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A Habitable Future: Reflections on water governance and Indigenous sovereignty

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On June 15th, 2023, the Centre for Human Rights Research hosted Dr. Jeffrey Ansloos for a seminar on "When the land hurts: Indigenous feminism on suicide, environmental violence, and the struggle for inhabitability." Dr. Ansloos is an Associate Professor of Indigenous Health and Social Policy and the Canada Research Chair in Critical Studies in Indigenous Health and Social Action on Suicide at the University of Toronto. He is Cree and English and a member of Fisher River Cree Nation. In this seminar, Dr. Ansloos presented the results of his pilot study that links water insecurity and environmental degradation to higher suicide rates in First Nations communities (within Ontario).

This article is divided into two sections: an overview of Ansloos' work and my reflections on Ansloos' call to "envision a life beyond the state." As such, I begin this article with Ansloos' seminar, which tied neoliberalism's environmental degradation to First Nations suicide. I then reflect on Indigenous knowledge and sovereignty, commenting on an implicit requirement for Indigenous sovereignty: the recognition and validation of Indigenous knowledge. That this article is a jumble of topics demonstrates, as Ansloos does, the totalizing power of the settler state, which can blur the connections between categories like "suicide" and "water insecurity."

Ansloos, 'When the land hurts.'

Suicide is endemic within First Nations communities, and death by suicide disproportionately affects First Nations communities compared to Canada's non-Indigenous population. According to Statistics Canada, for the period 2011-2016, the suicide rate among First Nations people was "three times higher than the

suicide rate among non-Indigenous people."[1] Even among First Nations people, a disparity exists based on where one lives. For those living on reserve, the suicide rate "was about twice as high as" those living off reserve.[2] However, disproportionate suicide rates are by no means a new issue. Several inquiries through the years have linked First Nations suicide with the social determinants of health. For instance, Ansloos and Cooper identify that in as early as 1995, the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) attributed First Nations risk of suicide to biopsychological, situational, and socioeconomic factors, as well as "cultural stressors (e.g., suppression of belief systems and spirituality, racial discrimination)."[3] When analyzing reasons behind the disparate rates of suicide, Ansloos argues that suicide as it currently stands is overly focused on the individualized psychological expressions of a collective trauma—namely, settler colonialism. For example, although RCAP implicates settler colonialism in determining First Nations suicide, it does so in the veil of naming the effects of settler colonialism (i.e., "cultural stressors"). It neglects to address what settler colonialism boils down to: an assault on a collective's self-determination. First Nations suicide does not occur in a vacuum; instead, as Ansloos aptly quotes Belcourt, "suicide emerges as a political response to structurally manufactured sorrow."[4]

In this reductionist view, Ansloos says suicide is reduced to an issue that is treated at the individual level. In addition to explicitly naming settler colonialism in connection to First Nations suicide, Ansloos is contributing to the emerging field of critical suicidology by drawing on scholars such as Jennifer White. White criticizes the reductionist view that individualizes collective problems: "It is within the larger context of a neoliberal, capitalist, patriarchal, and colonial paradigm, where social problems are individualized and privatized, and inequalities are converted into forms of pathology."[5] White gives an example by referencing when the Pimicikamak Cree Nation and Attawapiskat First Nation declared states of emergency due to youth suicide epidemics in their communities. Of the response, she writes: "The immediate focus was on responding to the crisis and ensuring the community had access to a full range of support services,"[6] rather than examining the systems contributing to these communities' situations: their situations are taken 'as is'—their sorrow is a given.

Importantly, however, Ansloos is not arguing against providing the "full range of support services" that treat suicide and suicidal ideation. Instead, in rethinking suicide as an expression of collective trauma, Ansloos advocates that any strategy for suicide prevention must also address these political structures that, in Belcourt's

words, manufactures sorrow for First Nations; these issues, Ansloos argues, include water insecurity, neoliberal environmental policies, and the suppression of Indigenous sovereignty. By highlighting the relationship between First Nations suicide rates and settler colonial structures, Ansloos seeks to shift away from addressing suicide as an individual mental health problem and towards recognizing suicide prevention as a collective responsibility.

In following White's work that propels people to engage in critical suicidology, Ansloos and Cooper's exploratory study of suicide rates among First Nations communities in Ontario suggests that persistent water insecurity may contribute to higher suicide rates in First Nations communities. The issue of water insecurity in First Nations communities reached public discourse as the Liberal government promised to eliminate long-term drinking water advisories (LT-DWA) on reserves by March 2021; however, 2021 passed, and 2025 became the new hesitant deadline.[7] While water insecurity on reserves only recently entered the limelight, inaccessible drinking water has long been the reality for many First Nation communities: Neskantaga has had a boil water advisory for 28 years; Shoal Lake 40 ended its boil water advisory in 2021 after 24 years—and subsequently sued the City of Winnipeg for the damaging impacts the city caused when sourcing its drinking water from Shoal Lake over a century ago. There has been progress in reducing the number of LT-DWAs, but more continue to crop up as the root causes remain unaddressed.[8] Altogether, persistent water insecurity on reserves stems from the state's infrastructural neglect, further exacerbated by resource extraction's environmental degradation.

Ansloos ended his seminar with a few provocations for the audience. First, rehabilitating suicide prevention as a political project means understanding suicide within First Nations communities "as an effect of, and firmly contextualized within, the project of settler colonialism and global extractivist capitalism." Second, increasing mental health services/funding is not enough; we must also address the swath of racist and neoliberal policies that degrade the environment and support the "persistent material deprivation of Indigenous life" (e.g., housing and other social socioeconomic factors). Third, with "courage and imagination [we can] envision a life beyond the state." As Ansloos states, "Central to suicide is the question of sovereignty of land, of water, and of our Nations." We must enhance First Nations' self-determination over our lands, waters, and lives.

Reflections: A Habitable Future Beyond the State

Image 1: Pictography of Mishibijiw on the shores of Lake Superior. Mishibijiw is an Objiwe water spirit and this site is considered sacred to Batchewana First Nation. ©2015 Sammer Muscati/Human Rights Watch

Image 2: A drawing by the grandson of Chief Dean Sayers, Batchewana First Nation, highlighting the importance of Mishibijiw, an Objibwe water spirit. ©2015 Sammer Muscati/Human Rights Watch

During Ansloos' talk, my thoughts went to different conceptions of water and what this means for Indigenous water governance and sovereignty. A few weeks before Ansloos' talk, I attended the Nibi Gathering, a multi-day gathering that centres around "Nibi Onje Biimaadiziwin," or "water is life"; on my morning visit, we gathered in a lodge to listen to stories and teachings focused on this principle. Student research assistant Eliza Maharjan (Centre for Human Rights Research) also attended and wrote a piece reflecting on her experiences describing the transformation her view on water took from "merely [being] this non-living entity that aided my survival" to understanding how an animate view of water introduces relational obligations. Ultimately, water "is to be protected, respected, and in the end, celebrated."[9] The Anishinaabeg of Treaty 3 exemplify this paradigmatic understanding of water through the Nibi (Water) Declaration, which affirms how Anishinaabeg relate to water as a living spirit. Knowing that water is living generates relational obligations for Anishinaabeg: just as water sustains us and all of creation, we must maintain and protect water for future generations.[10] This relational view is very different than viewing water as simply water, a dispassionate collection of molecules forming a resource to consume. Ultimately, this distinction speaks to how Indigenous ways of being and knowing are fundamentally distinct from western Eurocentric thought and practices.

Furthermore, worldviews also affect how people govern and how nations relate with other nations, including to their "territory" western Eurocentric legal orders confine conceptions of sovereignty to exclusive control over a territory and the exclusive right to exercise force within that territory—otherwise known as Westphalian sovereignty. In contrast to western Eurocentric thought, Indigenous legal orders "exist as—and were created through—a relationship with both a specific territory and other nations within that territory."[11] Because of this emphasis on relational responsibilities, Indigenous conceptions of sovereignty recognize that multiple sovereigns can share territories: "it was not territorial "exclusivity" that was privileged, but rather responsibility as it is the absence of rights and the presence of an underlying philosophy of responsibilities that remains central within Indigenous traditions."[12] Thus, Indigenous water governance, accepting responsibility for water's wellbeing, is part of Indigenous sovereignty.

How Indigenous water governance might look in practice will vary depending on the Nation. For instance, on the West Coast, some First Nations declared Indigenous Marine Protected and Conserved Areas (IPCA),[13] areas of "lands and waters where Indigenous governments have the primary role in protecting and conserving ecosystems through Indigenous laws, governance and knowledge systems."[14] Declaring an IPCA adheres to Indigenous law and does not seek legal permission or recognition from the settler state—although, keeping within Indigenous sovereignty practices, federal and provincial governments are invited to collaborate: as Michelle Gamage reports, "the [Kitasoo Xai'xais] nation declared [Kitasu Bay] a protected area under their own laws, closing it to commercial harvest by non-Indigenous fishers. Their declaration invited the provincial and federal governments to work with them to develop a co-governance model, but added, 'we seek no permission.'"[15] As Ansloos suggests, Indigenous water governance—as expressions of Indigenous sovereignty—can build towards a habitable future for Indigenous lives.

Settler colonialism is predicated on the devaluing and delegitimizing of Indigenous knowledge practices; if our goal is to break the settler colonial relationship, we must re-consider our understanding of Indigenous knowledge and see its potential. I see this implication in Ansloos' call for anti-capitalist, decolonial action: embrace Indigenous knowledge practices as distinct from western Eurocentrism and recognize their value, not only intrinsically but for Indigenous self-governance—connecting to Ansloos' call to "envision a life beyond the state."

About the Author

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