

**Apathy, Antipathy and Settler Colonial Constructs of Environmental Justice:
A Sentiment Analysis**

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Abstract

Within so-called Canada, settler colonialism exists as an ongoing structure of capitalism and dominance that contributes to land dispossession and, as such, informs the reproduction of environmental violence: a holistic form of violence that negatively effects Indigenous communities through a series of physical, spiritual, and emotional harms like that of the First Nations water crisis. This paper addresses commonly held sentiments towards the First Nations water crisis as they appear in the form of social media comments on a recently posted video of Black and Indigenous activists at the International Climate Conference speaking to their lived experiences of environmental racism (CBC Canada, 2021). Million's (2013) felt theory and notion of sociopolitical imaginaries are employed in this paper to guide the reframing of popular sentiments of apathy and antipathy that exist in the collective settler consciousness regarding environmental racism, the First Nations water crisis, and settler colonial violence on Indigenous lands and bodies (as cited by Meissner, 2017). Further discussion is elicited on the relationship between local forms of environmental violence and the global climate crisis, with emphasis made towards reimagining the foci of international environmental stewardship movements as based in Indigenous ways of knowing and being.

This research paper was written, in part, as a contribution to the collaborative learning forum at X University titled *Apathy to Empathy: Addressing the First Nations Water Crisis*. Upon presentation of this research at the event, an original creative piece was included which maps the research presented in this paper and includes a collection of images related to the First Nations water crisis, settler colonialism, land degradation, and environmental advocacy (See Appendix).

Apathy, Antipathy and Settler Colonial Constructs of Environmental Justice: A Sentiment Analysis

Sociopolitical imaginaries inform a collectively upheld settler consciousness and perception of Indigenous peoples and their experiences within the current so-called Canadian context (Million, 2013 as cited by Meissner, 2017). These discourses are reproduced as truths and can be identified throughout daily interactions like those that take place on social media platforms. The current paper seeks to address these sentiments by calling into question the narratives they reproduce as they are informed by the dominance and invisibility of settler colonialism within so-called Canada. Further, this paper challenges apathetic and antipathetic settler narratives, as they relate to the First Nations water crisis, through acknowledging the complex entanglements that exist across the climate crisis, environmental violence, settler colonialism, and the pervasive western Eurocentrism embedded in environmental justice initiatives.

Water Crisis, Environmental Violence & Settler Colonialism

Across what is currently known as Canada, several First Nations communities experience water contamination that prevent peoples from accessing clean water. These conditions range from short and long-term boil water advisories to do-not-use orders which prohibit the use of water for any purposes (Vowel, 2016). First Nations communities are 2.5 times more likely to experience these unsafe water conditions than non-First Nations communities and, for those First Nations communities not currently affected, nearly 40% have been deemed at risk for future water contamination by Health Canada (including those communities that have previously received treatment for both short and long-term boil water advisories) (Lam et al., 2017). The First Nations water crisis then, in which First Nation

communities are disproportionately affected by environmental toxins in their local water infrastructures, is an instance of environmental violence and directly results from ongoing settler colonialism within so-called Canada.

A recent video posted by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) depicts Indigenous and Black youth advocates speaking on the prevalence of environmental racism across so-called Canada; this short video was posted within the context of the recent 2021 United Nations International Climate Change Conference (COP26) (CBC Canada, 2021).

Environmental racism refers to the disproportionately negative effects of environmental contamination on racialized peoples and their communities (Women's Earth Alliance, Native Youth Sexual Health Network, 2016). Recent theoretical frameworks, however, suggest that environmental racism does not account for the detrimental impacts that environmental toxicity and extractive industries have on the totality of biophysical, sociocultural, and spiritual aspects of Indigenous communities presently and sustaining into the future. As such, Vanessa Gray suggests that, in discussing instances of environmental racism as they pertain to Indigenous issues of sovereignty and the ongoing impacts of settler colonialism, it is more accurate to apply the concept of environmental violence to discuss the totality of harms enacted upon Indigenous communities in relation to environmental and social injustice (Women's Earth Alliance, Native Youth Sexual Health Network, 2016).

Environmental violence against Indigenous communities that effect both body and land are inherently intertwined with the global climate crisis as both are rooted in the tenants and effects of settler colonialism. As defined by Wolfe (2007 as cited by Lea, 2018) settler colonialism is an ongoing condition in which infrastructures are made and remade to support the ongoing displacement, assimilation, and degradation of Indigenous peoples and lands to uphold

the settler colonial state. This process is informed by a capitalist, western Eurocentric heteropatriarchy and, it influences the production of knowledge and so-called truths within the settler colonial state. Sociopolitical imaginaries then, as discussed by Million (2009 as cited by Meissner, 2017), are those seemingly felt knowledges and truths defined and upheld by the settler colonial state that, in turn, inform how peoples living within the nation state conceptualize Indigenous peoples and related social issues. These imaginaries generate narratives in which the water crisis, a systemic issue rooted in environmental violence, is viewed apathetically and consequently disregarded as holding any sort of value within context of the global climate crisis and environmental justice movements.

Sentiments of Apathy and Antipathy: On Environmental Racism

Comment sections act as a gathering place for sharing feelings, thoughts, and collective ideologies in response to a particular subject or piece of content. While we cannot always know the commenter's intentions, we can identify certain sentiments that emerge throughout the language used and the interactions that take place amongst commenters in responding to online content. These sentiments, when concerned with content highlighting social justice issues, often fit into a larger framework of sociopolitical imaginaries and work to reproduce colonial narratives of Indigeneity in so-called Canada.

Regarding the comments on CBC's video on environmental racism, feelings of apathy and, at times antipathy, work to generate images of Indigenous peoples as individually responsible for and, simultaneously, unwilling to solve the water crisis in First Nations communities. One commenter writes that: they would be happy "to live in *horrible* Canada," and would willingly volunteer to "live next to a factory," (Fernández, 2021) thereby disregarding issues of environmental violence affecting Indigenous communities within so-called Canada. Another

response suggests that we should simply “look at any reservation in Canada for an example of how things should NOT be done” (Daughter of Time, 2021). This dialogue is reminiscent of explanations for the water crisis that situate First Nations communities’ inability to manage their own resources in a sustainable fashion as the root cause of the crisis (Vowel, 2016); Indigenous peoples in this sentiment are viewed as lazy, corrupt, or simply out of touch with modernity. Overall, the emotional expressions of the youth speakers, their felt knowledges, are undermined in favour of Canada’s seemingly nice, multicultural image on the global stage; these felt knowledges are then weaponized against the speakers to reinforce a trend of silencing Indigenous femmes’ voices, thereby disregarding the systemic nature of the environmental violence taking place impacting First Nations communities.

The comments further exercise an overall disdain for the youths’ experience and orientation towards social justice to suggest that speaking on the First Nations water crisis takes away from the more important issues of the global climate crisis being addressed at COP26. Million (2009) writes that Indigenous femme voices and felt knowledges tend to be infantilized or feminized within western heteropatriarchal Eurocentrism; we see this in a comment that suggests the speakers are simply ‘woke’ millennials who “crave ways to be offended” (Baynes, 2021). It is here that apathy, antipathy, and even disgust come together to undermine the experience of environmental violence in so-called Canada. As a response to the concept of environmental racism, CanadianJimmy (2021) writes: “another label? Really? Yuck!” A second commentor writes that, although they themselves identify with a leftist political identity, the youth advocates are out of line for speaking on environmental racism during a conference meant to address “[global] environmental change” (MacFarlane, 2021). Comments then, are made political, both in how they suggest certain sociopolitical imaginaries and by commentors themselves who

situate their own experience within existing environmental injustice initiatives that are separate from, and seemingly more important than, those outlined by Indigenous peoples in relation to their experience of environmental violence.

Alternative Narratives: Indigenous Feminisms and Decolonial Environmental Justice

The narratives put forth in response to Black and Indigenous youth speaking out against environmental racism can be characterized by an overall negative disposition towards issues of environmental violence affecting Indigenous communities—like that of the First Nations water crisis—and a general disregard for the relationships between environmental violence, settler colonialism, and the global climate crisis. It is important then, to present an alternative narrative that explores such connections, and which makes known the shortcomings of global environmental justice initiatives as they reinforce colonial constructs through a commitment to affirmative actions as opposed to transformative ones (Temper, 2019).

The First Nations water crisis has come about as a result of settler colonialism's intent on Indigenous cultural erasure, land dispossession, and capitalist exploitation in which land is understood as tool for resource extraction and state profit. The ongoing, forced removal of Indigenous peoples from their lands and the intentional degradation of such lands has been at the crux of settler colonialism's commitment to severing connections between Indigenous communities, lands, and bodies (Women's Earth Alliance, Native Youth Sexual Health Network, 2016). This disruption has been made possible through the perpetuation of the western Eurocentric ideology of an anthropocentric, ontological-epistemological divide, in which natural life-worlds are understood as less-than-humans and, therefore, sites to engage in resource exploitation and extraction (Lea, 2018).

As a result of the ongoing degradation of lands by means of the settler colonial state, much of the remaining abundance of natural biodiversity within so-called Canada is located within remote Indigenous communities (Temper, 2019). As such, extractive industries often set up camps in these areas and engage in the production and distribution of natural resources which, in turn, produce environmental toxins that degrade Indigenous lands and water systems. Consequently, many nearby Indigenous communities are subjected to boil water advisories and, due to chronic underfunding by the federal government and strict federal policies surrounding development on reserve that barre access to sustainable aquatic infrastructure systems, these communities are unable to address such environmental concerns on their own accord (Vowel, 2016).

In response to the First Nations water crisis, it is not enough to simply suggest that water is a basic human right and thus should be guaranteed for all peoples and nations, as is the discourse put forward by the United Nations (Vowel, 2016). Violence on Indigenous lands are inherently connected to violence on Indigenous bodies both physically—in terms of the abundance of pollutants that detrimentally effect the ability to consume clean waters locally—as well as spiritually, culturally, and socially (Women’s Earth Alliance, Native Youth Sexual Health Network, 2016). Indigenous feminisms remind us that water is valued as holding its own sentience and that Indigenous women, as carers of life, uphold a responsibility to protecting the life of water and their communities. This relationship of reciprocity between place and peoples exists at the core of Indigenous forms of decolonial environmental justice (McGregor et al., 2020). Further, this relationship opposes western Eurocentric ideologies which seek to normalize environmental violence and prioritize the commodification of lands under settler colonialism within so-called Canada.

Arvin and colleagues (2013) note that mainstream feminism must take-up anticolonial discourse if it is to engage in meaningful and transformative social change. Presently, this work can be applied to current global environmental justice initiatives, like those outlined at COP26. Environmental justice initiatives built upon human rights perspectives, such as those put forth by the United Nations, continue to undermine the decolonial action necessary to address ongoing environmental violence and issues related to the global climate crisis more generally (McGregor et al., 2020; Temper, 2019). Transformative change then, involves a total shift in environmental discourse to one that acknowledges the existing connections across anthropocentrism, settler colonialism, and the ongoing displacement, dispossession, and violence imparted on Indigenous communities and lands. Encompassed in such a shift is an inherent need to recognize the experience of Indigenous communities and women who act as land defenders and stewards while continuing to uphold values of care, reciprocity, and love in relationship to land. Further, transformative change requires recognizing how certain forms of knowledge are privileged under settler colonialism; discourse on environmental justice then, must account for the felt expressions and knowledges put forth by Indigenous femmes, like those youth advocates involved in discussions of environmental racism within so-called Canada while in attendance at COP26.

Conclusion

The analysis of comments on a recently posted video addressing environmental racism within so-called Canada exemplifies how sociopolitical imaginaries produce and reproduce discourses of settler colonialism as they relate to the First Nations' water crisis. Such sentiments make known the ways that feelings of apathy and antipathy inform perceptions of environmental violence, whereby settler colonialism's involvement in such violence is rendered invisible within the dominant settler consciousness. Alternative discourses on the First Nations water crisis that

address connections between ongoing settler colonialism and global environmental concerns
make known the ways in which decolonial environmental justice can only occur through
centering the expressions and felt knowledges of Indigenous femmes, communities, and land
protectors to prioritize responses to global environmental concerns which exist outside of the
western heteropatriarchal Eurocentric colonial construct.

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Appendix

Apathy & Antipathy: Creative Piece

The following image was presented alongside the present research as part of the X University interdisciplinary learning forum *Apathy to Empathy: Addressing the First Nations Water Crisis*. The original piece seeks to map the present research study and draws on images of water advocate Autumn Peltier, YouTube comments—those settler sentiments of antipathy—and public documents including maps of current First Nations boil water advisories, the Indian Act, and the Doctrine of Discovery. Artistic liberties were taken in the definition of environmental violence to reflect the focal issues of environmental racism and settler colonialism presented in the research paper (Digout, 2021).

