Indigenous Lands, Colonial Methods: How Literature Exposes Climate Injustices and Indigenous Resilience Through the Lens of Kyle Whyte's 'An Indigenous Allegory of Climate Justice'

Ashley Pocrnich

Kwantlen Polytechnic University,
Bachelor of Arts with Major/Minor in English (BA) Hons

Climate change is not the great equalizer of all peoples, as has been commonly claimed for as long as the science behind it has been discussed. Instead, this essay will use Potawatomi scholar Dr Kyle Whyte's analogy of peoples as different types of ships in a common body of water as he describes in 'Way Beyond the Lifeboat: An Indigenous Allegory of Climate Justice'.[1] He demonstrates how the effects of climate change and the methods used in attempts to mitigate it have revealed social inequalities and structural racism through literature. Non-fiction books written on the climate activism carried out by Indigenous peoples all over the world show the strength and resilience of these groups in their guardianship of their traditional lands. However, other sources also chronicle their serial discrimination from more general worldwide activism movements. Legal concerns are also revealed as Indigenous peoples struggle on the behalf of the environment, as barriers that protect the interest of a few become clearly labeled as tools of capitalism by authors. Despite challenges posed by the persistent effects of colonialism on social and cultural mechanisms, Indigenous peoples have remained some of the planet's most stalwart defenders.

[1] See Kyle Whyte 'Way beyond the lifeboat: An Indigenous allegory of climate justice,' in *SSRN Electronic Journal*, (2017), https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3003946 [accessed 4 November 2022].

How Indigenous Literature Refutes Colonial Concepts of Relationship to the Environment and Offers Mechanisms to Create a Better World

Conversations on the topic of climate change, when they include the existence of Indigenous peoples, often frame them as purely victims of the changing environments that they rely on, which fails to reveal the full story.[2] In fact, evidence gathered by Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers alike has uncovered the fatal mistake of addressing climate change through only colonial and capitalistic systems.[3,4] Unfortunately, many of the methods used by national and international bodies to address the climate crisis have had an overall negative effect on Indigenous peoples, such as the Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation in Developing Countries (REDD+) platform, implemented by the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change in 2013, which threatens Indigenous sovereignty and directs environmental activism to happen within existing frameworks of resource commodification and profit-seeking.[5] Indigenous peoples have been taking action in their own forms and expanding past these structures since the beginning.[6] Using examples of Indigenous literature like Potawatomi scholar Dr Kyle Whyte's updated boat analogy, this essay will reveal how colonial policies fail to actually encourage change in colonial structures while placing responsibility for the environment with Indigenous peoples whose sovereignty has already been under attack since the beginning of colonization.[7] Indigenous narratives, both in oral and written forms, offer new ways of interpreting relationships that could aid the fight against climate change worldwide.

The REDD+ program, while framed as a step towards a solution for climate change when it was

[2] See Kyle Whyte, 'Way beyond the lifeboat: An Indigenous allegory of climate justice,' in *SSRN Electronic Journal*, (2017*),* https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3003946 [accessed 4 November 2022], 1-8
[3] See Whyte.
[4] See Vanessa Sloan Morgan, '"Why would they care?": Youth, Resource Extraction, and climate change in northern British Columbia, Canada,' in *Canadian Geographer*, 64.3 (2020), 445-60.
[5] See Julia Dehm, 'Authorizing Appropriation?: Law in Contested Forested Spaces,' in *European Journal of International Law*, 28.4 (2017), 1379-96.
[6] See Chris Arnett, 'Asserting Native Resilience: Pacific Rim Indigenous Nations Face the Climate Crisis,' in *BC Studies,* 179 (2013), 231-32.
[7] See Whyte.

put forward during the UNFCCC in 2013, includes a carbon credits system-based power structure that Julia Dehm argues 'validates and legitimizes specific tools, actors and solutions while marginalizing others'.[8] REDD+ advocates for protecting carbon sinks like forests around the world, but proportionately allows the burning of fossil fuels to continue. The Global North contributes far more to greenhouse gas emissions, but it is countries in the Global South that find their lands co-opted to deal with those emissions, which led the Indigenous Environment Network to label REDD+ as a form of 'neo-colonialism.'[9] Land rights concerns between these peoples and the states that claim authority to speak on behalf of their lands have historically been severe, and no acceptable attempt was made in the process of creating REDD+ to mitigate this strain.[10] The sovereignty of Indigenous peoples and their connections to the land have been repeatedly trampled in the actions that led to the climate crisis as well as many of the actions taken to fight it.

In Whyte's analogy, he expands upon the familiar idea of Indigenous peoples and colonizers being in two separate boats on the same waterway to imagine an ocean full of different types of crafts, including canoes, aircraft carriers and even vehicles that float above the water entirely.[11] Whyte expresses some of the forces of colonialism as "engines, fans and carbon-intensive economics" that disturb the water enough to trouble the peoples close to it in canoes, representative of Indigenous peoples, but not those who live distanced from it in aircraft carriers, representing corporations.[12]

Indigenous peoples and people of colour have taken action outside of what has been done by nation states to combat climate change, in ways that honour traditional Ways of Knowing and utilize deep understandings of the land. Gleb Raygorodetsky's book *The Archipelago of Hope: Wisdom and Resilience from the Edge of Climate Change* shares coping mechanisms developed in response to harsh resource extraction by Indigenous communities around the world, including returning to traditional ways that have

[8] See Dehm, p. 1382.
[9] See Dehm, p. 1392
[10] See Dehm, p. 1385.
[11] See Whyte, p. 4.
[12] See Whyte, p. 6.

been practiced on these lands for generations.[13] Raygorodetsky suggests that these methods are applicable for all peoples in the fight against climate change, as long as they are utilized with respect.[14]

Onyx (Vanessa) Sloan Morgan centres youth in their discussions of climate change action, arguing that 'opportunities to engage rural and remote northern and Indigenous youth with a critical eye to structures that have excluded youth as knowledgeable members and denied Indigenous sovereignty offer transformative potential.'[15] In their discussions and workshops with youth in preparing their paper '"Why would they care?": Youth, Resource Extraction, and climate change in northern British Columbia, Canada,' they found that young people in these areas *did* want to be involved with community-centred change, and that they were central in expressing 'the need for Indigenous knowledges and self-determination to be foregrounded, and challenging the supremacy of and the violence that radiates from extractive relations to land.'[16] The eagerness showcased by youth in the paper highlights the importance of Indigenous narratives shared through oral testimonies, and the valuable role these testimonies have to play in research. Sloan Morgan contends that the exclusion of Indigenous youth from discussions on climate change and Indigenous sovereignty is a factor of settler colonialism and needs to be combatted during 'human-land discussions.'[17]

Indigenous artist Roy Henry Vickers and collaborator Robert Budd have brought Indigenous stories to a wider audience in the form of illustrated books that teach lessons passed down through generations on the interconnectedness of all things, and humanity's responsibility to ensure sustainability in ecosystems.[18] Their telling of the tale of *Orca Chief* — who teaches initially careless hunters ways to interact with the environment over which he presides in a respectful and sustainable way— is one example of a relationship-centred world view stemming from Indigenous Ways of Knowing.[19] As is demonstrated by *Orca Chief*,

[13] See Gleb Raygorodetsky, *The Archipelago of Hope: Wisdom and resilience from the edge of climate change*, (New York: Pegasus, 2017).
[14] See Raygorodetsky.
[15] See Sloan Morgan, p. 457.
[16] See Sloan Morgan, p. 450.
[17] See Sloan Morgan, p. 447.
[18] See Roy Henry Vickers and Robert Budd, *Orca Chief*, (Harbour Publishing, 2015).
[19] See Vickers and Budd.

exposing young people to these Ways of Knowing early is valuable.[20] Indigenous communities have had vastly different relationships with colonial governments—each struggle for sovereignty unique—though movements for climate change action being hindered by colonial governments has been a common experience for many among them.[21]

Environmental activism has also been expressed in the form of Indigenous works of futurism in literature, as science fiction works to reflect the social issues of the present onto the background of imagined future climates.[22] Struggles over climate rights, for example, have been used to highlight the deep connections Indigenous peoples have with climate activism and resurgence against oppressive regimes.[23] In Cherie Dimaline's novel *The Marrow Thieves*, she explicitly makes reference to the unique relationships Indigenous peoples experience with the rest of the living world, and goes as far as to imagine a world where non-Indigenous people attempt to plunder the physical connection to these relationships for their own benefit.[24] In *We Are the Middle of Forever: Indigenous Voices from Turtle Island on the Changing Earth*, a book of collected interviews with diverse Indigenous peoples, expressions of Indigenous wisdom were gathered respectfully using Indigenous research techniques.[25] Once again, this wisdom collected over generations of dealing with colonialism and ecological loss is shown to counter the western concepts of living within the environment: humans have a responsibility to protect the future of life on Earth for all living creatures and repair the relationships between us.[26]

Even though Indigenous peoples carry knowledge that will be instrumental in reversing climate change, they cannot be alone in their efforts. Given that current attempts by colonial powers have often disrupted Indigenous populations more than they have aided them, the first steps for settlers should be to collaborate and engage with Indigenous wisdom in a non-extractive way.

[20] See Chris Arnett, 'Asserting Native Resilience: Pacific Rim Indigenous Nations Face the Climate Crisis,' in BC Studies, 179 (2013), p. 232.
[21] See Arnett, p. 232.
[22] See Tarique Niazi, 'Imagining the Future of Climate Change: World-Making Through Science Fiction and Activism,' in Journal of International & Global Studies, 9.2 (2018), p. 209.
[23] See Niazi, p.210.
[24] See Cherie Dimaline, *The Marrow Thieves*, (Dancing Cat, 2017).
[25] See Dahr Jamail & Stan Rushworth, ed., We are the middle of forever: Indigenous voices from Turtle Island on the Changing Earth, (The New Press, 2022).
[26] See Jamail and Rushworth.

Returning to Whyte's analogy, all peoples across the world are in the same ocean and will eventually face the consequences of the climate crisis, but Indigenous peoples are often closer to the environment and experience these catastrophes first.[27] Examples can be found in literature of the failure of colonial governments to respect the human rights of Indigenous peoples in regards to their land, but also of the resilience of Indigenous peoples as they use their own traditional Ways of Knowing to engage in activism on their own terms. Dismantling the limiting societal factors faced by Indigenous peoples, or as Whyte says, '[d]ecolonization and anti-colonialism, understood in senses appropriate to the allegory, cannot be disaggregated from climate justice for Indigenous peoples.'[28] We are all dependent on the health of the land we live on, but understanding the failure of current colonial systems and the relationship-based solutions offered in Indigenous literature might provide us with both the motivation and hope to craft a better future for us all.

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[27] See Whyte.

[28] See Whyte, p. 7.

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