The Fight for Water:
Examining Environmental Racism &
the Effects on British Columbia's First Nations' Culture & Society

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Introduction

First Nations communities in British Columbia have always viewed water as a substantial element in the creation of life; in Michael Blackstock's interview with First Nations elders, water was described as "Mother Earth's blood", a "meditative medium" and a source of nourishment for medicinal plants; as such, water is discussed a power that requires respect **(Blackstock 2001, 62)**. However, there are currently "122 First Nations communities across Canada under a Drinking Water Advisory" **(Health Canada 2012)**, an alert by the government that waterborne contaminants are present in drinking water sources. This lack of access to clean water not only highlights a dangerous health risk to First Nations communities, it is also a denial of First Nations' access to cultural and social practices involving water; in effect, this neglect by the government of British Columbia is a clear example of environmental racism. This paper will firstly examine the connection British Columbia's First Nations have to water (physical and metaphysical); then, we will examine how uneven access to clean water in British Columbia's First Nations communities is substantial evidence of environmental racism. Finally, and more substantially, this paper will argue this uneven access by the government not only imbues discriminatory rhetoric when working with First Nations communities; but by denying First Nation communities access to clean, safe water, the government is also creating harmful impacts on First Nations' culture, social and political practices.

British Columbia's First Nations & Water

Water is undeniably an important part of the physical environment, especially within Canada; as one of the most common substances on the earth, it is essential to

survival for many organisms within our ecosystem. However, water has also long been a critical component to cultures and is a significant influence on societies. British Columbia's First Nations communities are no exception to this influence; not only are they impacted directly by water (and lack of access to it), many British Columbian Indigenous communities also see water as significant in a number of other respects.

On a material and physical level, the significance of water can be seen in the livelihoods of the Coast Salish peoples. The Coast Salish people relied heavily on the ocean, and as such viewed the waters of the Pacific with reverence. Not only did the Coast Salish use Salish Sea as a source of nutrition and as hunting grounds for seafood (such as seaweed, crab, seal, salmon, herring and small fish, known as *oolichan*), they performed ceremonies on the waters before long fishing expeditions. The Coast Salish believed the ocean contained spirits that could either harm or protect fishers (Ryser 2010). Coast Salish peoples (along with the Nuu-chah-nulth and Kwakwakaw'akw) also built their homes to face the ocean, due to their recognition of the waters as both food source and avenue of transportation. In Northern British Columbia, the First Nations of the Tsimshian, the Tlingit and the Nisga'a also built their villages and lives around water sources, due to their reliance on marine animals for food; their legends often revolve around marine animals, and the rivers and the watersheds within their territory, in a display of respect for water. (A Nisga'a legend holds that volcanoes within the area erupt because young boys were abusing a salmon, to explain the young volcanoes that exist within the geography of the Nass River Valley.) Other tribes, such as the Dunne-za, derive their names from the surrounding waters and the animals that reside in these aquatic environments; roughly translated, the Dunne-za are known as "dwellers among

the beavers", due to their proximity to the Peace River (Aboriginal Tourism Association of BC 2012). The First Nations' respect for water and those that reside in the aquatic environment is also reflected in their spiritual and symbolic significance.

Firstly, the First Nations perceive water as a biotic component, i.e. a living entity. This observation of water as a spirit translates into different perceptions of water in traditional ecological knowledge. British Columbia's physical geography and its location by the Pacific Ocean also makes many of its First Nations' connections to water unique, relative to other First Nations throughout Canada. For many of British Columbia's First Nations, water is also regarded as being a "meditative medium" and "purifier"; it is central to many First Nations rituals. For example, the Syilx Nation of the Okanagan First Nations regard water as a powerful spirit, one that can relieve stress and provide calm. Secwepemc (perhaps known more commonly as the Shuswap people) medicine men were known to swim "morning and night when they were practicing their medicine powers" (Blackstock 2001, 58). Springs, as a source of water for plants cherished by First Nations peoples, are also sources of water for villages and lodges, proved by the existence of settlements such as a Stl'al'imc pithouse village by Lillooet, B.C.

The sweat lodge, perhaps one of the most visual cultural features found within many First Nations, both inside and outside the province, is a purification ritual that, similar to immersion within water, is meant to restore the body to its purest form; water, as steam, is a spiritual cleanser and purger in this ceremony, and the location of the sweat lodge by rivers, lakes or springs represents a physical connection to the landscape. More significantly, the purification aspect of the sweat lodge will be explored further on in this paper; the restorative and healing powers of water are emphasized in ceremonies such as

the sweat lodge. Within the lodge itself, water is poured onto hot rocks, and the steam is meant to help the individual sweat out, and essentially rid their body, of their ills. The healing properties of this ritual can be found in present day, outside First Nations communities; modern applications of the sweat lodge can be found in holistic medicine in treatments for addiction (Wilson and Peters 2005, K. Wilson 2003). The sweat lodge also symbolizes the womb of Mother Earth; the emergence of the individual from the sweat lodge symbolizes a rebirth, and in certain cultures, the individual then bathes themselves in the source of water (a lake, river, stream or the ocean) nearby.

Ecologically, water is also perceived by the First Nations as helping to maintain a balance of in the natural environment. Groundwater is heavily emphasizes as being crucial; the First Nations believe that the trees and vegetation acts as pumps, by pumping groundwater and storing it within the forest (Blackstock 2001). The ecological knowledge implicit within this understanding of groundwater and water pumps is reflected in the modern concept of the "water table". First Nation elders also report that this balance when referring to the evaporation of nearby creeks and rivers due to logging further upstream; Blackstock reports that from a contemporary, scientific view, these water tables are influenced by flows in the rivers, the presence of deciduous vegetation and reduced fog interception. Therefore, these physical observations further emphasize that water is heavily imbued in understandings of traditional ecological knowledge.

First Nations' Water Rights

This paper will use the following definition of water in discussions concerning its legal status, created by the Chiefs of Ontario in 2008 in their claims to water: "rain

waters, waterfalls, rivers, streams, creeks, lakes, mountain springs, swamp spring, bedrock water veins, snow, oceans, icebergs and the seas" (Phare 2010, xi). The recognition of Indigenous water rights is evidently a very detailed affair, one that has long been a contentious issue in Canada, due to the lack of clean water access available to First Nations communities and reserves.

As stated above, as of October 31 2012, there are over 100 First Nations communities under a Drinking Water advisory; in many cases, residents are unable to drink water without first boiling it, and sometimes, if recognized, water is not fit for consumption or bathing. Besides Ontario, British Columbia has the most boil-water advisories, and also has the highest rate of waterborne due to municipalities utilizing surface water (Isfeld 2009).

However, these advisories only act as a band-aid solution to the problems. According to the Canadian Medical Association, it would collectively cost $31 billion to upgrade water and waste water treatment infrastructure in Canada (Eggertson 2008). The Commission of Environment & Sustainable Development (CESD) declared that "despire the hundred of millios in federal funds invested, a significant proportion of drinking water systems in First Nations communities continue to deliver drinking water whose quality or safety is at risk" and that "residents of First Nations communities do not benefit from a level of protection comparable to those of people who live off reserves" (Phare 2010, 9).

One may ask, who is responsible for managing drinking water? Under Canadian law, Chief and Council "are responsible for planning and … the day-to-day operation of water and wastewater systems on reserves", while Indian and Northern Affairs Canada

provides "funding for water services and infrastructures". However, the management of drinking water is a moot point when there is little legal framework behind who *provides* the water to communities; Phare points out three logistical issues behind the current management and provision system to First Nations communities. Firstly, the Indian Act fails to provide for comprehensive and clear powers related to water management. Secondly, many provincial laws do not apply on reserve; water protection laws therefore are of little use within First Nation communities, and legislative authority for the provision of drinking water to reserves lies with the federal government. And thirdly, the lack of a legal and comprehensive Canadian standard on drinking water means each province creates their own "patchwork of standards and rules that apply within their boundaries" (Phare 2010, 13) – the national Water Act, for instance, has not been updated since the 1970s (Eggertson 2008). These three facts together describe the challenges that face policy makers and First Nations leaders who campaign for their right to water.

These political and logistical hindrances especially place First Nation communities at a higher risk than the general population of waterborne diseases. Within this issue, we see matters of environmental justice and racism implicit in the inability of the government to provide access to clean water to First Nations communities. In October 2005, this environmental disadvantage was made evident with the evacuation of over 1000 residents from the Kasheshwan reserve in Northern Ontario after *Escherichia coli* (E. coli) was discovered in the water. In response to this event, the 2005 Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development (CEASD) identified that "most treatment plant operators do not possess the knowledge and skills required to operate their plants safely", and confirmed Phare's identification of key logistical

challenges by noting that the "technical help available to First Nations to support and develop their capacity to deliver safe drinking water is fragmented" (Simeone 2010).

The delivery of safe drinking water to on-reserve First Nations communities was noted by the Government of British Columbia to be "critical to the health and safety of the communities' residents". Besides this, the Provincial Government also noted that access to clean water is also part of the "economic viability" that these communities are losing out on (Simeone 2010). However, it is evident that the lack of access to clean water First Nation communities face is not simply a matter of economics; it is a critical social issue that speaks to the priority of the British Columbian government. In fact, this obvious lack of access for First Nations communities speaks to a greater problem, one that extends beyond health problems, political bureaucracy and human rights. The delivery of clean water (or lack thereof) is classified by many critical geographers as an issue of environmental racism.

What is Environmental Racism, & where is the evidence?

Environmental racism is the term used to describe the deliberate placement of communities in less desirable locations (such as hazardous waste sites, landfills, incinerators) or, in this case, the placement of communities in areas excluded from the mainstream dominant culture. This intentional placement and marginalization denies full citizenship to its members, and usually leaves members with little political power and representation in the policy-making process (Mascarenhas 2007, 26). This marginalized status defines certain reserves all too well; as Mascarenhas recalls

> … the remote nature of many First Nations communities joined with the special jurisdictional issue associated with them, has led to a lack of clear responsibilities for the health of these communities (Senate of Canada, 2007) (Mascarenhas 2007, 27)

Environmental racism can also be exemplified as cases "where the dominant culture perceives subordinated others as a "resource" with no goals and purposes of their own" and "where the subordinated other [First Nations communities] is defined solely in terms of the dominant culture" (Gaard 2001, 162). Of communities affected by water advisories, First Nations communities constitute a high proportion, and the number has grown by nearly 40 percent since 2006 (Health Canada 2012). Some communities have been on water advisories for 13 years, with some residents lacking running water in their homes. Since 2011, British Columbia has 31 communities under water advisories, and many communities remain overcrowded. A number are still unable to use their water, even after boiling, due to the risk of gasoline and Trihalomethane (or THM, a chemical compound that is related to a higher risk of cancer) (Harden and Levaillant 2008, 9). When one compares the response by the government of this phenomenon to the Walkerton incident where the provincial and municipal government confirmed the presence of E. coli within a month. As Chief Moonias of the Neskantaga nation recalls,

> "I am of the opinion that when Walkerton, Ontario faced its water crises a few years ago, the Provincial Government did not respond to this municipality that it was an operations and maintenance issue or only offered to assist by providing the community with an advance of funds. This is the current position of the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada. I wonder how different the response would be if the residents of Toronto were without access to water?" (Harden and Levaillant 2008, 9)

The Canadian government has also abstained from choices that would enable First Nations people to have clean access to water. Internationally, the United Nations General Assembly recognizes the right of every citizen to "safe and clean drinking water and sanitation" (a vote that Canada conspicuously abstained from) (UN News Centre 2010). In 2008, the Canadian government backed away from the Kelowna Accord, an agreement that would've dedicated $5.1 billion to "improving the socio-economic conditions and access to water for Aboriginal people" (Harden and Levaillant 2008, 8). While not an entire lack of action (the government set aside $330 million in the 2008 budget), First Nations leaders such as the Senate Standing Committee on Aboriginal Peoples were deeply disappointed with the choice. The Conservative government then voted against Bill C-292, which had been implemented to recognize the Kelowna Accord, even after it was announced the $330 million was not enough to "ensure safe drinking water in all First Nations communities when considering the need for new or upgraded infrastructure" (Harden and Levaillant 2008, 8). It can be noted this evident lack of political commitment is confirmation of Mascarenhas observation that "… in Canada, relatively little policy discussion explicitly linked to environmental justice has occurred … political and private sector leaders in Canada generally have not taken strong positions related to environmental justice issues" (Mascarenhas 2007, 25).

John Burrows, in *Living Between Water and Rocks: First Nations, Environmental Planning and Democracy*, introduces the idea that First Nations are not only living at the geographical margins of the land; rather, they also "exist just beyond the borders of the North American legal imagination" (Burrows 1997, 418). The limits that Canadian First Nations face in environmental planning render them "invisible" and "repressed" under

the federalist structures of the government. However, this repression extends beyond the political; as we will see, the environmental racism that British Columbian First Nations face in their access to water also has an impact on their cultural and social practices.

The Impact of Environmental Racism on First Nations Communities

First Nations' lack of access to clean water is not only a grave disregard for human rights, public health and evidence of environmental racism, there is a powerful impact on many facets of indigenous life. These problems are clearly not solely physical or environmental in nature; as will be discussed, the lack of access to water also has profound spiritual and cultural impacts on First Nations, and also on First Nations' notions of identity.

British Columbian First Nations, as detailed above, perceive water as a life-giving substance ("the lifeblood of Mother Earth"); its life-sustaining properties have helped define intrinsic and complex relationships found within the cultures of different First Nations in the province (Mascarenhas 2007). First Nations' cultural identity therefore is tied to, and, more crucially, threatened by the lack of access to clean water; in Michael Blackstock's *Water: A First Nations' spiritual and ecological perspective*, First Nations elders were questioned about the significance of the degradation in water quality to their present way of life. Most notably, an elder noted that "… when you start depending on yourself to survive without [the] spirituality – the thanksgiving, thanking Mother Nature, the creator for their gifts – you'll suffer because of it … Mother Nature has its way of disciplining us" (Blackstock 2001, 61). Another elder also spoke about the impact of water quality on culture: water rituals such as *amo:hi atsv:sdi* (meaning "water place, to

go and return, one) were important for newborns. "The water is the biggest part of all our lives; without it we'd never survive … with the first born, [the Secwepemc] take their babies to the water and dunk that baby into the water. It's steaming, gives that baby strength; it shares its life with that baby, its energy" (Blackstock 2001, 58).

Along with these cultural acts, we have also detailed the meditative properties of water to British Columbian First Nations. The healing properties of water are what Kathleen Wilson terms "therapeutic landscapes"; because First Nations peoples regard their physical landscapes as shaping their "cultural, spiritual, emotional, physical and social lives", Wilson contends that the physical landscape can act as "locations of healing" within First Nations societies (2003). Research has dictated that symbolic structures within therapeutic landscapes transcend notions of physical space and place; that is, therapeutic landscapes are not necessarily physical in nature, but are also "embedded within the belief and value systems of different cultural groups" (K. Wilson 2003).

The healing properties of rituals involving water, such as the sweat lodge, is multi-faceted; besides the symbolism of the connection between the individual, Mother Earth and the Creator, these rituals also represent the importance of symbols in shaping health within Aboriginal communities. James Waldram contends that health in Aboriginal populations is not simply based on the physical removal of disease, but must also contain notions of symbolic health, "dependent upon the use, interpretation, negotiation, and manipulation of cultural symbols as central to the process of healing" (K. Wilson 2003). The removal of access to water is therefore also a removal of physical landscape that is central to notions of healing within Aboriginal communities. As a part

of their culture and religion, water is also central to certain notions of cultural identity. The restriction of Aboriginal communities inflicted by the implicit environmental racism in policy and practice therefore inhibits First Nations from fully participating in healing and cultural rituals and engaging in their conceptions of health. However, the lack of access to water also disrupts notions of identity and expression.

Wilson and Peters found that in First Nations' concepts of identity, landscape features such as water were a significant part of expression and understanding one's relationship to land (Wilson and Peters 2005). The absence of such features made respondents "uncomfortable":

> "I can go outside, take my tobacco outside everyday and lay it by a tree … I improvise … I tell [the Elders of the community] I really miss the bush or um I miss being home, they say 'well go to water …' … and that helps me but it's not the same" (Wilson and Peters 2005)

These improvised spaces however were found to be bereft of the same connection: another respondent noted that "… [the respondent's community had] really lived off the land. I tend to feel a better connection [when] I am by the water, the rocks and the tree and all the islands"; the reserves also, in comparison to cities and urban settings, represents "an important source of cultural identities and cultural practices" (Wilson and Peters 2005). Therefore, the lack of access to clean water and the removal or destruction of natural features that once provided clean water to communities has a significant impact on the social identities of First Nations community members.

Traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) is also affected by the absence of water in a natural environment; as detailed previously, the observation of rivers and streams can be indicators of the health of a forest and activities that influence the biotic environment.

However, the modern inability to access clean water may also inhibit the education of TEK to new generations of indigenous people. The "rediscovery" and integration of TEK has benefitted watershed management in Manitoba, for example; efficient but adaptive natural resource management is critical to economic progress, especially in British Columbia; it is evident that local and traditional understandings of the environment, accumulated incrementally and "tested by trial-and-error and transmitted to future generations" are at risk of being lost if these same future generations are denied access to these same natural resources (Berkes, Colding and Folke 2000). TEK also offers an alternative to Western scientific ecological knowledge in that it does not aim to harness or control nature; its emphasis on relations, conservation and complementary base to environmental planning are evidently fruitful for modern resource management.

Conclusion

The lack of access to clean water in First Nations communities is nothing short of a human rights violation; the disproportionate percentage of First Nations communities without access to clean water, and the high number of British Columbian First Nations reserves on the same list, is a warning sign of the lack of environmental justice. The lack of policy, along with political bureaucracies and judicial red tape, are some of the reasons behind why First Nations communities continue to face issues regarding their water supplies. There is also poignant evidence of environmental racism found in the marginalization of these same communities, and continuing lack of action from the government, at both the provincial and federal level. As this paper has noted, environmental racism has a significant health impact on these communities.

However, as this paper has also argued, the lack of water rights for British Columbia's First Nations communities also impact important and complex relationships indigenous people have with their physical landscapes and more specifically, water. In threatening the cultural rites and rituals surrounding water, the symbolism and the respect for water that First Nations have, there is also an enduring negative effect on the cultural processes, social identities and personal expression that are tied to water. It is therefore evident that the unique multifaceted relationships that British Columbia First Nation societies have with water and their physical landscapes do not only complicate discussions of environmental racism; they elevate the human rights issue of access to water to an issue that now has profound consequences for culture, identity and expression.

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