

# Way Beyond the Lifeboat: An Indigenous Allegory of Climate Justice

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*Inuit culture is based on the ice, the snow and the cold....Therefore when the climate changes and/or warms... Then our right to culture, our right to educate our children on the land, our right to safety, our right to health all become impacted by these rapid changes. In essence our Right to exist as Inuit as we know it is impacted... We are a very adaptable people and yet others tend to think that it is our inability to adapt to the modern world that we are facing these challenges of social and health related issues. Not true.... It is the speed and intensity in which change has occurred and continues to occur that is a big factor why we are having trouble with adapting to certain situations. Climate change is yet another rapid assault on our way of life. It cannot be separated from the first waves of changes and assaults at the very core of the human spirit that has come our way. Sheila Watt-Cloutier, interviewed by the Ottawa Citizen (Robb, 2015)*

*The Treaty Belt is made of two rows of purple wampum beads, and these two rows have the spirit of the Haudenosaunee and the Dutch... the two purple rows depict two vessels travelling down a river. One, a birch-bark canoe, is for the Haudenosaunee and contains our laws, customs, and way of life. The other, a ship, is for the Dutch and contains their laws, customs, and way of life. The purpose of the Treaty is to recognize that each People is to travel down this river together, side-by-side but each in their own vessel. . . . The treaty recognizes that the Haudenosaunee and Dutch share the same river, the river of life. We are to help each other, from time to time, as we travel this river together. We are to take care of this river as all of our survival depends on a healthy river.” James Ransom, brief description of the Haudenosaunee Kaswentha (1999, pp. 27-29)*

## THE INSIDIOUSNESS OF CLIMATE INJUSTICE

In the first epigraph, Watt-Cloutier says that climate-related risks to her people’s health, cultural integrity and economic vitality are intensified through colonial and capitalist domination – “the first waves of changes and assaults”. Years of Indigenous testimonies and, more recently, evidence in major scientific reports, bear witness to the relevance of her claim for many Indigenous peoples (Whyte, 2017). The Nisqually Indian Tribe and Quinault Nation, living within the Pacific Northwest region of the U.S., depend on salmon and shellfish for cultural, religious, economic, and nutritional health purposes.

Yet important habitats are becoming further degraded from climatic and non-climatic factors, including warming waters, ocean acidification, and the ramped up shoreline development of U.S. settler populations. Late Nisqually leader Billy Frank Jr. states that “As the salmon disappear, our tribal cultures, communities and economies are threatened as never before” (Treaty Indian Tribes in Western Washington, 2011, p. 6).

Writing from a Potawatomi, North American perspective, I see Indigenous peoples as often perceiving the burdens of climate-related risks through their experiences of already having been deeply harmed by the economic, industrial, and military drivers behind anthropogenic (human-caused) climate change (Callison, 2014; Wildcat, 2009). Historically, U.S. settlers widely displaced, terrorized and polluted Indigenous communities for the sake of profiting from oil and coal development (Grinde & Johansen, 1995; Small, 1994; Weaver, 1996). In 20<sup>th</sup> century Oklahoma, for example, oil development and settler greed polluted the Sac & Fox Tribe’s drinking water and energized the systematic effort – dubbed “the Reign of Terror” – to murder with impunity scores of Osage persons (Grann, 2017; Royster, 1997). Gail Small writes that “Like many Cheyenne, I feel as if I have already lived a lifetime fighting [coal] strip-mining. We live with fear, anger, and urgency. And we long for a better life for our tribe” (Small, 1994). Haunting similarities exist when we make global comparisons across Indigenous peoples, such as the pollution and violence endured by the Ogoni people from the multi-national oil industry and the nation of Nigeria (Saro-Wiwa, 1992).

Fossil fuel industries remain major concerns in recent times. In 2009, 50 people were killed, many Indigenous, in a conflict over the Peruvian government’s endorsement of mining and oil drilling in the Amazon (Aquino, 2009). Oil and gas pipelines in North America traverse Indigenous territories without genuine Indigenous consent to the construction or continued operations of these pipelines, including the now notorious construction of the Dakota Access pipeline in Standing Rock Sioux territory (Dhillon & Estes, 2016). Even for Tribes pressured by the U.S. into reliance on fossil fuel industries, such as the Crow Tribe of Indians, the economic dependence has yet to make their members well-off by U.S. standards (Beeler, 2017; Turkewitz, 2017).

In my experiences, most Indigenous peoples have complicated stories to tell about anthropogenic climate change that often start with their being harmed by fossil fuel industries. The stories continue on to discuss how current laws and policies render them more vulnerable to climate change impacts. The relocating Isle de Jean Charles Band of Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw Indians were forced onto a highly vulnerable small island to make way for climate driving industries, including petroleum and industrial agriculture. The U.S. and these industries dramatically engineered the lands and hydrology of the region, which also worked to make the island itself less habitable. The island ecosystem’s capacity to support the Band’s cultural integrity, economic development and physical and mental health is curtailed due to pollution and loss of wetlands and barrier islands that protect against extreme weather. Now the Band faces climate-related sea level rise. In terms of law and policy, the U.S. still fails to recognize the Band as a politically self-determining sovereign. Federal and local agencies working on regional disaster response planning do not include adequate Indigenous representation or free, prior and informed consent in these decision-making and planning processes (Maldonado, Shearer, Bronen, Peterson, & Lazrus, 2013). It is no longshot to claim that the U.S.’ current treatment of the Band and other Indigenous peoples commits human rights violations. The United

Nations (UN) Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples expresses rights to enjoy the types of goods threatened by climate change and extractive industries, including cultural integrity, economic development, high standards of physical and mental health and political self-determination.

Even strategies for lowering national carbon footprints pose risks to Indigenous peoples and put their human rights in peril, whether through programs of the World Bank, the United Nations or particular nations. Hydropower and forest conservation *still* involve displacement of Indigenous peoples (Beymer-Farris & Bassett, 2012; Cooke, Nordensvard, Saat, Urban, & Siciliano, 2017). Wide-ranging technological solutions, from natural gas transitions to permanent nuclear waste storage to wind power to geoengineering, pose significant risks that include desecration of sacred sites, pollution, violations of free, prior and informed consent, and increased rates of sexual violence through sex trafficking at *man camps* set up to house oil and gas industry workers (Carr & Preston, 2017; Deer, 2015; Dussais, 2014; Eaton, 2017; Endres, 2009).

Public discourses of Indigenous allies, including climate scientists and journalists, can also be problematic when they portray Indigenous vulnerability to climate change without reference to the larger struggles with colonialism and capitalism I have described so far (Cameron, 2012). Such discourses give the impression that Indigenous peoples face risks only because climate change, via bad luck, happens to affect the flora and fauna they depend on. Ignoring colonial and capitalist domination also impacts negatively the attempts of some climate scientists to collaborate with Indigenous peoples to learn about climate change. For Indigenous peoples' knowledge of climate baselines or shifting species ranges can divulge sensitive information about sacred, medicinal or economically valuable species and ecosystems that are still threatened by the actions of settlers, corporations and nations or are not sufficiently protected under current legal frameworks (Williams & Hardison, 2013). Research organizations, with legacies of exploitative research against Indigenous peoples, often still do not create career incentives and educational opportunities to enable scientists to work with their Indigenous collaborators in ways that reduce risks and create mutual benefits.

So far, I have covered a complex landscape of Indigenous climate justice involving colonial and capitalist domination linked to industrialization. Is there a succinct way to convey an Indigenous perspective on climate justice that makes all these connections? Perhaps a story of vessels can be created to describe Indigenous climate justice. Stories of vessels, such as ships, canoes and boats, are often created to describe the relationships among different societies who share land, water and air. Buckminster Fuller's "spaceship earth" flies through space without the possibility of getting more fuel and supplies, illustrating dependence on finite resources (Fuller, 2008). Garrett Hardin described rich countries as lifeboats surrounded by poor people swimming in the surrounding oceans – there is only so much room on the lifeboat for poor people as environmental and economic conditions deteriorate (Hardin, 1974). Martin Luther King, Jr., in an attempt to motivate respect for diversity and justice in the U.S., said the widely quoted phrase "We may have come to these shores on different ships, but we are now all in the same boat".

The second epigraph at the beginning of this chapter features an enduring story of vessels, the Treaty Belt, or *Kaswentha*, between the Haudenosaunee and Dutch from the 1600s, that illustrates their relationship through depicting the politics of sharing a river.

To illustrate the relationship between colonialism, capitalism, industrialization and climate injustice, I have written an allegory of vessels, inspired by the *Kaswentha*, but very different in its telling.

#### AN INDIGENOUS ALLEGORY OF CLIMATE JUSTICE

Imagine a world of many vessels floating in a pool of waters under a sky. Humans, animals and plants live on these vessels; some, such as fish, live in the waters too. The vessels are all built very differently based on the histories, geographies, economic statuses, cultures and aspirations for the future of the occupants. One vessel is a birch bark canoe and another is a ship or sail boat. Each vessel is its own amalgamation of many different episodes of collective human and plant/animal lives and histories.

Some vessels will nonetheless be referred to as canoes given it is possible to see the traces of that boat-making style in their construction. To be accurate though, they are more like conglomerations of canoes with smaller boats such as speed boats and zodiacs, each connecting to one another, like a very complicated catamaran with many moving pontoons. Other vessels are large aircraft carriers with massive towers built on top of them; they also have upside-down looking towers built on their ship bottoms that extend deep underwater nearing the pool's floor. Many of the vessels are intricately connected to each other in various relations of interdependence. There are millions of different power lines, bridges, ropes, shuttles and other materials that connect the vessels to each other. Now imagine what this looks like as myriad people and nonhumans regularly move from one vessel to the next.

Aircraft carriers have towers and high-technology equipment on them. Yet aircraft carriers are the descendants of large wooden balloon carriers that were built using the wooden materials of canoes that were destroyed by the ancestors of some of the current aircraft carrier occupants. Glorious paintings of these balloon carriers hang in the aircraft carrier rooms and some of the old furniture in these rooms still has refurbished canoe wood. The watery depths and pool floor below where the early canoes were destroyed furnished many of the resources, such as metals and fossil fuels, that were used to transition from the balloon carriers to the current aircraft carriers. The canoes that avoided being absorbed by aircraft carriers and their ancestor vessels still float in the water. But they are much lower in height than the aircraft carriers. Occupants of the canoes can see what is going on in the water in great detail and observe firsthand trends in water quality and turbulence.

Residents of the aircraft carriers, on the other hand, rarely get close to the water. They observe the water through windows, probes and submarines. Canoes and aircraft carriers are both dependent on the water conditions for the well-being of the people inside them, but the perspectives of the occupants differ based on whether they can experience the waters with an immediacy or whether they must rely on experiencing the waters based on reports from probes sent out by the aircraft carriers. Many of the aircraft carriers have forcibly connected themselves to the canoes. Some people who were born on the canoes now live on the aircraft carriers, bringing with them shards of materials from the canoes that they often have to sell for food. However – and with some exceptions – these persons live on the parts of the aircraft carriers that are most exposed to the water or are more likely to be flooded.

The aircraft carriers often seek to get rid of the canoes when the canoes are in the way of a new addition to the aircraft carrier. They do so by pulling in the canoes, smashing them up against the sides of the aircraft carrier, absorbing any surviving occupants and taking any valuable supplies or shards from the canoes. Sometimes, occupants of aircraft carriers are curious and seek to experience the waters from the vantage points of the canoes. Yet, there is always a risk that too many inquisitive occupants of aircraft carriers can overwhelm a canoe's carrying capacity and supplies, either when the aircraft carrier occupants all try to board the canoe at the same time or when even just a few leap dramatically from an aircraft carrier to a canoe.

The strangest vessels of all are neither canoes nor aircraft carriers. They are not so much water-going vessels as they are giant hovercrafts that float above all the other vessels in the sky. The force of the fans of the hover-engines blows into the waters. Canoes, aircraft carriers, humans, plants and animals go in and out of them like billions of marionettes as the hovercrafts seek to take their materials, and resources from the waters as well as from the floor of the pool. The hovercrafts are massive in scale, spanning across many vessels, often blocking the sun in the sky just as an eclipse does, especially when the hovercrafts get close to each other. The hovercrafts often tie up the canoes like yoyos, smashing them up against the aircraft carriers. Sometimes, they drop stone weights onto the canoes, weights that plunge the canoes into the bottom of the waters. In the turbulence that is created, canoes take in water that needs to be bailed out. The hovercrafts often attach on to the aircraft carriers to prop them up when the hulls of the aircraft carriers get punctured.

While water turbulence and quality are sources of sustenance for all people, the water can also pose a threat to the cultural, economic and political self-determination of the people in the vessels, especially if the vessels take in water, or sink as a result of turbulence. The aircraft carriers create turbulence in the waters through the wake of their engines, and their sheer weight in the water. The turbulence is made worse by the blowing of the giant fans of the hovercrafts. The canoes, depending on their location and connections to aircraft carriers or hovercrafts jostle and bristle more in the water than the other vessels. Without the aircraft carriers and hovercrafts, the water would be a lot calmer and canoe vessels would have a lot more control, and be more stable.

The people in the aircraft carriers and hovercrafts no longer see how much turbulence their vessels create for canoes, because few of them live or work close enough to the water. The canoes simply disappear from vision or appear as small, fragile boats that are so vulnerable to the waters that it feels as if nobody would dare go there to find out what is happening. Nor do many of the people in the aircraft carriers see the risks endured by their fellow residents who live in areas of the ship that are more exposed to the waters. Moreover, going back many years, the aircraft carriers and hovercrafts have destroyed the aquatic carbon sinks and used fossil fuels so that they could power their engines and fans, producing greater turbulence in the waters, and more intense and frequent storms. The smoke stacks of the hovercrafts are piled on top of the crafts, with a direct line to polluting the sky. Underground oil drilling and leaking pipelines make the turbulent waters dirty as well.

Given that many occupants in the canoes can actually see the water, because the canoes are lower in height, those occupants have a good sense of how bad the turbulence is, how dirty the water is, and what to expect from the storms. People living high up

inside aircraft carriers or hovercrafts have not ever been close to the water, yet the technologies at their disposal allow them to reach out into the water and test for trends of greater or lesser turbulence. As the turbulence grows and the storms become more intense, all vessels are affected, but the canoes bear the brunt. Some sink completely into the water, their occupants escaping onto other canoes or, at times, onto aircraft carriers; others change their location in the water and detach from the aircraft carriers, in the process facing the onslaught of the disturbance caused by the hovercraft engines.

Some of those on the aircraft carriers realize that they are responsible for stirring up the waters or at least realize that they should do something about the impacts of the turbulence on smaller vessels. The occupants of the hovercrafts realize this, too; however, they feel that the solution is for them to create more, or larger, hovercrafts, eventually moving everyone into a network of interconnected hovercrafts or on to a massive, single hovercraft. The aircraft carriers, often disagreeing with the somewhat impractical ideas of the hovercrafts, put up proposals to bring the canoes closer to each other – in some cases lifting them out of the water and hoisting them like lifeboats; in other cases, beams and other materials are added to stabilize the canoes in the water. Yet, in cases where the aircraft carriers' proposals are put into practice, the results are disastrous. When the aircraft carriers fire their engines to move closer to the canoes, the wake of their engines further destabilizes the water, harming the canoe occupants even more. When severe storms break, the aircraft carriers cannot even see the canoes and run right over them.

The aircraft carriers blame climate change and smallness of the canoes for this unfortunate state of affairs. Yet, the occupants of canoes have a different perspective. The reason why the aircraft carriers cannot get closer is because they are too big, and their engines disturb the water greatly. The solutions with aircraft carriers and hovercrafts always involve creating more turbulence, a turbulence that was there even before “climate change” as an issue stirred the waters. One way to lessen the turbulence and storminess is to change the design of the aircraft carriers and hovercrafts completely. Yet this would mean that the occupants of those vessels would have to redesign their vessels in ways that do not disturb the waters. If there are parts and mechanisms of the aircraft carriers and hovercrafts that are not needed any more because they always disturb the waters, what would the occupants do with those parts and mechanisms? What would the occupants do in their lives *without* those parts and mechanisms?

#### INTERPRETING THE ALLEGORY

There are certainly many ways to interpret the allegory. The following is simply one place to begin—a starting point I offer as I quickly close this piece. The canoes represent the many different Indigenous peoples everywhere and people who share their situation. The aircraft carriers are nation-states and the hovercrafts are corporations. The pool of waters and sky are the earth system at broad and local scales. The engines, fans and carbon-intensive economics of the aircraft carriers and hovercrafts, their sheer size and desire to clear out the canoes, represent the nexus of colonialism, capitalism and industrialization. This nexus has multiple forms, including the military, extractive industries, and educational institutions. Capitalism and industrialization stir and disrupt the water and sky; colonialism makes it hard for some vessels to adapt to the disruptions.

I offer the allegory to demonstrate why climate change and many proposed solutions to adapt to or mitigate climate change produce great suffering for Indigenous peoples *unless* colonialism is addressed alongside capitalism and industrialization. Failing to address colonialism is like lowering or turning off some of the engines and fans of the aircraft carriers and hovercrafts. This, in turn, would sink the large vessels, pulling down the canoes with them. Given the physical realities of the vessels and waters in the allegory, it is hard to see how tweaks in the ways things work would change the ultimate ecological dynamics that are so unfavorable to the canoes.

So Watt-Cloutier's references to capitalism and colonialism in the opening quotations should not be dismissed within movements for climate justice. In the absence of a concern for addressing colonialism, climate justice advocates do not really propose solutions to climate change that are that much better for Indigenous well-being than the proposed inaction of even the most strident climate change deniers. Decolonization and anti-colonialism, understood in senses appropriate to the allegory, cannot be disaggregated from climate justice for Indigenous peoples. Indigenous climate justice movements are distinct in their putting resistance to the nexus of colonialism, capitalism and industrialization at the vanguard of their work.

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