



WATER RITES:
Reimagining Water in the West
Edited by Jim Ellis

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women, water, land

writing from the intersections

helen knott

Water has connected to me in an infinite number of ways. Water has communicated to me in an unspoken language that my grandmother once understood, and it has healed me without asking for anything in return. Water has shown me how to give of myself and nurture those around me unconditionally. Essentially, water has given me my heart for the people.

How do I explain this relationship in this cold language? A language that comes from a people who never understood us the day they brought it in their mouths on ships over 500 years ago. How do I explain it myself when I don't have the language of my grandmothers living on my tongue any longer? The words have been washed away from my family's mouth before I was even born.

I have reclaimed words relating to water.

Choo, *water*. Saghii nachii, *big river*. Tse lingay, *creek*. Mingeh, *lake*.

I may not be fluent in the Dane Zaa language, but it is a language that navigates my blood like the birch bark canoes navigated the river ways. It is a language that is living in my bones. I am still in the process of remembering who I am as a Dane Zaa and Ne-hiyaw woman whose great grandfathers and grandmothers roamed the land and the waters. My memories are tied to land and water.

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During the making of a documentary that I took part in, which focused on the connection between violence against Indigenous land and against Indigenous women, I was asked how to symbolize my healing that has come from the river. I asked what they meant.

“What does it look like? When you are healing by the water? How do we show that on film?” the producer asked me.

I chuckled.

“It literally looks like me sitting down by the river . . . for hours. It looks like tobacco offerings given and prayers said with my toes touching the lip of the water. It’s not a razzle dazzle Hollywood moment. In order to learn, you have to be quiet and listen to what the water and the land is telling you,” I replied with a hint of amusement in my voice.


I went quiet after that as the thought crossed my mind about what will change if Site C, the proposed mega hydroelectric dam in Northeastern British Columbia, continues to be built. How do I take my pain, tears, and gratitude to a reservoir instead of a free flowing river? I try not to think of such things as it bombards me with an overwhelming grief that I can feel trying to settle in my bones.



The relationship that I have with water has caused me to work to protect it. For me “activism” is more about upholding my end of a relationship and my responsibilities. I am fulfilling my role as a Dane Zaa and Nehiyaw woman when I speak out for the water, when I toe a frontline, when I make a tobacco offering, and when I am mindful about how land and water decisions are going to affect all of my relations. I have never ventured into activism out of interest or desire to be a part of something. I actually have struggled with conflict in the past and am shy by nature but fulfilling responsibilities leaves me little room but to stand and to speak. We step into roles out of inherent responsibility.

So I have helped organize at a grassroots level to fight against Site C, BC Hydro’s mega hydroelectric dam that could potentially flood eighty-three kilometres of the Peace River Valley. The Valley is full of cultural sites and medicines, is a migratory corridor, and has the best agricultural land north of Quesnel. The Peace River already has two

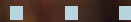




dams built upstream and has slowly been recovering from the methylmercury poisoning it incurred when this happened. Currently you are only able to eat one fish a month from the river and if Site C is to go through, the fish will be inedible altogether for some time as the methylmercury levels will spike again.

I was working and living in Kelowna when the 2014 provincial approval for the dam happened under Premier Christy Clark, and that was when I knew it was time to come home. Prior to that I held a grassroots youth camp where we had Elders come in and reconnect young people back to the territory through stories.

I moved home and in the winter of 2016, along with other First Nation members and local farmers, I peacefully occupied a camp in an old-growth forest that was slated to be logged and turned into a waste dump for acid-generating rock in preparation for construction of the Site C dam. We were located at the historic Rocky Mountain Fort, a place that marked the first solid relationship between settlers and Indigenous peoples within this territory. Each morning we kept fire and our presence there held the gleaming yellow beasts at bay that wanted to clear the tract of land. During that time BC Hydro launched a civil suit against myself and six other individuals but when this threat of a multimillion dollar lawsuit did not stop us they sought out and received an injunction to dismantle the camp. In September 2016 I helped organize and went on a cross-country caravan where we stopped in major cities to talk about Site C en route to attend a Federal Court of Appeal case in Montreal. There have been many communities, people, and organizations, such as Amnesty International, who have come together to make each of these efforts happen to put a stop to Site C. Still, the construction persists in spite of lack of free, prior, and informed consent.



There are aspects of how the dam will impact the people that are harder to explain, as they leak into the lives of people and trickle down into their homes, with only traces of its original cause. Impacts of adverse water-related decisions on Indigenous people cannot always be quantified and placed into charts and graphs. Anderson, Clow, and Haworth-Brockman (2013) state that “water quality issues can threaten spiritual and cultural well-being at the same time that they endanger physical health, local and household economies, and the environment” (12). The multifaceted impacts are lived realities for Indigenous people who experience relationships with the water, land, medicines, and animals within their territories. We are still trying to gain traction for

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our long-lived truths to be accepted in a world that, dominated by Western knowledge, relies heavily on what can be quantified.

How do you place a number on prayer?

How do you chart genuine connection?

What price do you place on healing?

How do you create a statistic to show how crucial land is in regards to identity formation as it is the gateway to blood memory and acts as storyteller?

At what point do we accept that other ways of being and knowing are valid?

Are we really still having this conversation?

It has been 150 years and Canada still has not learned how to accept and respect Indigenous ways of being and knowing.

A prime example of this would be in the winter of 2016 when Amnesty International released their report “Out of Sight, Out of Mind,” which examined the connection, in the traditional territory I am from, between violation of Indigenous lands and violence against Indigenous women and girls. Three of us women stood at the press conference for the release of the report and gave our own personal testimonies that were included in the report alongside many other identified and anonymous testimonies. A reporter raised his hand shortly after we were finished and asked for “hard facts,” and then pushed a few more times for numbers and statistics that were not present in the report. He was after the quantifiable and tried to kick the legs out from under the power of oral testimony. We are an oral people; all we have is our stories, and the difficult ones are ones that we tell even when it is hard, because we have the audacity to hope for change.



Change. It's a funny feeling, to empty yourself into efforts towards the elusive. It's an even funnier feeling when those efforts have been towards elusive justice. Justice. Not materials, not dreams, not a larger bank statement, not trinkets, nor personal ventures,

but Justice. When you believe that the right will always prevail and time and time again it does not happen, you feel a twisting in your chest. A wrestling of the heart trying not to give up on itself.

To be Indigenous and in pursuit of the preservation of land, water, and inherent rights that belong to those who come after you because of those who became before you – while simultaneously experiencing the elusiveness of justice yourself – is the funniest thing of all. Not funny in the satirical dark, humour kind of way – the way through which I have learned to laugh at most of life's maladies and afflictions. Funny in an existentialist "what the fuck is happening, how do I relate to this world in which I am existing" kind of way.

Why? Because you can't just simply exist in such elusive moments. Indigenous activists who are expected to engage with media often know that they will be interpreted. We learn to monitor ourselves and our responses to these moments in order to be properly consumed by white audiences. Present your grief in a palatable way, don't throw wild accusations, keep your head, and make sure your pain is tasteful – always balanced with possibility. Perhaps I say "we" too presumptuously but I know that this is the pressure I have often felt, from multiple avenues.

I've never been fond of censoring myself, but I have an inner dialogue that says don't be too sorrowful because it will make "them" think that they are winning. Don't sound defeated, tell people to keep hope and to become louder than ever. Be that warrior, be the fierceness you have witnessed in many other land protectors, be the fire that threatens to consume, be the thunder that makes its presence known. But be honest, always be honest. Just be an honest version of inspiration that is available for public consumption. Media engagement as an Indigenous activist can be a brutal battering ram and if you are not good at placing boundaries and staying out of the comment section, where racism breeds, it is ultimately traumatizing.

The experiences of removal from land and at the same time losing the land itself to projects is also traumatizing. Dispossession in a dual sense. After the dismantling of our winter camp I was despondent, had a short attention span, kept to myself, became depressed and disinterested for months before I figured out I was dealing with trauma from the loss of the camp. I've done intergenerational trauma workshops as a social worker within the communities in the north so I understand trauma but even I did not catch this right away. When I did catch it I was crying in a coffee shop as a journalist

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ripped open wounds for examination. I have worked to heal myself from the historical traumas my family and people have endured and passed on and I have to work continually to heal from the present-day colonial lacerations. We need to be mindful that colonial goals of assimilation and inflicting trauma on Indigenous people are still very real and present to this day.

At the time of writing, the new NDP and Green Party provincial government has sent Site C for review and in the coming months we will see if the dam will finally be stopped. There is hope, however fragile. There is hope. We who stand on frontlines cannot live without it, and our children and grandchildren cannot afford for us to lose it, either.

bibliography

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