

Cracked Earth and Choked Voices: Exploring the Dynamics of Sustainability in the Narratives of Native Canadians

Sriyanka Basak

MPhil Research Scholar, Dept of Comparative Literature, Jadavpur University, Kolkata, India

ARTICLE DETAILS

Article History

Published Online: 14 November 2020

Keywords

Sustainable Development Goals, Canadian Indigenous Literature, Clean Drinking Water, Land Rights, Digital Media.

*Corresponding Author

Email: [sriyankabasak\[at\]gmail.com](mailto:sriyankabasak[at]gmail.com)

ABSTRACT

Canada's Agenda 2030 aims towards the sustainable development of the nation and abroad. The agenda is a challenge for the Canadian government to advance equality and prosperity in the country by "leaving no one behind". It means Canada wants to create an inclusive society by recognizing the rights of the country's indigenous people. Sustainable development means economic developments without depletion of natural resources. The Canadian state policy which wants to progress by including the indigenous people must realize that nature is an integral part of the indigenous worldview. Indigenous people worship and value natural resources. Therefore, it becomes necessary to understand how indigenous people view Canada's sustainable development. In this paper, I want to explore the dynamics of the role of sustainable development in the lives of the indigenous people of Canada. To analyze such an aspect I would focus primarily on the status of the natural resources of land and water in Canada and study it in relation to the worldview of native Canadians. The paper will focus both on literary texts and factual texts simultaneously to comprehend Canada's aim for sustainable development. I would like to look into Jeannette Armstrong's novel *Whispering in Shadows* to portray the meaning of nature in the indigenous worldview. Armstrong's novel is a depiction of the effects of polluting "Mother Earth" and thereby questions the meaning of development in the colonizer's capitalist society. Simultaneously I would go beyond the realms of literary texts and study videos and Facebook posts as texts on the digital platform. These digital texts record the actual experiences and emotions of the native Canadians to bring out facts and narratives that question Canada's aim towards sustainable development. These facts will mainly concentrate on the land and water issues of Canada. For instance, a critical study will be done on the dichotomy in the sustainable procedure of carrying crude oil from under the earth's surface by the Trans Mountain pipeline and the Kinder Morgan But indigenous Canadians protesting against these pipelines bring out an alternative narrative that question Canada's progress. To portray this alternative narrative, I would look into Facebook posts of indigenous Canadian people who voice protests on social media. The power of social media in the twenty-first century is undeniable and the Facebook posts can serve as texts to help us to investigate development from both the view-point of the state and the view-point of the indigenous people. Indigenous people of Canada also face the basic crisis of clean drinking water. Water means life to indigenous people and conserving water is part of "all their relations". It is ironic that indigenous people who value water are unable to get their basic right to clean drinking water. The paper also aims to bring out the fissures in the Canadian government's aim to provide clean water to indigenous people and the indigenous peoples fight towards claiming their right to clean water. The juxtaposition of the indigenous people's protests against the state's development projects and their fight against clean drinking water with Canada's agenda towards sustainable development by 2030 questions the politics of including the indigenous people within the state-policies. In this paper, I thus wish to explore the dynamics in the politics of inclusions in building a sustainably developed nation-state, Canada.

The modern man has repainted nature's canvas with urban landscapes and technological designs. Nature that once provided the man is now being under the mercy of man. Across the globe, there is an exigency to save Mother Earth. Following the United Nation's objective, Canada's Agenda 2030 aims towards sustainable development of the nation and abroad. Sustainable development means economic development without the depletion of natural resources. Canadian Prime Minister, Justin Trudeau, in his address to the United Nations,

in September 2017, commented on Canada's commitment to implement all the seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the principles that underline the 2030 agenda of "leaving no one behind".¹ It means Canada wants to sustainably develop by creating an inclusive society by recognizing the rights of the country's indigenous people,

¹.Canada's Implementation, accessed January 15 2019, 20312Canada_ENGLISH_18122_Canadas_Voluntary_National_ReviewENv7.pdf

women, and immigrants. The politics of inclusion of indigenous people towards sustainable development is ironic in the sense that nature and indigeneity together are one entity. This paper is a quest to unravel the politics involved in the process of inclusion of indigenous communities in Canada's goal for sustainable development. Locating the concept of sustainability as the core, the paper focuses on the dynamics of the relationship of the indigenous communities and the Canadian government to unbury narratives of exclusion and reconciliation.

In excavating indigenous narratives revolving around the politics of sustainable development, this research-paper demands to travel beyond written texts. The comparative methodology has taught us to analyse videos, digital posts as literary texts. In this paper, I would like to look at YouTube videos and Facebook posts on the digital platform related to the "Kinder Morgan Trans Mountain Pipeline Project" and "Drinking Water Advisories" as texts to be analysed. Simultaneously I would also refer to Jeannette Armstrong's novel *Whispering in Shadows* to portray the meaning of nature in the indigenous worldview. The indigenous worldview in itself offers a repertoire of ecological knowledge to be analysed. Therefore, any western criticism of ecology and literature will not be referred to in studying indigenous narratives. Further, the lens of sustainability will focus on issues pertaining to land and water resources in Canada only. It should also be noted that I do not wish to burden this paper with factual data. Therefore the factual data presented in this paper is a pre-requisite in analysing the narratives of the indigenous communities in their search for indigenous identity in the Canadian state.

The goals of sustainable development serve as a tool for the Canadian government to progress and indigenous people are part of this "progress". But, what does this progress mean to the indigenous people? In an interview on *Indigenous Communities: Surviving Canada*, Suzanne Stewart from Bryce Institute for Indigenous Health says, "Well I guess that depends on how you define progress and who's defining it. So when we try to measure indigenous well-being and indigenous health or education or life even on as reserve we are looking at measuring that from non-indigenous perspectives and world views. It's not going to really make sense from the indigenous perspective".² It becomes evident here, that progress of indigenous communities cannot be defined from the colonial settler's paradigm. In order to progress as a Canadian nation, the government needs to recognize the identity of indigenous people and adhere to the indigenous worldview while determining the policies of development for the indigenous communities. Armstrong's protagonist, Penny in the novel *Whispering in Shadows* says, "I don't think there's enough research on the fact that Native people understand real sustainability and practise it even on the small reserves left of their homelands".³ It is true that enough research has not been done in understanding sustainability in terms of indigeneity but contemporary "western" ecologists are now realizing the potential of indigenous knowledge in conserving the

environment. The words, "traditional ecological knowledge" have recently captured the minds of western ecologists, which means, "the product of keen observation, patience, experimentation, and long-term relationships with plants and animals. It was a knowledge built on a history, gained through many generations of learning passed down by elders about practical as well as spiritual practices"⁴. Thus traditional ecological knowledge is now being used by western ecologists to construct a sustainable world.

In an effort to include the indigenous communities in the SDGs, the United Nations had made a YouTube video on why the SDGs are important for the indigenous people. The Grand Chief of Tl'azt'en Nation from Canada, Ed John says, "From the indigenous perspective world I would certainly take a look at good health and well-being. It is really the essence of being connected to your lands, your languages, your culture, physically well being, the emotional well-being, the spiritual well-being".⁵ From Grand Chief John's comment, we can understand how the well-being of the human body is related to that of nature. The human body is an integral part of nature in the indigenous worldview. Polluting nature is synchronous to the degradation of the human body. Jeannette Armstrong also explores the relationship between the body and nature in her novel. Penny detected with a rare cancer is symbolic of Mother Earth being injected with pesticides and toxic chemicals. Through the death of Penny's human body, Armstrong teaches us through her novel that time has come for human beings to start respecting and valuing the environment or else Mother Earth will also perish.

In 2018 Canada, a lot of debates and protests have been going around the "Kinder Morgan Trans Mountain Pipeline" project. The Trans Mountain Pipeline carries crude and refined oil from Alberta to the coast of British Columbia, Canada.⁶ In an article in National Observer, Carl Meyer writes, "The oilsands, deposits of tar-like heavy oil mixed with clay beneath the boreal forest in Alberta and Saskatchewan, represent the third-largest reserve of crude oil in the world after Saudi Arabia and Venezuela".⁷ Tasker reports that "Kinder Morgan forecasts the expansion will create 15,000 jobs a year during construction, and a further 37,000 direct and indirect jobs for every year of operation. It also estimates expanded operations will deliver an additional \$46.7 billion in government revenues for all levels of government in the first 20 years. The bulk of that money, \$19.4 billion, would flow to Alberta".⁸ Therefore Trans Mountain Pipeline is definitely a project that will boost the economy but

⁴. M. Kat Anderson, "What is Traditional Ecological Knowledge?", September 16, 2016, <https://www.kcet.org/shows/tending-the-wild/what-is-traditional-ecological-knowledge>.

⁵. United Nations, "Indigenous Peoples and the Sustainable Development Goals", May 23, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Swy0boCxEGY>.

⁶. Wikipedia, "Trans Mountain Pipeline" last modified January 27, 2019, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trans_Mountain_Pipeline.

⁷. Carl Meyer, "Chiefs from 133 First Nations join fight against Kinder Morgan pipeline and oilsands" *News, Energy, Politics*, May 2, 2018, <https://www.nationalobserver.com/2018/05/02/news/chiefs-133-first-nations-join-fight-against-kinder-morgan-pipeline-and-oilsands>

⁸. John Paul Tasker, "Trudeau cabinet approves Trans Mountain, Line 3 pipelines, rejects Northern Gateway", CBC News, last modified November 30, 2016, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/federal-cabinet-trudeau-pipeline-decisions-1.3872828>

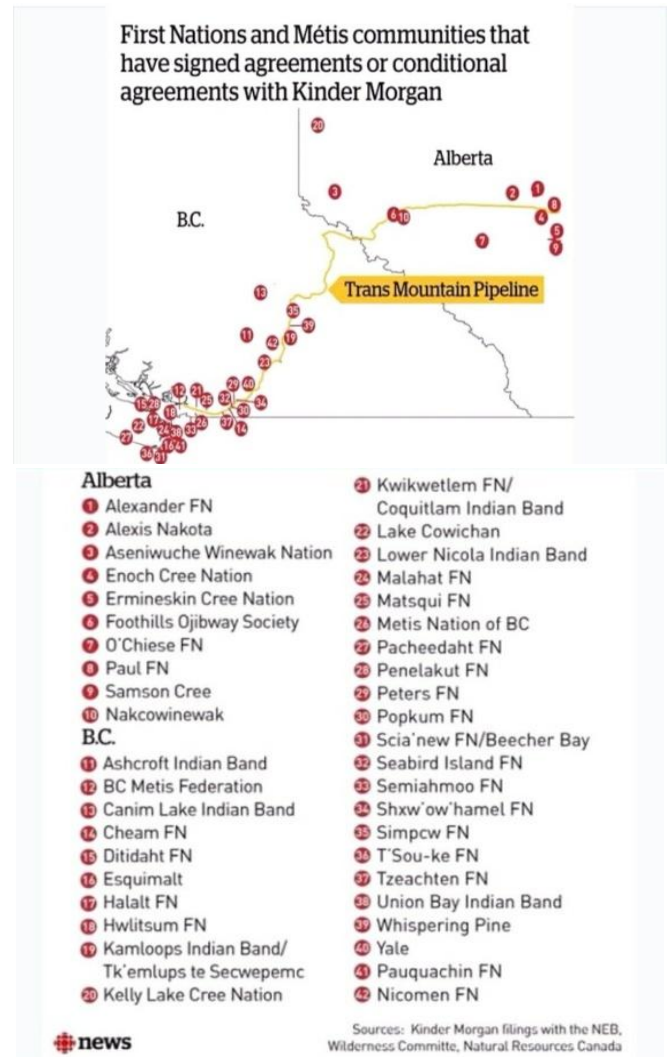
². Steve Paikin, "Indigenous Communities: Surviving Canada", *The Agenda with Steve Paikin*, November 16 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a6Vs7IcxaF0&t=35s>

³. Jeannette Armstrong, *Whispering in Shadows*, British Columbia, Theytus Books Ltd, 2000, 109.

whether the project will affect the environment is a question that cannot be ignored. David Boyd, an environmental lawyer and associate professor at UBC says, "The reality is that there are huge gaping flaws in the Canadian environmental review process that have been known about for decades and have never been fixed".⁹ The flaws in the environment review process fails to provide a concrete report on the impact of the Trans pipeline project on the environment thereby creating a series of ongoing debate and protest regarding it. There have been reported cases of oil-spillage from pipelines in Canada, like the rupture of the Kinder Morgan pipeline at Inlet Drive in 2007. Grant Granger recalling this incident in Burnaby Now writes in 2017, "Kinder Morgan, Surrey-based B. Cusano Contracting Inc. and R.F. Binnie Associates of Burnaby pled guilty in October 2011 to introducing waste into the environment causing pollution under the Environment Management Act... there's no denying the rupture has had a big impact on the debate over Kinder Morgan's Trans Mountain expansion".¹⁰ According to Prime Minister Trudeau, the Trans Pipeline project is safe and has been based on rigorous scientific debates. He also pointed out that Kinder Morgan will need legal "consultation" from indigenous communities, whose lands come under the area of the project.¹¹ But Green Party Leader, Elizabeth May has opposed the government's decision saying that she would be willing to go to jail to prevent the Trans Mountain's construction. From these disagreements over the project, it can be observed that while some First Nation communities have accepted the project signing the "mutual benefit agreements" with Kinder Morgan, other First nation communities have rejected it.¹²

The relationship between environment and economy is complex. In order to progress, natural resources are exploited. In this case, the crude oil, the non-renewable fuel is the source of the expansion of Canada's economic growth but the wounds made on Mother Earth because of this action are irreparable. In *Whispering in Shadows*, Penny writes a letter to her friend Julie, "And the sludge from every kind of industrial operation is something else. It stinks. Them salmon must be choking! ...Cripes, the garbage that washes up! You'd think the ocean is too big to pollute! It's dangerous. It makes me so outraged! How could it be allowed! It's like one huge bloody rape scene".¹³ Penny outrages through her paintings that depict the "cracked earth".¹⁴ Armstrong paints us pictures of active protests against logging and indigenous environment gatherings¹⁵ attended by Penny to show us how indigenous

communities protect the nature as "all their relations"¹⁶. In today's digital world we see indigenous Canadians protesting on social media about the Kinder Morgan Trans Pipeline. Ryan McMahon, an Anishinaabe comedian and writer, posts a picture of the First Nation Bands and Métis communities in Alberta and British Columbia who have signed agreements with Kinder Morgan Pipeline on April 23, 2018. The picture divided into two parts are¹⁷:



The benefit of posting on social media is that people can comment on each other's viewpoints. Richard C. Powless from Ottawa comments on McMahon's post "42 of 633 is not a lot".¹⁸ Powless's comment highlights not only the number of indigenous communities who have not consented to the building of the pipeline but also the spirit of indigenous people in resisting the pipeline project. Greenpeace Canada, a non-profit organization also posted a video on their Facebook Page on March 25, 2018- that more than 170 people have been arrested across the country for standing together in protest of the Kinder Morgan oil pipeline.¹⁹ This type of post and video on social media is a modern way of protest. It may be argued that such protests on digital space are virtual but the number of reactions (489), comments (326), and more importantly "1k

⁹. Emma Gilchrist, "The Real Reason Canada is in Crisis over the Kinder Morgan Pipeline", *The Narwhal*, April 25, 2018, <https://thenarwhal.ca/real-reason-canada-crisis-over-kinder-morgan-pipeline/>.

¹⁰. Grant Granger, "The Day Oil Rained Down on Burnaby", *Burnaby Now*, July 21, 2017, <https://www.burnabynow.com/news/the-day-oil-rained-down-on-burnaby-1.21287293>.

¹¹. John Paul Tasker, "Trudeau cabinet approves Trans Mountain, Line 3 pipelines, rejects Northern Gateway", *CBC News*, last modified November 30, 2016, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/federal-cabinet-trudeau-pipeline-decisions-1.3872828>.

¹². Tasker.

¹³. Jeannette Armstrong, *Whispering in Shadows*, British Columbia, Theytus Books Ltd, 2000, 84.

¹⁴. Armstrong, 125.

¹⁵. Armstrong, 104.

¹⁶. Thomas King, "Introduction", *All my Relations*, University of Oklahoma Press, 1992, VI.

¹⁷. Ryan McMahon, Facebook, April 23, 2018.

¹⁸. Richard C. Powless, Facebook, April 24, 2018.

¹⁹. Greenpeace Canada, Facebook, March 25, 2018.

[1000] shares”²⁰ of the video by both indigenous and non-indigenous people suggests the awareness of the problem made available to people across the globe to let them know the truth behind the activities of the government projects and to simultaneously make the readers of the posts question the government goals towards sustainable development.

Another issue that I want to focus on in this paper is the problem of the availability of clean drinking water on the reserves. Many reserves in Canada are on boil-water advisory and do not have proper water sanitation systems. The federal government has decided to eliminate all First Nations drinking water advisories by 2021 by “investing in long-overdue repair and maintenance”.²¹ What I want to draw attention to in this paper is the politics involved in the government’s funding for providing clean water. In doing so the first question that inevitably arises, why the Canadian Government failed to provide clean drinking water to indigenous lands. Without going into factual records I want to point out the comment made by Linda Debassige, Chief of M’Chigeeng First Nation in a debate about the increase in the budget of water on her reserve; “We actually saw a decrease in the enhanced water and wastewater funding last fiscal in terms of the current projected. But the budgets are coming into regions. They distribute them regionally... [If you say] the money is flowing. Where is it going? ... but grassroots First nations on the ground, we are not seeing those increases”.²² Diving into the legal pool in search of the allotted funds to the reserves is a herculean task but in the same debate, Frances Widdowson, co-author of *Disrobing the Aboriginal Identity* identifies the lawyers and legal systems in between the government and indigenous communities as the reason for the funds provided by the government failing to reach the indigenous reserves. Widdowson’s answer may or may not be the right, but it underlines the politics played by the law-makers where indigenous people get entangled in the loopholes of legal systems to improve their reserves.

At this point, I would like to focus on some of the posts made on the digital platforms that highlight the conditions of drinking water on reserves. Lee Maracle on October 6, 2018 posts, “Thinking of all the reserves in Canada that do not have clean water, let’s all send Minister Bennett a bottle of dirty water with ‘Drink like an indigenous person’ written on it”.²³ On the same post Myrna Tom from Burns Lake, British Columbia (though the statistics on boil water advisory excludes Quebec and British Columbia) comments, “We hv [sic] arsenic in our water supply [sic], so we are using [sic] water jugs for the last few yrs [sic] now” and Jennifer Meekis from Sandy Lake First Nation comments “Ours has been on boil advisory since 2002”.²⁴ Maracle’s virtual attack on the Minister about dirty water is not only a voice of protest but the comments on the post; narrate the actual experiences of indigenous people concerning the horrific water condition of some of the water bodies in Canada. “The Guardian” notes that

Nestlé extracts millions of litres of water daily from Six Nations treaty land while ninety-one percent of the homes there aren’t connected to the water treatment plant. While some houses have no water at all, others have water in their taps, but it is too polluted to drink.²⁵ The article is a reminder that sustainable development is tinged with power-politics which allow Nestlé to extract water but do little to treat the water condition on the reserves. The water condition mentioned here is contradictory to what Armstrong narrates in her novel. Penny says, “The water we carried in buckets to use was lake run-off. I grew up drinking the water that geese and ducks swam in, and cows and horses watered...”²⁶ Armstrong’s notion of pure water that heals humans corresponds to the idea of Autumn Peltier, a 13-year old water advocate from the Wikwemikong First Nation in Northern Ontario, who addressed at the United Nations General Assembly in New York City on World Water Day. Peltier was the only child from Canada to be nominated for the 2017 International Children’s Peace Prize who said, “I am lending my voice to speak up for water and mother Earth... many people don’t think water is alive or has a spirit. My people believe this to be true... we believe our water is sacred because we are born of water and live in water for nine months. When the water breaks, new life comes but even deeper than that we come from our mother’s water and her mother’s water and so on. All the original water flows through us from the beginning and all around us”.²⁷ Peltier’s words resonate with the profoundly embedded traditional knowledge of ancestors that reflect the deep value in a drop of water in the indigenous ecological worldview. Land and water are the two most important natural resources in the indigenous system. Life is born through water and after death by being buried with Earth’s bosom, one reunites with Mother Nature.

In conclusion, I want to steer back my focus to the politics of inclusion and reconciliation of the indigenous people in the Canadian state. To do so, firstly I would like to mention a few comments made on certain YouTube videos. On Peltier’s video on water, we find comments like “stop using children as prop stages and ammunition” by Bad Penny and “Ayyy Imao what... If there’s one thing we have enough of on Earth its water” by Mathew Mungra. In another video on the reaction of indigenous leaders on the Trans pipeline project, comments appear like, “All the Indigenous people want at the end of the day is more money; they will protect their land until the price is right. Listening to this is just infuriating” by Shawn S. and “This from all the same people who want clean water and more services on reserves but don’t want to pay taxes that allow for such things. They are unhappy they are not getting a life of work free living” by Darcy Wood. All the commentators’ identities could not be found but the comments are an indication that they are non-indigenous people. Determining the ethics of these comments is not my intention here rather I want to throw light on the attitude portrayed towards indigenous people in the

²⁰. Greenpeace Canada.

²¹. “The Right to Water”, *Amnesty International Canada*, <https://www.amnesty.ca/our-work/issues/indigenous-peoples/indigenous-peoples-in-canada/the-right-to-water>.

²². Steve Paikin, “Indigenous Communities: Surviving Canada”, *The Agenda with Steve Paikin*, November 16, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a6Vs7IcxaF0&t=35s>.

²³. Lee Maracle, Facebook, October 6, 2018.

²⁴. Myrna Tom, Facebook, October 6, 2018.

²⁵. Alexandra Shimo, “While Nestlé extracts”, *The Guardian*, last modified October 5, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/global/2018/oct/04/ontario-six-nations-nestle-running-water>.

²⁶. Jeannette Armstrong, *Whispering in Shadows*, British Columbia, Theytus Books Ltd, 2000, 164.

²⁷. World Water Day: Indigenous Canadian teen addresses UN General Assembly Global News, 22 Mar 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A6LcaTWTx8g&t=84s>.

comments that unabashedly demonstrate the power politics of exclusion. Even in 2018, the voices of indigenous people are ridiculed. Though digital platforms have provided indigenous voices to narrate their experiences, yet there are still comments subjugating those narratives with racism. Dawn Martin-Hill, professor at McMaster University says the reason for the scarcity of water in certain areas is that “there’s a lot of environmental racism”.²⁸ Jeannette Armstrong too ponders upon environmental racism in her novel, *Whispering in Shadows*. Penny says, “...the way Native people get treated every time they do make a stand. Here and everywhere else. There’s a lot of racism that surfaces. Maybe they know in the end that people... want the trees saved but not with them in it”.²⁹ The politics of protecting the environment lies in the exclusion of indigenous identities. The narratives mentioned above prove the gaps present in the SDGs goal of “leaving no one behind”. Canada’s sustainable development rests on the fulcrum of recognizing indigenous identities at both global and local levels, and reconciling with them to reconstruct indigenous identities in the new paradigm of inclusion and sustainability.

References

- [1]. Armstrong, Jeannette. (2000): *Whispering in Shadows*. British Columbia: Theytus Books Ltd, 84.
- [2]. Ibid. 104.
- [3]. Ibid. 109.
- [4]. Ibid. 110.
- [5]. Ibid. 125.
- [6]. Ibid. 164.
- [7]. Anderson, M Kat. (2016): “What is Traditional Ecological Knowledge?” www.kcet.org/shows/tending-the-wild/what-is-traditional-ecological-knowledge *Canada’s Implementation, 20312Canada_ ENGLISH_1 8122_Canadas_Voluntary_National_ReviewENv7.pdf*
- [8]. Gilchrist, Emma. (2018): “The Real Reason Canada is in Crisis over the Kinder Morgan Pipeline”. *The Narwhal*, <https://thenarwhal.ca/real-reason-canada-crisis-over-kinder-morgan-pipeline/>.
- [9]. Granger, Grant. (2017) “The Day Oil Rained Down on Burnaby”. www.burnabynow.com/news/the-day-oil-rained-down-on-burnaby-1.21287293.
- [10]. Greenpeace Canada, *Facebook*, March 25, 2018.
- [11]. King, Thomas. (1992): “Introduction”. *All my Relations: An Anthology of Contemporary Canadian Native Fiction*, University of Oklahoma Press, VI.
- [12]. Maracle, Lee. *Facebook*. October 6, 2018.
- [13]. McMahon, Ryan. *Facebook*, April 23, 2018.
- [14]. Meyer, Carl. (2018): “Chiefs from 133 First Nations join fight against Kinder Morgan pipeline and oilsands”. *News, Energy, Politics*, www.nationalobserver.com/2018/05/02/news/chiefs-133-first-nations-join-fight-against-kinder-morgan-pipeline-and-oilsands.
- [15]. Powless, Richard C. *Facebook*. April 24, 2018.
- [16]. Shimo, Alexandra. (2018): “While Nestlé extracts millions of litres from their land, residents have no drinking water”. *The Guardian*, www.theguardian.com/global/2018/oct/04/ontario-six-nations-nestle-running-water
- [17]. Tasker, Paul John. (2016): “Trudeau cabinet approves Trans Mountain, Line 3 pipelines, rejects Northern Gateway”. *CBC News*, www.cbc.ca/news/politics/federal-cabinet-trudeau-pipeline-decisions-1.3872828.
- [18]. Tom, Myrna. *Facebook*. October 6, 2018.
- [19]. “The Right to Water”, *Amnesty International Canada*, www.amnesty.ca/our-work/issues/indigenous-peoples/indigenous-peoples-in-canada/the-right-to-water.
- [20]. Paikin, Steve. (2017): “Indigenous Communities: Surviving Canada”. *The Agenda with Steve Paikin*, www.youtube.com/watch?v=a6Vs7lCxaF0&t=35s.
- [21]. United Nations, (2016) “Indigenous Peoples and the Sustainable Development Goals”. www.youtube.com/watch?v=Swy0boCxEGY.
- [22]. “Trans Mountain Pipeline” (2019): Wikipedia: Free Encyclopedia, Wikimedia Inc, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trans_Mountain_Pipeline.
- [23]. “World Water Day: Indigenous Canadian teen addresses UN General Assembly” (2018): *Global News*, www.youtube.com/watch?v=A6LcaTWTx8g&t=84s.

²⁸. See note 25.

²⁹. Jeannette Armstrong, *Whispering in Shadows*, British Columbia, Theytus Books Ltd, 2000, 110.