronto's Natural Parklands*. ECW Press: Toronto.
- Simpson, L. (2017b). *As We Have Always Done*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press.
- Simpson, L. (2014). Land as pedagogy: Nishnaabeg intelligence and rebellious transformation. *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 3, (3), 1-25.
- Starblanket, G. and Kiiwetinepinesiik Stark, H. (2018). Towards a Relational Paradigm: Four Points for Consideration: Knowledge, Gender, Land and Modernity. In Ash, M., Borrows, J., and Tully, J. (Eds.). *Resurgence and Reconciliation: Indigenous-Settler Relationships and Earth Teachings*. Toronto: Toronto University Press

- Todd, Z. (2016a). From a Fishy Place: Examining Canadian State Law Applied in the *Daniels* Decision from the Perspective of Métis Legal Orders. *TOPIA* 36: 43-57. Toronto: University of Toronto Press. <https://doi.org/10.3138/topia.36.43>
- Todd, Z. (2016b). From Classroom to River's Edge: Tending to Reciprocal Duties Beyond the Academy. *Aboriginal Policy Studies*, 6(1), 90-97.
- Todd, Z. (2016c). "This Is the Life" Women's Role in Food Provisioning in Paulatuuq, Northwest Territories. In Altamirano-Jiménez, I., and Kermoal, N. (Eds.), *Living on the Land: Indigenous Women's Understanding of Place* (3-18). Edmonton: AU Press.
- Watts, V. (2013). Indigenous place-thought & agency amongst humans and non-humans (First Woman and Sky Women go on a European world tour!). *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, 2(1), 20-34.
- Williams, T. (2011). Climate Change Negotiations: The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, the Copenhagen Accord and Emissions Reduction Targets. *Library of Parliament*. Retrieved from [http://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection\\_2011/bdp-lop/bp/2010-29-1-eng.pdf](http://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2011/bdp-lop/bp/2010-29-1-eng.pdf)
- Yazzie, M and Baldy, C. R. (2018). Introduction: The Politics of Water. *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education and Society* 17(1), 1-18.