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From Classroom to River's Edge: Tending to Reciprocal Duties Beyond the Academy

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How do you teach about the layered colonial realities that mould a Canadian city? How do you connect the threads of movement, displacement, stories, erasure, resistance, and kinship that enliven and shape cities across Canada? These questions take on a new meaning for me as a newly arrived guest in Ottawa intent on honouring the unceded Algonquin territories I occupy. In teaching anthropology courses at Carleton University, I struggle to situate the material we read in class within the *physical* realities that we inhabit as student-teacher interlocutors moving through academic and civic spaces in Ottawa. I see it as my duty as an Indigenous feminist (Métis) scholar to try to ground-truth the theoretical work with which we engage in the classroom with—well, literal *ground*-truths (and water-truths, and atmospheric-truths) in cities across Canada.

On November 12, 2015, Algonquin law student Caitlin Tolley opened the Pierre Elliott Trudeau Foundation Public Policy Conference in Ottawa with an honour dance. She greeted the crowd with an orientation to the territories and waters in which the conference participants were embedded (Tolley 2015):

> [T]his territory that we're all on today is the territory of my ancestors. And this particular place that we're all gathered on this evening used to be the gathering place of my ancestors, and the river that you see behind us used to be their travel-ways. And that used to be their traditional highways. So I wanted you to think about that. Think about the Algonquin people who traditionally inhabited this territory, think about the fact that this is on unceded and unsurrendered traditional Algonquin territory, and that we as Anishinaabek people still have a lot to discuss with Canada.

Taking Ms. Tolley's words to heart, I tried a pedagogical experiment this winter term in one of my classes. I asked my students to read Vanessa Watts's (2013) piece "Indigenous Place—Thought and Agency Amongst Humans and Non Humans (First Woman and Sky Woman Go On a European World Tour!)." I also had them read chapter 2 of Audra Simpson's seminal book *Mohawk Interruptus* (2014, 37–66), in which she describes how the federal government expropriated waterfront land in Kahnawà:ke in the 1950s to build the St. Lawrence Seaway. Once we had analyzed and discussed these texts in class, I asked students to spend a week accounting for the rivers around them—to pause every so often and orient themselves to the Ottawa River, the Rideau Canal, the Rideau River, Dow's Lake, and the long-lost creeks that have been paved over and erased in city-building in the nation's capital. I asked them also to consider the citizens within those waterways. Not only to consider *humans* with whom they share this space, but also to acknowledge the lives and movements of fish, plants, and invertebrates that move through water that we, in turn, rely

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on for drinking, bathing, and survival. And I asked students to consider what it means to move through municipal space while acknowledging the more-than-human beings with whom we share these spaces.

I also participated in this experiment. I spent my week pausing every so often and trying to orient myself to local waterways. To account for the water in a new city, even in the dead of winter, is no easy task. I began the week deeply disoriented. I mistook the Canal Building on Carleton Campus for the River Building when a taxi was dropping me off for work. I conflated the Rideau River and the Ottawa River. I did not realize my neighbourhood is book-ended by the canal. I did not even know where Ottawa gets its drinking water from![1] I realized quickly that I owe a great deal to Ottawa's rivers and water-bodies, and that in order to be a good citizen within unceded Algonquin territories I have a lot of work to do in learning about the lands, waters, stories, and laws that inform this place.

Rivers invited colonial movement into Indigenous territories throughout the historical colonial period in North America. And today, rivers also invite resistance to colonialism. While voyageurs and fur traders used rivers to make their way into Indigenous lands across the continent, rivers also allowed the movement of Indigenous peoples from community to community, camp to camp, strengthening kinship ties with human and more-than-human relations across vast territories. In my research in the Northwest Territories, I have also learned that watery beings like fish worked to paradoxically *fuel* some colonial enterprises in the early twentieth century—feeding Oblates and Hudson's Bay clerks as they set up missions and trading posts along the Beaufort Coast—while human-fish relations *also* acted as a "micro-site" across which Indigenous legal orders were consciously applied to resist colonial authority over northern lands and waters. At Letty Harbour in the winter of 1928, Oblates of Mary Immaculate relied on local Inuvialuit men to teach them how to fish, unaware that these men were *also* teaching the Oblates about principles of reciprocity and fairness, and showing these missionaries how to move through the land competently. When the Oblates succeeded at catching fish after extensive training from two local men (Asisauna Lester and his son-in-law Fred), the missionaries attributed their fishy success not to the pedagogy and labour of their Inuvialuit interlocutors, but to the divine intervention of St. Joseph, the patron saint of the Oblates' Mackenzie missions, to whom the Oblates had been praying.[2]

Bodies of water, and those who dwell within and alongside them, are therefore paradoxical and productive loci of inquiry in trying to understand Indigenous-settler relations in Canada. The river-city edge is a site that weaves the city-as-terminus into a much broader constellation of stories, histories, legal frameworks, and *movement.* Whereas cities guard their boundaries quite jealously with ring-roads and ordinances, rivers permeate and implode these boundaries, necessarily drawing city-dwellers into broader awareness of, and responsibilities to, the watersheds within which they are enmeshed.

1 It comes from the Ottawa River (Ottawa Hydro 2015).

2 Letty Harbour Codex Historicus (1928), Provincial Archives of Alberta, Oblates of Mary Immaculate Archives, Accession 97.109 Box 97 Item 2104: 10.

Further, Edmonton owes its existence to a river. Fort Edmonton, in its many iterations, required access to the river to move men, cargo, and materials to and from the post. It is no accident that first a fort, and then a city, grew up around *pehonan*—the gathering place at the heart of the city—where Indigenous peoples have been gathering for millennia (Cardinal 2013). Colonial actors needed access to water for their operations, and they also knew to position themselves in places through or to which Indigenous people were likely to travel. As Lewis Cardinal (2013, 2) points out:

> Edmonton was born at Rossdale Flats as a gathering place for Indigenous peoples 8,000 to 10,000 years before Europeans came. It was a "pehonan," or waiting place, that was a centre of trade, celebration, and ceremony. The flats are rich in history, stories, and spirit waiting to be brought into being. Sacred is the only word to describe the full depth of this land.

This sacred space, pehonan, at the edge of the North Saskatchewan River, has been home to *multiple* modernist city-building projects over the course of Edmonton's history. It was home to the now-decommissioned Rossdale Power plant from 1931 to 2008 (National Trust n.d.; Rossdale Regeneration 2013). It is still home to the Little Flower School my dad attended briefly as a child. It houses condominiums and a currently unused professional baseball stadium. It also houses a long-erased burial site, recently honoured with an architectural installation. In 2013, a local civic leader proposed a plan to build a canal through pehonan, modelled on a similar project in Oklahoma City (Global News 2013). Bodies of water offer us insight into the inscriptions of power and value made by municipal settler-colonial institutions, developers, engineers, architects, and others at sites that carry sacred importance to Indigenous peoples and Indigenous cosmologies.

Building on the floodplains of pehonan carries risk. Water has a way of reminding Canadian cities of their precarity and impermanence. Cities are snaked with creeks both extant and buried, and Alberta's major cities in particular run high with water when provincial rivers surge (*Calgary Herald* 2013). Water can haunt and tease in places it has long been forgotten to occupy. I attended McKernan Junior High in Edmonton in the 1990s. The neighbourhood of McKernan is built atop what used to be McKernan Lake, a popular skating and picnic destination for early settlers (Environmental Research Studies Centre n.d.). My principal at the time, Ms. Pat Hogaboam, told me a story of the first year the new facilities manager, Hermes, had worked at the school. He had lovingly painted the basement of the school that fall, only to discover that the waters of lake McKernan still rise several feet into the basement of the school in the spring.

The river—*sipiy*—that runs through Edmonton is a methodological and philosophical teacher in my work, a site and body through which to ponder the histories and stories that bring Indigenous and settler experiences into sight of one another. In 2014, I paid a tattoo artist in Edinburgh to ink *sohkeciwan* onto my wrist, so that when British scholars inquired about the syllabics on my body, I could tell them about the whitefish, sturgeon, sticklebacks, walleye, perch and pike with which I share my hometown. I endured fifteen minutes of pain and the raging red flesh that lingered for a week afterwards so that I could tell colleagues

and peers about the walking-lectures on which my dad took my little sister and me through the Edmonton river valley when we were kids. I delighted in telling Scottish taxi drivers and cashiers about Dwayne Donald's walking lectures through Papaschase Cree territory in the heart of Edmonton. I imbued my flesh with a river-word so that when I felt so lost, thousands of kilometres away from the waterways I grew up swimming in and moving along and dreaming about, I could tell British interlocutors about the watery expanses that feed into every house, office, factory, refinery, and mall in my hometown.

My Dad remembers his friend Bobby's family setting lines for suckers out into the North Saskatchewan, beneath the High Level Bridge, when he was a kid. And when I was little, my step-dad often spent summer evenings fishing along the bend in the North Saskatchewan near the Quesnell Bridge. My Dad and eldest auntie have both told stories of their shenanigans as kids playing in and around the ice factory in the Rossdale Flats in the 1950s. On hot days, my aunt tells me, they would open the chute from which customers collected ice from the factory to cool off their heads. A popular family story revolves around two young Todd boys, who shall remain nameless, trying to steal a broken-down truck from the ice factory at the ages of nine and ten respectively. The ice from the factory, made from the water that flows past the Flats, past pehonan, itself becomes a locus for mid-century Métis children's play and movement through a city that, as I've since learned from conversations with non-Indigenous Edmontonians, saw this neighbourhood as a slum.[3]

Bridges, those structures that traverse wily rivers and unapologetically watery harbours, can paradoxically unite and obliterate community, depending on who you are and how your politics and legal traditions are valued in municipal logics. In the 1960s, when Edmonton sought an efficient way to move cars over the river in the heart of the city, the homes of families like mine in the Flats became an obstacle to modern city building. My great-grandparents, Caroline LaFramboise and James Todd, had their home appropriated by the city. Against their protestations, their modest clapboard home was bulldozed to make way for the James MacDougall Bridge and, according to family oral histories, Caroline and James were never compensated for the loss of their family home. One of my earliest memories is of my dad taking us to the base of the James MacDougall Bridge as children, showing us where his grandparents' home had stood. When I cross the river on this bridge today, I feel a tug in my body as I contemplate the personal cost my dad's mosôm and kohkom paid to enable the burgeoning prairie metropolis of Edmonton to flourish with concrete and engines, to subdue the inconvenience of the snaking sipiy (and the inconvenience of Métis bodies) that cuts through the heart of the city.

I do not have such stories for Ottawa. But by heeding Caitlin Tolley's reminder from November 2015, I have a place to begin to honour my duties as a newcomer embedded

3 In 1981, the neighbourhood became the site of conflict characterized as a struggle between wealthy and impoverished Edmontonians when City Council tried to locate the Edmonton Space and Science Centre in Rossdale (Silvester 1981). The Rossdale Community League President at the time, Steven Rivers, stated: "It's all very nice for the aldermen to build monuments to themselves, but the people they're going to displace don't make very much money—they're poor people!" (Silvester 1981,78).

within the waterways of this Algonquin Territory. Elder William Commanda explained the significance of these waterways in 2010 (Asinabka 2010, 3):

> Ottawa sits on the traditional territory of the Algonquin Peoples, and this confluence of the Ottawa, Rideau and Gatineau Rivers has long served as the sacred meeting grounds of my ancestors. Asinabka, the sacred heartland, also a cultural landscape of national historic significance, includes the Chaudière Rapids, Chaudière Island and Victoria Island.

Much like pehonan in Edmonton, Asinabka has been the site of industrial development for many years. In 2012, Hydro Ottawa bought paper producer Domtar's hydro plants at Chaudiere Falls (Porter 2015). Though William Commanda worked with others to propose the Asinabka National Indigenous Centre at the site (Asinabka 2010), a different series of projects is currently being built in Asinabka. Today, Hydro Ottawa is remodelling its hydro plants on Chaudiere Falls, promising locals "a clear, up-close view of the once-majestic Chaudière Falls for the first time in more than a century" (Porter 2015). Construction has already begun on a proposed 1,200-condominium residential project, developed by Windmill Developments, at the former Domtar site (Bozikovic 2016).

Writing this article on my computer while drawing electricity from Hydro Ottawa invokes my duties to the dammed waterways of Eastern Ontario that fuel cities and industry in the region. Once you set your mind to it, it is impossible to escape our entanglements with water and watery beings in Canadian cities.

So I teach about colonial histories in municipalities in Canada by focusing on water, rivers, fish and reciprocal obligations between humans and the more-than-human. By invoking Tolley's reminder that we are working next to her ancestors' waterways, I ask my students to consider the webs of colonial and decolonial relations into which water brings us both within and outside of urban spaces. Water disrupts the neat geometries of city boundaries, disrupting the colonial imaginaries of "urban" and "rural." And water flows through Indigenous cosmologies and legal orders with life-force. Cree legal scholar Sharon Venne (2007, 1), in discussing Cree articulations of Treaty 6 at Fort Pitt and Fort Carlton in 1876, reminds us:

> I remember the Elders stating that the Treaty will last as "long as the sun shines, the waters flow, and the grass grows". The words "the waters flow" refer not to a body of water like the North Saskatchewan River, but to the water that breaks when a woman gives birth. Because Treaty is supposed to last for as long as water flows when women give birth, these words tie Cree women like me to the Treaty process.

I do not identify as Cree, though some of my ancestors were. My Métis great-grandfather, James Todd, was born at Fort Pitt in 1881 or 1882. Though not embedded in the Cree legal orders enlivened by Cree thinkers and philosophers and leaders in Fort Pitt during the negotiation of Treaty 6, his mother Marie Dusfresne's waters did indeed flow in that place, and when James retired to Edmonton's Rossdale Flats, to pehonan, some seventy years later, he resided on the shores of the same river he was born alongside. These intimate

connections among life-force, (re)birth, reciprocal obligations, and care that my great-grandfather was born into and alongside continue to circulate today in my own tending to the North Saskatchewan sipiy as philosophical teacher, interlocutor, and home.

If I can somehow bring even a taste of all of this into the classroom, I think I will have succeeded in fostering a rich engagement between my students and the Indigenous territories, waterways, and relationships they inhabit as citizens and scholars. I trust that I have encouraged students to position their movements in the academy, and their movements through cities, within a broader and underlying awareness of, and tending to, the insistent and ongoing relationships formed among Indigenous peoples, lands, laws, and those of us who are guests within unceded and unsurrendered territories.

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