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Problem at the source: Canada's role in Indigenous Water Insecurity

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Image: Work by Gerry Sheena

Originally a subcategory of military, environmental and food security in the 1990s (Cook et Bakker, 2012), since 2000, the concept of water security has broken away from the former and has been framed in ambiguous operational terms. In some cases, water security has taken on an anthropocentric definition where it comes to mean the quantity and quality of water available for political and socio-economic human purposes, while in other cases has included the environment and ecosystems. The use of the concept of water security has gone beyond its original conceptualization and made its way into wider, more popular use. According to Cook and Bakker's (2012) review of policy and academic literature across disciplines, Water Security: Debating an

emerging paradigm, water security has taken on a myriad of definitions. Nevertheless, an important commonality identified through their research was the consistent use of “security” as a suggestion of a threshold where prior to a minimum standard, water is considered “insecure”. The authors of the article explain that there has been little agreement on an international level about the expressions of water security and insecurity across the globe. In the case of arid countries, water security includes a seasonal variation facet, while where war or pollution are embedded aspects of a nation’s operations, water security becomes a geopolitical concern (Al-Otaibi et Abdel-Jawad, 2007). Geography and politics play important roles in access to water. In Canada, though hydrologically equipped, water scarcity is still a geopolitical question within its borders.

Canada controls 7% of the world’s renewable fresh water and 0.5% of the world’s human population (Lam et al., 2017). According to associate sociology professor Carmela Murdocca (2010) and Métis artist and author Christi Belcourt (2018), with such a substantial amount of fresh water, Canada has historically had a strong affiliation with water (Murdocca, 2010). Despite its abundance, water has been a source of insecurity for 10% of Canada’s population. Water security has typically been an issue in developing nations, while it has been assumed that drinking water is universally accessible in Canada (White et al., 2012). It is by no coincidence however that water has been a source of inequality among Canadians, as Canada did not vote to support the UN Committee on Human Rights to appoint a Special Rapporteur to promote the right to water (Murdocca, 2010). Canada’s federal government maintained its provincial and territorial water governance system that it enacted through the Natural Resources Transfer Act in 1930 (Basdeo et al., 2013) and opted for national water guidelines rather than national drinking water standards, like the United States or the European Union. Consequentially, this ambiguous protocol has led to only Alberta, Nova Scotia, Quebec, Ontario and Yukon adopting the guidelines (Christensen et Goucher, 2010) and with differing expressions of said guidelines.

On the heels of the Toronto Star’s November exposé (Cribb et al., 2019) highlighting the elevated levels of lead in Canadian drinking water and as the Wet’suwet’en, British Columbia and Canada conflict (Wet’suwet’en Hereditary Chief Woos et al., 2020) continues, this paper will present the systemically discriminatory practices perpetuated by the Canadian government’s legislation in differential access to clean drinking water. The paradoxical nature of access to water by marginalized Indigenous populations will be detailed through a literature review of 11 scholarly articles, selected through a keyword search on Proquest and read through a postcolonial lens. Spotlight will be placed on the contrasting differential political and media attention given to certain

populations and issues, more specifically to First Nations peoples and their limited access to secure drinking water. It will also highlight whose lack of access is problematic, whose pain warrants outrage and how who you are and where you live determine whether you have a right to water.

Drinking Water Regulations and Advisories

Health Canada can issue one of three types of drinking water advisories when water is potentially or confirmed to be unsafe for use (Health Canada, 2017). These advisories include:

1. Boil water advisories
2. Do not consume advisories
3. Do not use advisories.

According to interdisciplinary health researcher Lindsay Galway (2016), boil water advisories, the most common of the three, are often precautionary. In this case, water must be boiled before it is used for drinking, ice, brushing teeth and food preparation. Do not consume and do not use advisories are when contaminants cannot be removed by boiling and are infrequent. Regardless of advisory type issued, in his report on health and place through an examination of access to safe drinking water in a developed country, Patrick (2011) explains that Indigenous populations' source water is held under advisory far more frequently and for longer durations than the majority of the Canadian population.

The Canadian constitutional name 'Indigenous peoples' recognizes three North American people's descendants, First Nations, Métis and Inuit (Lam et al. 2017). These groups have long been plagued with a history of othering and marginalization that is only reinforced by their unequal access to clean drinking water. Some indigenous peoples live in remote areas that are designated by Canadian legislation, creating legal segregation of these groups in First Nations reserves or in other isolated geographical areas. Basdeo et al. (2013), scholars from the University of Saskatoon's School of Environment and Sustainability contend that isolation and seclusion are part of the equation of water insecurity, but the issue is more than one of proximity. For Galway (2016) it also goes beyond a technological one and rests in multilayered colonial-based problems.

Provinces and territories regulate water provision for all non-reserve residents. Water is an economic resource for non-First Nations communities (White et al., 2012). In their article comparing drinking water systems of First Nation and non-First Nation communities in Ontario, Budhendra et al. (2012), argue that large, urban communities benefit the most from water as exploitable property and are able to sustain clean drinking water. Provincial water regulation, however, does not apply on reserves (Galway, 2016). Water management for reserves is overseen by Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada, Health Canada, Environment and Climate Change Canada and First Nation communities (Galway, 2016). The federal government provides all policy

directives for this tri-departmental water regulation and 80% of funding (Budhendra et al., 2012), which, as reported by White et al.'s 2012 paper examining Canada's water paradox, is often less than half of what non-First Nation communities receive for water treatment systems. In their scoping review of Canadian peer-reviewed literature from 2000 to 2015 about drinking water and health in Indigenous communities, Bradford et al. (2016) highlight that First Nations leadership must absorb 20% of costs for infrastructure, operation, maintenance, monitoring and training operators and in some cases, they must assume 100% operating and maintenance costs. While non-First Nation communities can charge for water, Budhendra et al. (2012) suggest that First Nations are bound by the problematic structure of dependency on federal funding and resultantly, giving them, as White et al. (2012) submit, little decisional power or power in the capitalist economy.

The Example of Ontario

The 2006 Ontario Clean Water Act assigned 36 regional Conservation Authorities to develop source water protection plans in 19 regions (Collins et al., 2017). Twenty-two plans were approved in the 19 regions and funded by the province (Collins et al., 2017). Within those regional boundaries were 27 First Nation communities. For any of those 27 communities to opt into provincial source water protection plans, they would have had to forgo their treaty rights and participate in a source water protection voting committee, that would be disproportionately representative of non-First Nation communities (Budhendra et al., 2012).



Image: Work by Gerry Sheena

The role of government, media, finances and legislation in water security

Murdocca (2010) postulates that Canada's first peoples did not choose their current location, they were displaced by colonial powers that saw them as internal enemies or contaminants of racial purity. In keeping with colonial tradition, Indigenous populations do not profit from residence in the global North. Communicated by Galway's (2016) analysis, First Nation communities experience a 26 times higher number of water-borne infections than the national average. People living on reserves are 90 times more likely to have no access to running water. And Patrick (2011) indicates that boil water advisories are 2.5 times more frequent in First Nation communities than in non-First Nation communities and 30% of First Nation communities' water systems are classified as high-risk systems. Bradford et al. (2016) explain that in some Indigenous regions water must be trucked in, while in the case of Rigolet, Labrador, water from potable water dispensing units must be collected from a station, transported home and stored in household containers (Wright et al. 2017). Access to a life-sustaining resource is restricted for Indigenous peoples in comparison to much of the Canadian population, predicated on their status as 'other' or an independent population.

Not only is the resource of water itself constrained for this racialized group, but tools for enabling access, such a legislation, media and finances, are also differentially available to them.

In May of 2000, when residents of Walkerton, Ontario were struck by an E. Coli outbreak, it warranted national attention. Based on Lam et al.'s (2017) search and analysis of prominent national newspapers, it was found that those newspapers featured 652 articles on the town over two years and in that same time new provincial water policy was introduced. Those newspapers, however, published 131 news stories, over sixteen years, about poor water quality in Indigenous communities and only incited the country's introduction of the Safe Drinking Water for First Nations Act, eight years after a similar, but much longer standing incident of E. Coli in Kashechewan, Ontario (Lam et al., 2017). With water security being a chronic problem among Indigenous groups, the issue has become commonplace, spurring public and governmental complacency, out of sight, out of mind.

In Patrick's article, research shows that water interventions are restricted by institutional and jurisdictional factors rather than technical or scientific. Bill S-8, mentioned above, The Safe Drinking Water for First Nations Act, was unconstitutional and in violation of Treaty rights, allowing the federal government the right to enforce standards without mandating funding to support the implementation of the new standards. In Source Water Protection Planning for Ontario First Nations Communities: Case Studies Identifying Challenged and Outcomes, Collins et al. (2017) assert that the act relied on First Nation Chiefs and Councils to execute plans without new funding.

A lack of funding largely hinders the training and operation process. Without adequate training, equipment malfunction has been the most common reason for water advisories, where further operator training has been required (Galway, 2016). Bradford

et al. (2016) points out that training programs are often in urban areas with different governing systems, making it difficult to train and retain certified water operators. Without sufficient funding to implement them, standards are trivial.

The power held by the federal government over this marginalized group forces them to submit to the state's objectification of them. "The colonized have been governed" (Murdocca, 2010). While painted as outsiders by the Canadian government, this group is forced to adopt the government's view of water, where water is a resource to be exploited, though as Basdeo et al. (2013) reveal, the perspective among some First Nations is that it is a resource to be shared. It is also traditionally believed to have holistic properties that affect both physical and spiritual health (Lam et al., 2017). Even though water is often considered sacred and possessing healing and spiritual relationships, current policy neglects this cultural perspective and obligates Indigenous peoples to explain their culture to outsiders (Murdocca, 2010) in order to be included or legitimized in, what postcolonial theorists Tuck and Yang (2014) call, a damage-centered legal and political framework.

Differential Access Leads to Different Results

With precarious access to potable water, Indigenous populations have endured negative consequences. They have primarily been affected through health concerns but have also suffered time and economic burdens.

The primary health implication for First Nation communities is gastrointestinal issues, appearing 26 times more frequently among these groups than among other Canadians (Bradford et al., 2016). There are many other illnesses that have resulted from the consumption and use of water in First Nation communities that are not as exorbitantly present among other Canadian groups. In an analysis of perceptions of municipal tap water in northern Canada, Wright et al. (2017) expose that the resulting distrust in tap water has led First Nations to have higher odds of believing someone has fallen sick from their tap water, compared to non-First Nations (Wright et al., 2017). In attempting to resist the effects of poor water quality, Ontario First Nations were shown to be 9 times more likely to be solely reliant on bottled water than non-First Nations (Wright et al., 2017). This response has had further negative impacts on First Nation communities, coercing them to bare a financial burden to access clean drinking water.

The economic burden is felt by both the individual and the community. Individuals must spend significant amounts of wages on bottled water (Galway, 2016), while the community must provide 20% of its budget to finance clean water. These budgetary funds are diverted from education and child welfare (White et al., 2012), leading to further economic depression in these remote areas (Basdeo et al., 2013). If communities are unsuccessful in providing clean water, school closures usually follow water supply contamination (Galway, 2016), exacerbating the already lower than average educational attainment of First Nations (White et al., 2012). The boil water

advisories that accompany water contamination also pose a time constraint on individuals as they must spend enormous amounts of time boiling water. Galway (2016) highlights that this poses heightened difficulty during long-term advisories and especially for the chronically ill, pregnant mothers, children and the elderly.

The devaluing of this groups' time, finances and health is clearly demonstrated through the government's disregard for Indigenous populations' access to clean water.

Access to clean water for Indigenous peoples was an aim discussed during the Canadian federal election in October 2015 (Lam et al., 2017). It has since been addressed by the Trudeau government through a five-year timeframe for the eradication of water issues (Collins et al., 2017). In March 2016, Trudeau committed \$8.4 billion to Indigenous communities with \$1.8 billion specifically to water (Galway, 2016). The time interval has not expired, so we await successful results.



Image: Work by Gerry Sheena

Conclusion

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada has mandated greater representation of Indigenous peoples and non-discriminatory portrayal of Indigenous issues in media and legislation (Lam et al. 2017). The current federal government is attempting to adhere to this commission by treating water insecurity among Indigenous groups. In trying to close this gap, the government is trying to make amends for a systemic injustice that created enormous disparities in the value of health, finances and time between Canada's first peoples' descendants and settler populations' descendants.

Some research has already been done to offer insight into First Nation communities, but limited literature has been published about Métis and Inuit groups. This type of limited research further creates inequalities within marginalized groups. Presently, water security is a function of who you are within Canadian borders and not of equal access.

The idea of this paper is not to be speaking for (Alcoff, 1991) Indigenous communities, as I cannot compare my lived experience to those experiencing water insecurity. But rather as a member of the triad of settler colonialism, I aim to ask the questions of 'where are these stories of resource insecurity?' and 'whose water security matters?'. I am careful not to focus on pain as Belcourt (2018) suggests and am mindful of academic and writer Saidiya Hartman's (1997) call not to emphasize the most dramatic stories of injustice. My objective is simply to highlight the absences and gaps where these stories of water insecurity should be. So many have been enthralled by the pain of First Nations and so my focus is shifted away from those in pain and to the perpetrators who inflict pain through inequality and injustice. In acknowledging another's pain, we allow an opening for histories of injury to be heard and sanctioned through what postcolonial theorist Sara Ahmed (2014) terms the ethics of pain. As a co-conspirator with those experiencing the pain of water insecurity, I emphasize the state's monopoly on justice from its indisputable dominance over the territory (Tuck et Yang, 2016) and how this contributes to the superposed structure of settler colonialism utilizing water as a tool that we command, paddling away from recognizing the Indigenous proverb that "we need everything to survive, and nothing needs us" (Belcourt, 2018 : 114).

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