

Conceptualizing Water: A Critical Reflection

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A major portfolio submitted to the Faculty of Environmental Studies in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master in Environmental Studies

York University, Toronto, Ontario, Canada

November 30th, 2016

Foreword

This major project is submitted to the faculty of Environmental Studies as a partial requirement of the degree of Master in Environmental Studies.

This component of the major portfolio incorporates previous work that is outlined in the Plan of Study (POS): conceptualizing broader understandings of water and water justice in Indigenous law.

The POS that this work incorporates is from three areas of concentration. The first examines Indigenous and natural law in relation to water and water justice in Ontario, the second is the role of Women (Indigenous and non-Indigenous) have to water, and thirdly, I incorporate the significance of water from my own lens and further approaches toward water justice.

I have met these learning objectives by incorporating wisdom from Indigenous elders, literature and interviews from Indigenous scholars and activists, as well as personal photography and poetry emerging out of my own lived experiences with water. My purpose is to expand the ways we approach issues of water by bringing together different understandings of water, to bridge gaps and work toward reviving the human relationship to the element we need most.

Introduction

I happen to be comprised of 70% water and 30% emotions. In essence, this is how I relate and position myself in relation to this research. I have always been interested in how dominant views shape the way humans interact with the environment. Water is something I believed to focus my research toward after completing my undergraduate degree in social work. It was not until I began my Master program that I really sat down and thought about different conceptions of water and our interactions with it as human beings. Water is essential for all life and is what connects us in many cultures. Speaking of water brings many things into consideration. From the metaphorical to political in its varying uses and significance, water is more than what we often see it as. Water is a topic of growing momentum today. Pipeline protests across North America have indicated that there has never been a more important time to ensure the health and longevity of water all over the planet.

The goal of this document is to provide an overview of relationships, wisdom and approaches to water and water justice and how it can be conceptualized through Indigenous worldview. It is organized in three chapters: the first addresses the differences of water in Western/dominant worldview and in Indigenous law, how the commodification and bottling of water has adversely affected the environment and health, as well as highlighting some problems it has led to in Ontario. The second chapter discusses Indigenous women's knowledge and connection to water, the negative health impacts of polluted water on reproductive roles and the importance of recognizing women in mobilizing change for water justice. Lastly, I incorporate the significance of water from my own lens through self-reflection and personal experiences to inspire a more comprehensive understanding of it.

The second part of the major portfolio is an 8 minute film titled *The Significance of Water*. It is uploaded on YouTube available for viewing:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ONBclWfP1pA>

I believed that having a visual component was important in both expressing and doing more justice to water rather than simply writing about it. I attempted to represent water and the many interchanges I shared with it. The film includes rain, ripples, lakes and landscapes with footage gathered from Toronto, Northern Ontario and Hawaii. My film also incorporates views of Indigenous law on water and includes interviews from Indigenous women on the issue. The purpose of my film is to provide viewers with a fresh perspective on water and what we can do to help re-purpose the current relationship humans have with it. I believe it is important to engage with water more directly in order to understand how to provide justice for it.

My research approach uses Indigenous theory that honors participants and their communities in the research process as well as visual methods and experiential learning that is relayed through critical thought and reflection. Research methods I have undertaken involve video interviews I conducted with Josephine Mandamin and Sue Chiblow from Professor McGregor's research project "Indigenous Environmental Justice: Theory and Practice". As a part of my data collection I incorporated symposium footage from Sydney Nolan who spoke on the youth panel and knowledge from public discussions and gatherings I attended, from Isaac Day, Vanessa Grey and Stanley Peltier. Along with this, I incorporated literature from Indigenous scholars to help develop my ideas throughout the paper while using my own self-reflection, personal photography and poetry. My portfolio will contribute to a larger research project on

Indigenous environmental justice for Professor McGregor and will be available for knowledge sharing, research and/or private study.

Acknowledgements

I would first like to thank and acknowledge the Anishinabek People for sharing their traditional wisdom and knowledge, for the greater good of their communities and more broadly, the planet we all need to live and breathe.

I would also like to give my sincerest thanks to my supervisor Deborah McGregor, for providing the light, guidance, patience and encouragement throughout my learning journey, especially during the rougher times. I have faith in the benefit of sharing the information this document and film will provide. Thank you, for wanting to see me succeed.

To my late father, who was also my best friend, who always provided me with a voice of reason and never to give up in what I believe in. To my mother and sisters, whose efforts and lessons taught me what I needed to learn in order to develop and pursue my goals.

And finally, to my cherished partner Muhammad, for your kindness, generosity, on-going support when I needed it the most.

Table of Contents

Chapter 1 Water in Western and Indigenous Contexts.....	p.1
Chapter 2 Women and Water.....	p.13
Chapter 3 Significance of Water.....	p.23

Table of Images

Image 1 Lake Superior.....	p. 1
Image 2 Hanuama Bay.....	p.2
Image 3 Nestle Water.....	p. 6
Image 4 The Story of Bottled Water.....	p. 8
Image 5 Road map of Toronto to Sue Sault Marie.....	p.9
Image 6 Sue Chiblow.....	p. 10
Image 7 Terrarium Science Center.....	p.13
Image 8 North Shore.....	p.15
Image 9 Josephine Mandamin.....	p.18
Image 10 Toronto Skyline.....	p.23
Image 11 Standing Rock Rally at Queen’s Park Toronto.....	p.25
Image 12 Sue Chiblow and Tantoo Cardinal at Standing Rock Rally Toronto.....	p.26
Image 13 Ojibway Park Great Lakes Gathering.....	p. 31

Chapter 1: Water in Western and Indigenous Contexts



Image: Location: Lake Superior, Sault St. Marie, ON. July, 2016.

*Without water
There just would not be
Any you or any me
It is our first environment within our Mother's womb.
Water is far more than a drink to be consumed.
All beings are comprised of it.
And there are clear effects
Seeing it is polluted.
Water is critical and is
The pinnacle of sustaining life*

*To being a 'natural resource'
Listening to the Elders speak
Helps me understand
The significance water had
On the lives
Of those before them.*

Along with being critical for survival, water has the potential to help restore peace or destroy anything that comes within its path. In Indigenous culture there is an integral spiritual connection to water. In the Creation and re-Creation stories, earth is a living entity bearing special responsibilities for the continuation of life (Benton-Banai, 1988). Though there are many versions of these stories amongst Indigenous people, water always plays a central role and is referred to as the lifeblood of Mother Earth (Benton-Banai, 1988). Water has a responsibility to nourish and purify the earth through ebbing and flowing, the same way blood circulates in our bodies (McGregor & Whitaker, 2001).



Image: *One role of water is to revitalize the earth and everything of which it is comprised by naturally flowing, undisturbed.*

Location: *Hanauma Bay, Hawaii, August. 2016.*

To realize the connection between life and water is to understand that people will suffer along with the earth if water is unable to fulfill its responsibilities. As Indigenous scholar Debby Danard states: “What we do to the water, we do to ourselves” (Danard, 2012, p.13). Building dams or pipelines interferes with water's natural course, impeding its ability to renew and replenish all beings. To view water holistically is to understand that all parts of the environment are interconnected. The damage done to water, in one way or another, is the damage that leads to everything else. Indigenous law views water as a direct and foundational element that is critical for maintaining all life in the physical realm (Anderson, 2010). The human body is mostly comprised of water and without hydration, we would perish, as well as the plants, animals and land. Water permeates every part of life, right from the beginning as it is our first known environment within our mother's womb. Acknowledging that ‘water is life’ is key to understanding water as something simply beyond an element. In Indigenous law, ‘water is life’ because no mother can have birth without water, water is thus understood as spirit and without spirit we have no life (Stanley Peltier: Great Lakes Gathering, 2016).

Cree/Metis scholar Kim Anderson's research explains how relationships to water are governed through sacredness, intimate knowledge and much reciprocal respect for it (Anderson, 2010). Indigenous governance principles acknowledge the link between past and present and the connection the ancestors had with it over time. Water is not just for consumption but also provides a source of inspiration for continuity of future life and generations (McGregor & Whitaker, 2001). The flow of water is a metaphor for the transmission of wisdom, as described by Chief Frank T'Seleie of the Dene Nation (1977):

Our Dene Nation is like this great river. It has been flowing before any of us can remember. We take our strength and wisdom and our ways from the flow and direction that has been established by our ancestors of a thousand years ago. The wisdom flows through us to our children and generations we will never know. We will live out our lives

as we must and we will die in peace because we will know that our people and this river will flow on after us (p.16-17).

(Above is from the 2001 report on water quality in the province of Ontario by Deborah McGregor and Steve Whitaker).

Over time, many traditional and holistic views of water have been compromised through processes of colonization (Phare, 2011). Forces of industrialization have resulted in severed relations with traditional lands and water for many Indigenous populations today. The Western view of water emerges from a material view, based on commodification, shifting the human relationship with it quite significantly through ideals of wealth, consumption and power. “Power is concerned with agency and the ability to make things happen. In material terms, nothing can happen without water, as its meanings are generative and creative, linked with ideas about power and wealth, enabling processes of production and health and well-being” (Strang, 2015, p. 53). The control of water is thus essential to political power- those who control the water control the ‘life-stream’ (Strang, 2015).

Merrell-Ann Phare, executive director of the Center for Indigenous Environmental Resources, explains that in Western law of the past, water was seen as ‘common property’ that was collectively used by all members of society with the best interests of all in mind (Phare, 2011). This changed over time, as industrialization began to influence and shape the way resources were viewed and managed. Water through this lens is a resource, to be bought, sold or owned much like coal or oil and can be made into property to be ‘controlled’ (Groenfeldt, 2003). Private owners can keep water and have the ability to sell it to the highest bidder, even in times of shortage (Phare, 2011). Through lived experiences of Indigenous people, it is evident that the commodification of water limits the potential to sustain life and threatens people’s access to it over time.

While many Canadians are able to meet their needs and provisions using water the same cannot be said for many Indigenous communities living in this country. Nearly half a million Indigenous¹ people living on reserves in Canada face the risk of their water being laced with mercury, arsenic or uranium (Long, 2016). Indigenous communities have lost direct control over their resources. Water provides a metaphor for the flow of economic resources (Strang, 2015). Water markets are used to determine the distribution of water rights by how much companies are willing to pay for water (Phare, 2011). For Indigenous people, water markets can only work if their inherent rights have been acknowledged and protected first (Phare, 2011). In Indigenous cultures, inherent rights are given to Indigenous people by the Creator with the understanding that water is a gift, to be revered and respected, as it depends on the people to help fulfill its responsibilities (Chiefs of Ontario, 2001). Indigenous communities who often do not have the financial resources are often shut out from the market, while corporations sell water that is not theirs to sell (Phare, 2011). Consuming water through corporate ownership deprives Indigenous people access to their traditional resources and restricts them from exercising their own sustainability practices.

National chairperson of the Council of Canadians, Maude Barlow campaigns against Nestlé Corporation in Guelph, Ontario for the over-extraction of water (2016): “At this pace, we will not have enough for our future needs. Wasting our limited groundwater on consumptive uses such as bottled water is a recipe for disaster. We must safeguard groundwater reserves for communities and future generations” (p. 3). Water is often extracted from source water found in Indigenous communities, further severing and exploiting land ties and threatening their survival as

¹ Indigenous communities, peoples and nations are those which, having a historical continuity with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies that developed on their territories, consider themselves distinct from other sectors of the societies now prevailing on those territories, or parts of them (UN Declaration for the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, 2007).

a people: “In the last four years, Nestlé has upped its dangerous water extraction by over 33% from another of its wells in Ontario, Canada, while the water level has dropped by a staggering 1.5 meters” (Barlow, 2016, p. 3).



Image: *Bottled water drains the environment and negatively affects our health. If one has the option, stick to tap! I have personally always been skeptical of bottled water, not just because I found it to be un-quenching, but also because it epitomises the destructive and wasteful nature of modern society. Another aspect of commodifying water is bottling it in plastic.*

Location: *Toronto, ON. September 2016.*

The compounds in plastic have been linked to health-harming compounds that undermine water’s beneficial properties. The bottled water industry is also among one of the most environmentally unfriendly industries that are used to make profit: “The bottle manufacturing process itself releases toxic compounds like nickel, ethylbenzene, ethylene oxide and benzene, and the amount of oil used to make plastic water bottles could fuel a million cars annually” (Mercola, 2016, p.6). What implications does this have on the body? It varies from person to person but according to the Environmental Working Group, an American environmental organization that specializes in research and advocacy in the areas of toxic chemicals, public

lands, and corporate accountability, (EWG, 2011) claims that plastic contains perfluorooctanoic acid that can cause cancer, polybrominated diphenyl ethers PBDEs (flame retardant chemicals), which have been linked to reproductive problems and altered thyroid levels and phthalates which are reproductive toxins (EWG, 2011). BPAs are another chemical that is found in plastic bottles, which disrupts the endocrine system by mimicking the female hormone estrogen (EWG, 2011). Aamjiwang First Nation in Sarnia, Ontario (otherwise known as 'Chemical Valley') is facing a declining sex ratio, where fewer males are born in the community due to environmental and occupational chemical exposures (Luginaah et al., 2005). So far, it has been hypothesized that some of these chemicals may act as endocrine-disrupting compounds (EDCs), influencing the sex ratio by changing the hormonal environment of the parents (McKenzie et al., 2005). One must take into consideration the risk factors of how water is currently being treated, or mistreated for that matter. Becoming aware of these issues can influence a change in what people decide to put in their bodies and where they choose to invest their money. These changes can lead to cultural, environmental and economic solutions that are more sustainable and where people are in a more direct relationship with water by being more informed. A shift first begins within the social conscience of where water comes from, understanding its purpose within the 'bigger picture' and the roles it has to fulfill in order sustain life.



The Story of Bottled Water

Image source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SeI2y9hSOM0> retrieved September 2016

POLARIS institute, a non-profit research organization aiming to challenge the influence of corporations on government and public policy created a short video, *The Story of Bottled Water*, illustrating how manufacturing and commodification pushes what people do not need and destroys what people need most. When one considers the energy it takes to produce plastic and to ship bottles, the labour and waste involved with extracting water is clearly damaging to the environment. The bottled water is then consumed and left with to be disposed of, then shipped again to be dumped, perpetuating the cycle of waste and pollution. As I watch this video, I draw the conclusion that if something is not good for the environment, than it is also not good for us. Manufacturing processes have exploited water in many instances without carefully considering the negative implications. Considering the state of water resources in many Indigenous communities, some have no choice but to consume bottled water. As of January 31, 2014, 113 First Nations were under a federal drinking water advisory (Health Canada, *First Nations & Inuit Health*, 2014). Indigenous communities are often the first to feel the adverse effects of

contaminated water through pollution because their lives and culture are directly connected with the land (Phare, 2009). *Water: Environmental History through the Eyes of Elders* (2008) a master's thesis by Sarah McGregor draws on the significance of water through the eyes of Elders in Garden River, Ontario, and how relationships have changed with water over time, due to an increase in pollution, impacting roles and water tasks.

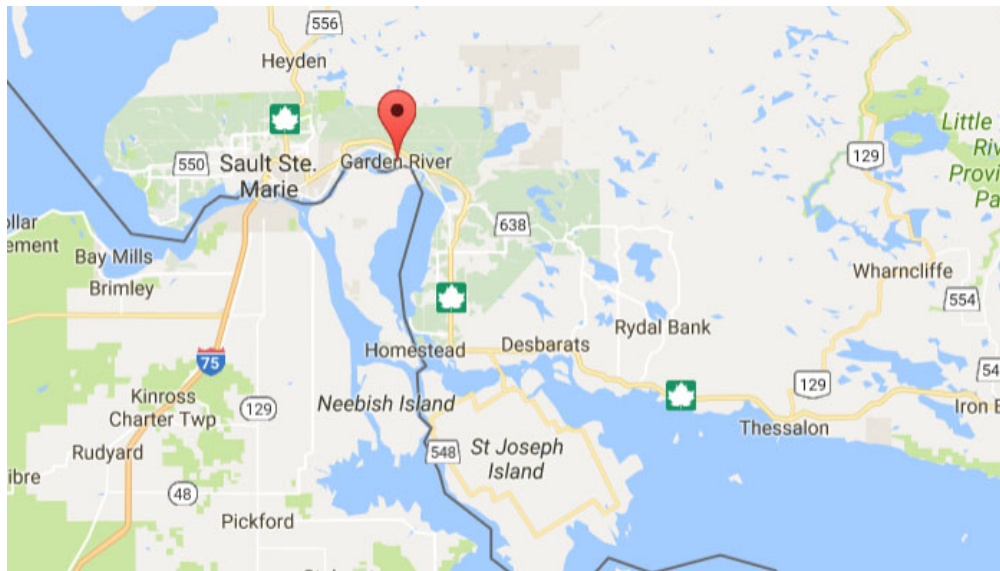


Image Source: Google Maps. Retrieved July 2016

I visited Garden River for a Great Lakes Gathering in July 2016. This gathering was intended to take action to protect the sacred water to ensure it remained safe for future generations. Isaac Murdoch, who was the moderator for this gathering explained that water is the spiritual thread of Indigenous peoples and that they must ensure that clean water is passed down for future generations. It was discussed that industries were being given too much power to make decisions at the cost of clean water.

Today, many Indigenous communities in Canada are being restricted from interacting with water because there is a fear of developing illnesses due to contamination affecting water quality. Many communities across Ontario have been given boil water advisories. This restriction infringes on so many aspects of traditional life and the cultural and spiritual link it has to

Indigenous identity such as, fishing, hunting and harvesting (McGregor, 2008). In many cases, the polluted water has been linked to high rates of cancer and fish deformities in these communities (Phare, 2009). Other adverse effects have led to habitat damage, flooding of traditional lands or forced relocations (Nowlan, 2004). Though water is understood to be an essential part of the physical environment, it is often perceived as separate from the functioning of a society or community in Western contexts (Szack, 2013). This is a gap in mainstream understandings of water because it fails to recognize how nothing can truly be ‘separate’ from what it depends on for survival. In Indigenous law, water is lifeblood of the earth and must be kept clean to fulfill its purposes (Blackstock, 2001). This responsibility is one of the things that upholds Indigenous people’s relationship with the land. The use of water is governed by natural law², in which the allocation and treatment of water without respectful regard for the environment and needs of future generations will lead to inevitable turmoil (Laidlaw & Passelac-Ross, 2010).



Image: *Indigenous environmental consultant and water walker, Sue Chiblow, explained during an interview that provincial policies and environmental regulations are failing, and that ‘there should be nothing going into the water, no contaminants should be thrown into the water*

² Natural Law is derived from fundamental interactions, experiences and observations of the natural world, deriving a great deal of knowledge gained from living on the land, ensuing a code of conduct and responsibilities among human beings and the co-existence of all other members of Creation (McGregor, 2013).

period'. What happens to water permeates everything that depends on it. The fish, the land, vegetation, the animals are all touched by water.

Image location: *Indigenous Environmental Justice Symposium, Osgoode Hall. May, 2016.*

During the Indigenous Environmental Justice Symposium in May 2016, some young women from the youth panel were also from Garden River. Sydney Nolan was one of the young panelists who discussed some of the issues her community was facing in Sue Sault Marie, Ontario. She explained that sewage disposal comes out into the water and that no one prefers to swim in the rivers, as her relatives and community members did before her. Untreated raw sewage is dumped into the water daily. Phosphorus, bacteria, metals, contaminated sediments and fish consumption advisories are all a result of industrial and municipal waste that end up in the rivers and lakes (IEJ Symposium, 2016). S.R Steele and the Paper Milling Company are two major contributors to polluting the St. Mary's River and are to blame for the rise in temperatures of the rivers, which are now incapable of freezing over (McGregor, 2008). For production purposes, water would be extracted and then discharged back into the river at a high temperature. In many cases, reports indicate that contaminants being dumped are below limits, but this does not mean there are not adverse effects (McGregor, 2008). Nolan went on to say that "the earth gives so many things, like beautiful sceneries, food and flowers, the least we can do is show our gratitude.... as an Anishnaabe woman, I was taught to pray or give an offering and thoughts about the well-being of the water. Treat water with good intentions and think before you act in every deliberation." (Sydney Nolan: IEJ Symposium: 2016).

The generational challenges of environmental and cultural risks that Indigenous communities currently face do not diminish hope for better days and the potential for restoration and revival. Over time, I have seen both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people rising up for the earth, to rebuild lost connections that have been altered through modern influences and human

ignorance. Through my journey as both a student of academia and learner of life, I have realized Indigenous issues are indeed human issues, that we all drink the same water and breathe the same air. We share this planet that requires everyone coming together if we want to survive. If technology could be altered in ways which would allow for the delivery of healthy drinking water that incorporates more respect into practice and Indigenous water rights, then it would indeed help in healing the fractured relationship humans have with water. Understanding water is not complicated, it is clear, (pun intended). Water provides inspiration in decision making, because it carries the characteristics of fluidity, beneficence, clarity and perseverance. New perspectives and thoughtful considerations in light of Indigenous law can help stop the cycle of destruction and greed. It is the social conscience of people that needs to change first, before they can heal the relationship toward water. Listening to the Elders wisdom taught me about how we guide our relationships can make a difference in every outcome. As people, we can come from a place of admiration and respect for water or from a place of entitlement and exploitation of everything around us. We always have a choice. Apathy is perhaps the worst one.

Water in mainstream discussions continues to be referred to as mainly a resource, however, Indigenous law offers broader understandings of water by respecting it and valuing it in all its forms and uses. Indigenous worldviews can contribute to helping Western policies in understanding the inherent value of water. This can be achieved by learning how to relate to it and by taking lessons from the way humans and industries have treated water in the past and present.

Through history, water has faced historical trauma and so have women. In the following chapter, I discuss the relationship between Indigenous women and water and how recognizing women's role to water is key to restoring balance in our relationships to water through healing.

Chapter 2: Water and the Roles of Women



*Water, vital liquid
Sustains life
Like my mother did
She kept me clean
Wanted the best for me
With good intent and honesty
Beautified transparency
Washed away my pain
Through nourishing
Showing me
That life begins
In purity*

Location: *Indoor Terrarium, Ontario Science Center, April 2015.*

Inspired by its capabilities and characteristics, I sought to learn and share my knowledge about water and what it might have in common with who I am as a human. Water has inherent beauty and can yet be extremely destructive. I could sit in front of a creek for hours and listen to the calming presence of water permeate between rocks or I could suddenly get engulfed and carried away by a current or violent tide. Water has a way of its own and its nature cannot be controlled. It is a teacher, a source of cycles and continuity, sustaining life in the past and for future generations. As a woman, I see water as an element of capacity that can help expand, transform and explore perspectives of how it is understood. Water gives every woman the chance to create life and is thus linked to any woman's existence as a 'life giver'. The quote below encapsulates the Anishnaabe perspective of water as the lifeblood of the planet and the earth as 'Mother' because of its life-giving, creative and nurturing capabilities. Humans must relate to water in order to live (McGregor, 2013):

Earth is said to be a woman. In this way it is understood that woman preceded man on earth. She is called Mother Earth because from her comes all living things. Water is her lifeblood. It flows through her, nourishes her, and purifies her (Benton-Banai, 1988, p.13)

In Indigenous law, the properties and energies associated with water are equated with the feminine (Anderson, 2000). While male elements such as fire are prominent in many of the teachings and establishing a balance between water and fire is respected in Indigenous law, water is seen as more powerful because of its ability to determine life (The Chiefs of Ontario *Water Declaration*, 2001). Indigenous women as the protectors of water, share their knowledge through the process of passing it down from their ancestors (McGregor & Whitaker, 2001). In Anishnaabe and Haudenosaunee traditions, the moon is referred to as 'Grandmother', representing rebirth and renewal (Szack, 2013).



Image: *The moon is linked to water because of the strong influence it has on the tides and rebirthing cycles which are celebrated during full moon ceremonies.*

Location: *North Shore, Oahu, Hawaii. August 2016.*

“The moon has a special relationship to the waters of earth, the big and small. From the waters at the doors of life, such as the follicular fluid that bathes the primordial ovarium, the dew on the grass in the dawn at dusk, to the waters of the great oceans, she causes them to rise and fall. Her constant ebb and flow, teaches us that all Creation is related, made of one breath, one earth. The waters of the earth and the waters of our bodies are one. Breastmilk is formed from the blood of a woman. Our milk, our blood and the waters of the earth are one water, all flowing in rhythm with the moon” (Cook, 1999, p. 139-140).

Women, as keepers of the water conduct ceremonies that seek guidance and give thanks for the water that sustains all life and for the gift of fertility (Native Women’s Center, 2008), providing the understanding of the connection the moon has to women and water, and how both are linked to creative energy and life giving power:

Women gather in a circle, from youngest to oldest, representing the life journey from infancy to old age. Women can ask Grandmother Moon for direction in life, for wisdom, and for help for her children and others. Grandmother Moon can give her healing and balancing energy to women. They drum and sing. Tobacco is placed in the fire and the women ask for the cleansing of the earth, as the water, the lakes, rivers and oceans constitute women’s responsibility (Native Women’s’ Center, 2008, p.8).

The connection between women and water has much to do with birthing cycles and Creation. When we are born, water precedes birth (McGregor, 2008). We are surrounded by water in our mother's womb and it is a human's first known environment. The tears we cry at birth and throughout our life are water, helping build our senses in the world. We live the rest of our lives depending on water, because our bodies are primarily comprised of it. These are simple concepts often forgotten and overlooked, though current and true. Water is an integral part of us and we are a part of it. We depend on it until we die. The role of water is thus imminent throughout life. By listening to the lived experiences of Indigenous women and attending the Great Lakes Gathering in July 2016, I have come to see how Indigenous women in Canada are rebuilding their connections with water, rekindling spiritual and cultural bonds in their traditional roles as water keepers. I learned that because we are born of water while in the womb of our mothers, love is our first teaching because it is what provides life. Water (*Nibi*) acknowledges the ethics of care and response by looking after life in the womb and being the first environment of a child. Love is a binding force that connects us all.

In Anishnaabe traditions, love for water is a fundamental principle to protect it. In my observation, the destruction of water today and the fragmented relationship women have with themselves have some connection. Both women and water have suffered much historical trauma through colonization and patriarchy that attempts to dominate and uphold positions of power and as a result, many women have forgotten their own strength and abilities to restore balance in places of injustice (McGregor, 2013). Water gives women a reason to exercise their power to heal past traumas in themselves and the planet (McGregor, 2013). Contemporary systems and decision-making regimes are lacking certain voices, those of women in particular -and this imbalance suppresses the potential for positive change. Connecting women to systems of power

especially those involving water, is critical to maintaining life and continuity. Many Indigenous women have taken up the responsibility to do this without permission and are reclaiming their roles and responsibilities with care and love (McGregor, 2013).

Grandmother Josephine Mandamin began the Mother Earth Water Walks in 2003; her motive was to raise awareness of the connection between people (especially women) and the water (McGregor, 2013). These walks represent a form of justice for the waters in response to the decades of maltreatment and pollution they have gone through, bringing attention to the people and informing them that they must begin to take direct action for their responsibilities toward the water (McGregor, 2013). The healing journeys taken are motivated by the 'love of the water' (Mandamin, 2012) with the intention to enact reciprocal relations between humans, water and natural law. The water walks are an example of living and experiencing what we can do actively, walking for the water, learning about the trauma of the water and how it connects us to history and reflects our present actions and what we can do to change the track of the course we are currently living. There has been a lack of political attention toward this movement, but this does not undermine its efforts. It is refreshing to see that these water walks have arisen not through a selfish political agenda, but for the greater good and well-being of future generations.



Image: *Grandmother and water walker, Josephine Mandamin from Manitoulin Island has walked thousands of miles around each of the Great Lakes. Mandamin is an inspirational leader who ‘walks the talk’ to promote the message that water is a human right and needs our respect and care now more than ever.*

Location: *Indigenous Environmental Justice Symposium, Osgoode Hall. May 2016.*

I had the pleasure of interviewing Mandamin in May 2016 during the Indigenous Environmental Justice Symposium. A few things that stood out to me were her personal experiences with the water, and how “women have to start picking up their bundles” (Mandamin, IEJ Symposium, 2016). This means that women really have to start respecting the life-giving element within their own bodies and think about the kind of life and place they want to provide for future generations. Mandamin said: “We all must think about how we take baths, how we consume water because it won’t last forever. The great lakes are declining, water won’t be around for as long as we think” (IEJ Symposium, 2016). Lake Superior really stood out to Mandamin. She expressed that it was the “epitome of a female, stubborn and strong willed and that it has brought down many boats” (Josephine Mandamin, IEJ Symposium, 2016). She

suggests we fast and sit with the earth in order to connect with it and truly understand how precious food and water are to our vitality. Mandamin also explained that we have to start listening to the environment, as she believes water can speak to us if we are willing to listen: “Listen not just to hear, but to really listen” (Mandamin, IEJ Symposium, 2016). People must begin to understand the importance of observing and listening to rivers, lakes, oceans and streams as teachers that are all deserving of our collaborative respect and protection.

Despite their wealth of knowledge, lived experiences and wisdom in regards to water, Indigenous women continue to be marginalized from water management and decision-making involving their territories, where women and children are often the most vulnerable and sensitive to water contamination. Aamjiwang First Nation also known as The Chemical Valley in Sarnia, Ontario is surrounded by many industrial refineries. Residents are being exposed to chemicals daily. Sarnia has one of the most extensive petrochemical complexes in the world, accounting for about 40 percent of Canada's export products such as synthetic rubber, polyvinyl chloride and plastics (Luginaah et al, 2010). The area also is the site of one of the country’s largest hazardous waste dumps. The impact of these contaminants has resulted in increasing rates of reproductive health problems among First Nation women, such as respiratory issues, ovarian cancer and miscarriages due to industrial emissions, documented by the community with the publication of statistics citing a declining 2:1 birth ratio of girls on the reserve (Mackenzie et al., 2005). Along with these issues, abnormal gender characteristics have been observed in animals in the area, such as feminized snapping turtles with smaller than average penis size (Environmental Health Perspectives, 2009). Aamjiwang was sold to these industries in the late nineteenth century, in hopes that profits would improve the community’s quality of life in the future (Luginaah et al, 2010). Over time, communities received financial compensation for pipelines running under the

reserve; however finances did not have any impact on the well-being of the community and have only had adverse health effects ever since (Lunigaah et al, 2010). On December 21, 2015, Vanessa Grey of Aamjiwang First Nation with the support of her friends, shut down Enbridge's Line 9 on Anishnaabe Territory, just outside of Aamjiwnaang and Sarnia. They arrived on the site, called Enbridge Inc. and requested that the pipeline and its flow of oil be turned off. Grey expressed that 'these industries have no limit to destruction, it is clear that tar sands projects represent an ongoing cultural and environmental genocide.' (Water is Sacred Panel, 2016). She also explained that she as an Anishnaabe woman, she "has the right to defend the land and water because it is sacred and has the right to defend anything that threatens (her) traditions and culture" (Water is Sacred Panel, 2016). I commend Ms. Grey on her courage for standing up for what she believes as an Anishnaabe woman. Her act of bravery in the face of opposition is inspiring to me as a woman, but more importantly, as a human who requires water not only to survive, but to articulate thoughts and evoke feelings, find calm and to now see the destruction of the planet sadly reflected.

Colonization has impacted women's relationship to water today, however the challenges Indigenous communities are currently faced with evokes a resurgence and revival of traditional purposes and responsibilities (Longboat, 2015). Jo-Anne Lawless, Indigenous scholar, explains how current governance schemes consult with Indigenous communities only out of a constitutional obligation, undermining the potential for other forms of participation and partnership. Water governance should take different approaches for drinking water and rebuild water legislation that focuses on relationship building with communities (Lawless, 2011). According to Lawless, women bring a certain level of understanding and compassion to their practice which is very important for relationship-building in Indigenous communities. Creating

more dialogue and incorporating more sample based and lived history into analysis can create more roles for women in consultation and educational settings. The use of traditional practices and ceremonies can give non-Indigenous allies the opportunity to learn about the roles of women in relation to water that can help influence more holistic policies and regulations. The spiritual undercurrent of women and water cannot be divorced from how water is viewed in Indigenous law. Both Indigenous and non-Indigenous women must work alongside men, who are willing to learn from them to improve the structures and policies that have become very restrictive and in many cases, destructive. This change begins with valuing the feminine as equal, thus bringing the connection back to the fundamental 'life-giving' ability that both water and women have. From my understanding of Indigenous law thus far, Mother Earth requires her inhabitants to cultivate the right relationship with her first, preparing the ground for survival and for future life. In a male-dominated world, men need to re-establish their connection with women through seeking their voices and knowledge to be received and integrated in the service of restoring balance respectfully. It begins with valuing the contributions of women in families, communities, work and the world. This is all very important, as it can influence changes in the political sphere, using the authority of power to serve the greater good, to protect and serve future generations to heal, not to dominate, exploit or serve self-regarding interests. When we think about our daughters, mother or our wives, we should also think about water and the life it provides.

The connection between women and water can be understood through both having life giving abilities. Full moon ceremonies honor relationships to water because of the union between menstrual cycles and the influence the moon has on tides, regulating earth's water cycles. Indigenous women are traditionally keepers of the water. By recognizing their contributions and roles, we begin to restore our relationship to the water through healing.

The next chapter looks at the significance of water through my lens, as it has been inspirational for me in my own healing journey as well.

Chapter 3: The Significance of Water



Image: Location: *Toronto skyline, Lake Ontario. May 2015.*

*In faint waves
Lies intensity
Telling the story
Of the same water
That was here
Long before
The clusters of buildings
And pipelines
Took over
These Western hemispheres*

“Water creates light, we do not see light, we see the world as it is, revealed by light”

(Strang, 2004, p. 45).

Water enters human lives in a myriad of ways. It can help describe complex ideas about change and has a compelling effect on the senses. By engaging with water directly, I have always felt a sense of freedom to project thoughts on it and see it reflected back clearly. Ripples remind me of the consequences of choice and how far-reaching they can be; ice reminds me of treading consciously or risking cracks and damages; snow reminds me of mystery, purity and potential of the unknown; dew drops remind me of peace, sweetness and the unborn; lastly, tears remind me of pain and how they symbolize a renewed desire of life after a storm.

During my religious upbringing, the Shia Islamic school of thought taught me respect and reverence for water. In a historical narrative, the emphasis and vitality of water during the Battle of Karbala stood out to me greatly. In this narrative, Hussain, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, along with his relatives and supporters, was massacred by a strong army led by the tyrant of the time; for refusing to pay allegiance to him as a leader. In an act of bravery and honour, Hussain chose to stand against corruption through martyrdom. During the battle, the generals were told to block Hussain’s camp from their access to water, not allowing even the innocent women and children a drop under the scorching Arabian sun for three days. In the Shia theology, water became a symbol of gratitude, to be regarded with the utmost respect and as a remembrance for those who were denied it. These themes shaped my view of water at an early age as much more than a means to an end, and instead as the ultimate form of sustenance and mercy, to always be regarded with respect and conscious awareness.

I feel versions of this story are playing out in different forms today. There are people defending the planet and speaking up for what they believe in, regardless of violent opposition. I

attended the *Toronto Standing up with Standing Rock Solidarity March* on November 5th, 2016. This protest represented a ceremony being performed on behalf of all of humanity. A more profound conflict exists at these protests that is a confrontation between two completely polarized worldviews. On the one hand, there is the Indigenous perspective that honors all of creation, living in a respectful relationship with the earth. On the other hand is the industrial civilization, which sees the earth a thing - to be used for production and capital that knows no end. Indigenous cultures in general, have a concept about the spirit of cannibalism known as the Wendigo (Levy, 2013). The Black Snake (oil pipeline) represents the spirit of the Wendigo that is being protested by the Standing Rock Sioux.

“Those aligned with the wendigo endlessly consume like an insatiable cannibal, the life force of others—human and nonhuman—for private purpose or profit, without giving back anything of value from their own lives. At the collective level, this perverse inner process is mirrored by the consumer society in which we live, a culture that continually fans the flames of never-ending desires, conditioning us to always want more. As if starving, we are in an endless feeding frenzy, trying to fill a bottomless void. This process of rabid, obsessive-compulsive consumption is a reflection of a deep, inner shared sense of spiritual starvation that is endemic to industrial civilization” (Levy, 2013, p.14).



Image: Location: *Standing Rock Rally, Queens Park, Toronto. November 2016.*

Water is key to the continuation of life and consumerism represents the opposite, as it is only interested in taking and not giving back. I came to this rally, as did many kinds of people from different ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds, for a peaceful protest for the protection and love of water. Water is what brought us all together, enduring and reinforcing our responsibilities as human beings to allow water to fulfill its duty. The speakers kept mentioning the future generations and how we must think about the kind of world we want our children to live in when they grow up. I was overwhelmed seeing thousands of people come together for this common cause. I thought about how I used to focus so much on my own problems until recently, but being at this rally with thousands of other people helped me realize that there are bigger and more important things with which to be concerned with. I felt humbled with pride as tears streamed down my face. My tears came from the same water, the same life force which empowered all of us, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, to overcome injustice and to plunge into the depths of doing the right thing.



Image: Location: *Queen's Park, Toronto. Sue Chiblow and Tantoo Cardinal at the solidarity march. November 2016.*

Inspired by the in Solidarity with Standing Rock protest, I wrote a small poem:

*Water breaks moulds
Crosses thresholds
Brings together justice
Infiltrates systems
Of oppression
Standing here for the same reason
We found a common denominator
Her name is Water*

Water gives every person who depends on it the purpose to protect it, but only if that is what they choose. I was told that anyone, Indigenous or non-Indigenous, could offer gratitude to water, in whatever way one feels. Isaac Murdoch of Serpent River explained at the Great Lakes gathering in July 2016, that “everyone is made of water, and water is our greatest medicine. We should never push away Non-Natives who want to help, because then we are pushing away medicine. Water does not have a race. The revolution belongs to everyone”. This answers a part of my own conundrum and is a powerful response to any criticism I have received for doing the research I do. I also know that through the Elders’ teachings, we as humans are responsible for what we know and if we can share knowledge for the benefit of everything, than that is what we should do. To achieve water justice, one must first acknowledge and take care of the historical traumas waters have endured over time.

Currently water justice tends to be a contentious issue, as it tends to be limited to “competing definitions as either a fundamental human right or a commodity to be bought or sold” (Davidson-Harden et al., 2007, p.3). The Anishnaabe understanding of water justice expands this binary by extending human duties to non-human entities through loving and respectful responsibilities (McGregor, 2013). Water justice begins with a renewed relationship with water by relating to it, understanding that all life shares this need and can only be achieved

through love, respect and by keeping the well-being of future generations in mind. Water justice in the Anishnaabe understanding considers water as having experienced trauma itself that must undergo healing. Love, vision, mutual respect and responsibility are all principles that are at the pinnacle of healing water (McGregor, 2013). Love is the motivation for undertaking responsibilities to ensure that water can contribute to supporting life. Indigenous knowledge keeps the best things of the past while continually adapting to the present. Unlike formal Western policies, traditional governance approaches are not without limitations, as there is a range of cultural and traditional understandings held by Indigenous people (Longboat, 2012). The Anishnaabek perspective on water justice is traditionally based on natural law and the notion of '*bimaadziwin*' (a healthy way of life), a legal principle for achieving well-being for all things (Rheault, 1999). Water justice starts with understanding the inherent value of water and acknowledging it as life, vital to the well-being of all. Traditionally, water was not managed by humans; it had rights of its own, through ceremony and song, the relationship with water and all of nature was maintained so that all of Creation could conduct and fulfil its responsibilities (Longboat, 2012). Indigenous worldviews may contribute to the development of a renewed relationship to water that places emphasis on its protection and preservation above all, teaching humanity, once again, how fundamental it is to all life.

Dr. Sherri Longboat of Six Nations of the Grand River wrote a doctoral thesis on water security. Within her thesis, she applied the Seven Grandfather teachings to water principles. I have been inspired by the correlation. Below is the list Longboat presents, with a few minor additions made by myself.

7 Grandfather Teachings and Water Principles (Longboat, 2012):

- 1) **Truth:** To value water in all its forms and uses. To recognize the work of Creator in all things.
- 2) **Humility:** To know that each one of us is part of the environment and we are all equal.
- 3) **Respect:** To take care of all things the Creator has given Mother Earth. Respect water and all of nature, including taking responsibilities and being respectful of other views and ways.
- 4) **Wisdom:** Seek and share knowledge and use water wisely. Learn from water and past and present experiences with water.
- 5) **Honesty:** Speak rightly of things. Be like water, transparent and clear in decision making.
- 6) **Love:** Water justice begins with love for the water. Love to care and help one another and the water, to collaborate and share benefits and knowledge.
- 7) **Bravery:** Be ready to face and accept challenges and current problems. Be brave to confront the past traumas waters and people have endured and invest the time to understand that technology and the easy route are not the best choices in the long term.

When these teachings are applied to water, they enable the assertive and binding efforts of all those who want to achieve justice. Defending the right to water means being like water; clear in the mind and passing through obstacles that may hinder the flow. At the same time, water has the tremendous ability to transform or destroy foundations through concentrated force. Water is an entity on its own and cannot be controlled despite all the efforts to do so. Water will soon teach us what we already know, that all life depends on it and those of us who respect it should share this knowledge and tame the forces who try and corrupt it. Water justice requires humans to develop ties and connection with water, affirming its rights to it as if it were human. This belief teaches people that the earth is not simply a lifeless rock to consume and destroy for

the convenience of non-sustainable mass consumption. We live on this planet and it provides us with things of vital importance for maintaining all our lives; it surely does need, at minimum the same protections as humans, and even care beyond that. Water needs noble protection, not driven by greed. There are alternative ways of seeing ourselves in relation to water through getting in touch with our own senses.

The main body of water I interact with is Lake Ontario. I mostly spend time in the water for leisure or spiritual practices, to calm and contemplate, cope with grief and alleviate my depression, release serotonin and increase my energy. Water can be very healing. When I listen to the water, nothing sounds more assuring and steady. When I closely observe water hitting the shoreline or rocks, it never does so in the same way twice, and yet its purpose is the same, which is to cleanse and participate in the function and circulation of life within the ecosystem. I learned some of my deepest lessons through water. I have understood rain as water 'falling from grace'. As a teenager I would stand under rain and feel vindicated. I experienced near-drowning at the age of eight, but I was not discouraged from learning how to swim. I did not realize how water helped me navigate my life journey until I looked back from this point, in gratitude and reverence. As I got older, I made the conscious effort to thank water during my own self-taught personal practice. I show respect for water by meditating on rocks in creeks, or by holding water between my two hands while raising it up to the sky, asking thanks for life. In my religion, I was taught to perform ablutions before prayer, so that whatever comes from me is clear and pure. Today, when I am given the chance to be in a body of water such as a lake or ocean, I fully immerse myself in it, feeling it clear my energy field, washing away all that is no longer true for me. I feel it replenishing all aspects of my being. I feel it on my skin and I allow my body to drift, as my heart opens being given the courage to live from it. I bring my mind to the vision of

renewal and healing that both humans and water deserve. I am letting water, my life force, motivate my intentions. I remember the body's water composition and I say a prayer of gratitude for the water and for the life it brings into the world. As I honour the water, I honour myself. Through my own experiences, I see the potential for the overall human interaction with water to evolve for the better. In order for this potential to be actualized, a more reciprocal, re-introduction of water is necessary. We can all take lessons from Indigenous people's interactions with water through ceremonies and knowledge.



Image: Location: *Ojibway Park, Serpent River First Nation. July 2016. The Great Lakes gathering in July 2016 was led by people's courage to protect and preserve the water. For the first time I saw how, through ceremony and offerings, Indigenous people ask for forgiveness from their Creator for what humanity has done to get to this point of suffering. Even if First Nations people are not directly responsible for the suffering of the water, they still ask the Creator for forgiveness on behalf of others, which is a true act of humility. During a ceremony water was put in copper vessels. I was told that this is done for the benefit of healing because the ions that are positive in the copper charge the water.*

The way humans interact with water is cultural, as it is influenced by the material properties of the world and what they believe and understand about it (Strang, 2015). In light of this perspective, Japanese scientist Masaru Emoto discovered a theory that when water is

exposed to different thoughts, it can form crystals based on the nature of that vibration. It was found that thoughts and speech impact the quality of water present in bodies of water. His research is inspirational to skeptics, to begin to understand the healing and conductive properties of water through science (Emoto, 2005). Dr. Emoto's research reiterates the wisdom and knowledge of Indigenous peoples that predated his theory. Consciousness can indeed increase or decrease the quality of water, based on the intentions given to it. We can interact with water to restore balance through healing, like the Water Walkers and Josephine Mandamin, retracing the steps of the ancestors in a call for justice. This knowledge ultimately presents the understanding that the way we think about water has an impact on its reality. As well as carrying blood to our brain, water is literally a stream of consciousness (Strang, 2015). The subject of water has always been of interest to me because it communicates its uses, ideas and cultural understandings extremely well, while at the same time transcending differences. Water requires a greater understanding and perspective if we want to survive.

'The Significance of Water' is a short film that I created in addition to this paper. With footage gathered from Toronto, Northern Ontario and Hawaii, I aimed to present water both visually and audibly to achieve awareness about the essential value and beauty of water. Interviews I gathered with Indigenous scholars, elders and activists narrate frames. Their voices explain their roles and experiences with water and how they have been connected to it through their teachings. Water is uniquely featured in this film through diverse natural expressions and a personal perspective. I wanted the water to speak for itself by capturing it through different lenses — from rain, streams, rivers and oceans to its varying uses and how it is being commodified today. The purpose of this film is to communicate water to the audience more intimately and emotionally, as a gentle yet impactful way of advocating water justice. As an

author and artist, my goal is to evoke the contemplation of water and how we as humans can conceptualize it with a broader regard.

Water is relative, in that it takes many forms and can have many meanings in different cultures and experiences. Water is also our relative in relation to all humans and moreover all living things, because it is a part of us and we are a part of it. As we rely on water to function, water relies on humans in ensuring it can fulfill its responsibilities too. When we begin to understand water as our relative or as a gift, it becomes worthy of our respect, protection, gratitude and generosity. This understanding should enable people to defend and love water through recognizing the water living within themselves first. Water is life itself. It supports the functioning of all life and when one part as integral as water is out of balance, then the entire system of creation will suffer. The same can be said for women. Women are the keepers of the water. The respect shown to women directly correlates to the respect we show the earth and water. In order to take part in the earth's healing, we must acknowledge past traumas and consider how we contribute to what has happened and what we can do to reverse it. While we still have time, we should learn how to respect water once again and respect each other once again by bringing ideas together and turning to the traditions that have not failed Indigenous peoples for thousands of years and are still viable and adaptable to modern systems today. Water is more than a right and more than a commodity. It is who we are. Identifying with water is what will ultimately save us and every generation after ours.

K(no)w Water.

K(no)w Life.

Miigwetch!

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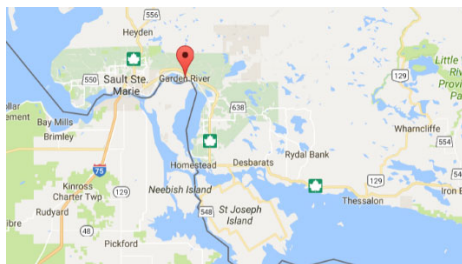
Images References

Image 4:



The Story of Bottled Water (2010) retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Se12y9hSOM0> Retrieved October 2016.

Image 5:



Road Map retrieved from <https://www.google.ca/maps/dir///@43.7647685,-79.4928425,14z>
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