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Water, Stories, and Ceremony: Exploring Indigenous Sovereignty and Governance Through Water

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This photo was taken on Reindeer Lake in Kisipakamak (Brochet/Barren Lands First Nation), northern Manitoba. Kisipakamak means "where the water ends" in Cree, a name that reflects the relationship between the land, water, and people living there. Image Credit: Malcolm Disbrowe.

Tansi, hello. My name is Malcolm Disbrowe, I am an Anisininew, Cree, and Métis man. My mother is Cree and Métis, while my father is Anisininew and Métis. I identify with both lines of my family, First Nation (Anisininew and Cree) and Métis,

with my family's lines coming from the Red River Métis. As an Indigenous man, I have grown up around family, connecting to the land, and land-based ways of being. I was born in northern Manitoba and have called Barren Lands First Nation my home for 15 years before moving for my education. It is through education that I hope to gain a deeper understanding of myself and other Indigenous Peoples so I can help develop ideas that support Indigenous communities in living in a good way. Writing, like the reflections in this article, is one way I hope to share knowledge and perspectives. I believe stories offer us an important way of understanding the past, present, and future.

This article focuses on Indigenous communities in Canadian prairies, especially Manitoba, where water insecurity and hydro development impact many Indigenous communities' traditional and long-standing relationships with water. In this article, hydro development refers not only to physical and artificial features of land, such as dams and diversions, but also serves as a broader analytical frame to understand how colonialism prioritizes industrial capital at the expense of Indigenous communities' sovereignty, cultural ways of being, and relational responsibilities to water and land.

Water holds great cultural, spiritual, and social significance to Indigenous Peoples, including here in the prairies. Water is powerful. It has enough power to sweep people away and ravage land. For many Indigenous Peoples, water is more than a physical feature of the land; water is a living relative that weaves itself into teachings, identity, and memory. Autumn Peltier, an Anishinaabe activist, states, "Water is medicine. It's not just a resource. It's a right, and it's a basic human right that everyone deserves to have." (as cited in NWAC, n.d.).

This statement highlights the relational thoughts and practices that many Indigenous Peoples maintain with water. However, within cityscapes, these connections get disrupted. Environmental degradation, colonialism, and hydro development have been particularly harmful to Indigenous Peoples' relationships with water in Manitoba (Thompson, 2015). Access to rivers, lakes, and basins that once held social, cultural, and spiritual significance is limited (Martinez-Cruz et al., 2024). For many Indigenous Peoples throughout Canada, the rivers and water now carry stories of grief and disconnection.

This article examines how Indigenous narratives of water challenge colonialism and colonial understandings of land use, whilst asserting Indigenous sovereignty and advocating for environmental justice. By examining water-related knowledge, this

article highlights how Indigenous Peoples continue to develop meanings and reclaim their Indigeneity through their relationships with waterways. Drawing on current media, Indigenous scholarship, and community advocacy, this article further argues that water is critical for healing, memory, and resistance, and recognizing these narratives is essential to addressing ongoing water injustices in the Canadian prairies. It is through stories and knowledge about water that Indigenous People assert their rights to land, water, and self-determination, thus illustrating how a river's flow can carry memories and pathways toward cultural resurgence and sovereignty (Leonard et al., 2023).

Dispossession and Colonialism in Water Sovereignty

In recent history, colonialism shaped the relationship between water, land, and Indigenous Peoples in the prairies, displacing Indigenous communities and disrupting time-honoured ceremonies. Early colonization imposed new land ownership systems (ex. the pass and reservation systems) that disregarded Indigenous ways of relating to the land and water (Atleo & Boron, 2022). Furthermore, hydro development, pipelines, and disputed infrastructure that accompanied the construction of large cities fragmented Indigenous Peoples' access to water sources, straining essential cultural connections. In Manitoba, hydro development has significantly reshaped how waterways, lands, and even communities are perceived and governed. Often occurring without the consent of Indigenous Peoples, this issue is central to the conversation regarding water sovereignty in the Canadian prairies.

Hydro development, which includes dams, river diversions, flooding, and water regulation systems has impacted, and continues to impact, northern Indigenous communities in Manitoba. Projects like the Lake Winnipeg Regulation and Churchill River Diversion dramatically changed how water flows within and around northern Manitoba (Brown et al., 2024). By flooding traditional territories of surrounding communities and displacing Indigenous communities, these disruptions have created long-term environmental and social consequences, including the erosion of cultural practices tied to fishing, gathering, and ceremony (Thompson, 2015).

Boil water advisories are another persistent marker of water insecurity in Indigenous communities across Manitoba, including those with ties to Winnipeg

(Zambrano-Alvarado & Uyaguari-Diaz, 2024). While many urban residents may take clean drinking water for granted, Indigenous communities have endured decades of restricted access to safe drinking water. This inequity reflects broader patterns of environmental racism, where Indigenous Peoples are disproportionately affected by inadequate infrastructure and contaminated water.

Despite these disruptions, Indigenous communities continue to resist water dispossession and advocate for sovereignty over water. Groups such as the Wa Ni Ska Tan Alliance of Hydro-Impacted Communities and the Lake Winnipeg Indigenous Collective work to raise awareness, promote Indigenous-led governance, and lead projects to restore impaired waterways. These efforts illustrate how Indigenous communities and collectives are resilient in reclaiming water as a relative, striving towards self-determination and cultural continuity.

Through understanding activism and even dispossession, Indigenous Peoples continually challenge colonial narratives that frame water as a commodity. Instead, these narratives assert water's role as a living relative – one that demands care, respect, and relational accountability.

Using Stories as a Means of Healing

For many Indigenous Peoples, storytelling is a powerful tool for reclaiming and strengthening relationships with the water and lands (Mussi, 2021). Within urban spaces like Winnipeg, stories emerge as a way to heal, grow resilience, and resist adversity (Rieger et al., 2020). For example, the Walking With Our Sisters art installation, which visited Winnipeg, honoured missing and murdered Indigenous women, girls, and Two-Spirit people. The installation displayed over 18,000 pairs of vamps from moccasins, with each pair symbolizing a life that ended too soon. Red Rising Magazine, developed in Winnipeg, is another example. The magazine is an Indigenous-led publication that provides Indigenous Peoples with a platform to share their stories, which often challenge colonial narratives. Stories touch on aspects of trauma, identity, and connections to land and water, reflecting on ways of healing and moving forward. Thus, initiatives that involve storytelling can help communities navigate the complex feelings that arise during times of struggle while fostering a relational mindset when interacting with the land and water.

In storytelling, Elders can share their narratives to teach balance, renewal, and kinship. For example, in conjunction with water, storytelling is used in sweat lodges

to facilitate healing among individuals. This ceremony is one of many that highlights how water and storytelling can support mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual well-being. Other ceremonies involving water may be viewed through different lenses. For example, many Indigenous Peoples consider major life events, such as the birth of a child, as ceremonies. Such practices provide spaces for reflection and hope, blending emotions with a sense of renewal and healing (Absolon, 2010; Hartmann & Gone, 2012).

Stories about water and land also play a powerful role in preserving cultural knowledge (K'ah Skáahluwáa Todd et al., 2023). Storytellers can teach others how respect, responsibility, reciprocity, and relationships are maintained by sharing memories and teachings about the lands and water. These narratives enable youth and children to develop an understanding of the importance of the land, water, and ceremony, all of which can help younger people recognize their role as protectors, teachers, and stewards of the land and water for future generations.

Indigenous-led advocacy for water often incorporates storytelling to connect lived experiences with calls for systemic change (Acharibasam et al., 2024). For example, CUPE National Indigenous Council members spoke out in support of water sovereignty. They shared personal narratives of water insecurity, highlighting the emotional and cultural impacts of environmental harm (see CUPE, 2023). Stories like these are powerful tools for educating policymakers and the broader public about Indigenous worldviews, advancing calls for water governance rooted in Indigenous values.

By sharing these narratives, Indigenous Peoples demonstrate their relationship with water as a source of identity and resistance–these connections with the lands and water challenge colonial narratives of loss and disconnection. Rather than being disconnected from the land, Indigenous Peoples are reclaiming their cultural ways of being and knowing. Thus, despite injustice and inequity, Indigenous Peoples continue to foster deep connections to water and their traditional waterways.

Visioning Indigenous Sovereignty in Water Governance

Indigenous knowledge of the land and water enables researchers and others to re-envision governance and sovereignty, focusing on Indigenous rights, values, and knowledge systems. This focus encompasses Indigenous perspectives on water,

allowing non-Indigenous persons to view the land and water from a relational perspective (Hurlbert et al., 2024). With this new perspective, policymakers, researchers, and advocates can work towards a more sustainable and just water governance system within and out of Winnipeg.

Indigenous governance is relational–it is how Indigenous Peoples, Indigenous Nations, and Indigenous communities make decisions and exercise authority (Mills et al., 2017). Additionally, relational accountability emerges, which refers to humans' or Indigenous Peoples' responsibilities toward the water and the land as living beings (Datta et al., 2025; Wilson, 2019). This way of being and knowing differs from contemporary Western legal traditions. Western legal frameworks often manage and commodify water as a resource through ventures such as hydro development within Indigenous territories. On the other hand, Indigenous-led initiatives are part of community-driven strategies that prioritize ecological health, revitalization, and collective well-being of communities, lands, and waters.

One example of Indigenous sovereignty pushing for Indigenous Water governance is the Anishinaabe Water (Nibi) Walks. The walks demonstrate how storytelling, ceremony, and activism blend to promote water protection and overall well-being, encompassing ecological, spiritual, mental, and physical health (Chiblow, 2019). During the walk, individuals share stories, visit, and offer prayers to the water bodies they pass. The walks also call attention to dangers that local waterways are facing. These walks (ceremonies) are just one of many ways to demonstrate Indigenous sovereignty. As Indigenous Peoples assert their inherent rights to care for and protect water according to Indigenous teachings, they are reclaiming (and asserting) their power and identities.

Indigenous legal frameworks, such as the Anishinaabe Nibi Inaakonigewin (Anishinaabe Water Law), provide a pathway for transforming governance and sovereignty related to water on a macro scale (Craft et al., 2021). Indigenous legal frameworks often emphasize the importance of treating water with respect and recognizing it as possessing inherent rights, similar to those of any person. By integrating these legal frameworks into municipal and provincial governments, policies can shift and highlight one way to address environmental racism, water insecurity, and the adverse effects of hydro development in Manitoba (Arsenault et al., 2018).

By focusing on Indigenous perspectives, water governance strategies can move beyond solutions and embrace holistic approaches that address water's cultural,

emotional, and spiritual dimensions. Indigenous water narratives reveal that healing waterways is inseparable from healing communities and relationships with the land.

Reclaiming Rights and Responsibilities through Indigenous Water Sovereignty

Indigenous Peoples' sovereignty over water is recognized as one of their inherent rights. These rights encourage Indigenous Peoples to govern, protect, and sustain the lands and waters in accordance with their spiritual and cultural practices (Hurlbert et al., 2024). For many Indigenous Peoples in the prairies, practicing and reclaiming water sovereignty involves maintaining cyclical and meaningful relationships with waters within their territories. Water sovereignty also includes asserting rights for water, recognizing it as an animate (or living) being. This concept extends beyond cultural frameworks grounded in relational accountability, where water is a relative (Acharibasam et al., 2024).

Advocacy towards Indigenous Peoples' water sovereignty is happening in Canada. Organizations and collectives of non-Indigenous and Indigenous Peoples strive towards Indigenous-led water governance by combining Western scientific research and traditional Indigenous Knowledge through Two-Eyed Seeing approaches. (Arsenault et al., 2018; Leonard et al., 2022). For example, the Unama'ki Institute of Natural Resources and the Atlantic Policy Congress of First Nations Chiefs Secretariat are collaborating to protect Indigenous Knowledge of the water and ocean while fostering knowledge exchanges between Indigenous fishermen and scientists. This work highlights the importance of engaging with water and land from an Indigenous worldview, as this worldview emphasizes intergenerational responsibility, balance, and stewardship.

Supporting First Nations in Manitoba impacted by hydro-dam development is also part of Indigenous Peoples' water sovereignty. By documenting the various harms caused by hydro projects, researchers and advocates can elevate Indigenous voices in policy discussions and work toward healing the relationships between Indigenous Peoples and the water. These actions enable many to understand how water sovereignty for Indigenous Peoples protects water while revitalizing cultural identity, Indigenous languages, and traditional land practices.

Recognizing Indigenous Peoples' sovereignty in and out of water requires changing how non-Indigenous persons view policy and the government (Leonard et al., 2023; McKibbin, 2023). For example, provincial and federal governments must be able to create spaces for Indigenous voices in water governance, as upholding Indigenous voices is part of respecting Indigenous laws and protocols related to the land and water. Voice in governance also includes assisting and developing Indigenous-led water monitoring programs, investing in water-related cultural revitalization efforts, and maintaining that decision-making processes support Indigenous self-determination in and out of water.

Ultimately, Indigenous water sovereignty illuminates a path toward environmental justice and equity, enabling the preservation of Indigenous Knowledge, accountability, and water protection for future generations (Acharibasam et al., 2024; Menzies et al., 2024).

Reindeer Lake in Kisipakamak (Brochet/Barren Lands First Nation), northern Manitoba. Image Credit: Malcolm Disbrowe.

Moving Towards Water Justice

Indigenous Knowledge and stories revolving around water and the land highlight that water is more than a resource; it is a living, relational being. Water connects communities to their identities, homelands, and each other (Leonard et al., 2023). Understanding water in this relational sense challenges larger governance frameworks that reduce water to a commodity. Reimagining water security through an Indigenous rights lens that prioritizes land-based Knowledge, spiritual connections, and community resilience will also amplify Indigenous Peoples' stories, sovereignty, and governance (Datta et al., 2025).

Governments, advocacy groups, and policymakers must engage meaningfully with Indigenous Knowledge and communities to achieve effective water governance. Doing so includes taking action and pushing for consultations and storytelling between governments and Indigenous communities. These interactions also require supporting Indigenous-led initiatives such as the Lake Winnipeg Indigenous Collective and the Wa Ni Ska Tan Alliance. These two groups demonstrate that water security and solutions to water insecurity must align with Indigenous communities' understanding of water as a sacred and interconnected entity.

The mental, emotional, spiritual, and physical impacts of water insecurity–including grief, trauma, and displacement–must be addressed through culturally responsive supports that acknowledge the emotional and spiritual importance of water loss (Morton Ninomiya et al., 2023). This support may involve community healing circles, land-based programming, and partnerships between mental health providers, Indigenous Knowledge Keepers, and communities.

Ultimately, achieving water justice and governance on the prairies requires centring Indigenous sovereignty and storytelling in governance frameworks. Indigenous narratives surrounding water offer wisdom into how communities can build resilience, strengthen cultural identity, and restore relationships with the land and water (Acharibasam et al., 2024). Listening to these stories allows everyone to take an important step toward justice, healing, and reconciliation.

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Malcolm Disbrowe (he/him) is an Indigenous student in the Department of Psychology at the University of Manitoba. He is from northern Manitoba, where he was raised in Kisipikamak (Where the Water Ends), or Barren Lands First Nation. Malcolm's academic research and interests include understanding Indigenous theory and perspectives through community-based, qualitative, and mixed-methods frameworks. With his background as a northern Indigenous student from an isolated community, he hopes to shed light on issues that Indigenous Peoples in northern and isolated contexts face, such as access to proper mental health care, issues with food security, and developing community capacity.