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Canadian Theatre Review, Volume 182, Spring 2020, pp. 22-25 (Article)

Published by University of Toronto Press



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What Is Lost and What Is Gained: A Travelogue of Tours of Hydro-Affected Communities in Northern Manitoba

by Jessica Jacobson Konefall,
Peter Kulchyski, and Ramona Neckoway

Hydroelectric development may not appear ‘extractive’ in the same way as the mining, oil and gas, or forestry industries; however, it is an environmentally catastrophic endeavour that severely damages the material bases of ways of life in the middle and far north of Canada and impacts environments hundreds of kilometres beyond generating stations. In northern Manitoba, because there are no significant canyons to fill, land is flooded, and the impoundment creates huge artificial lakes and low-lying reservoirs. Transmission lines necessitate clear-cuts through thousands of acres of pristine boreal forest. Producing energy in the winter means reversing normal ecological cycles so that water flows can be increased; these artificial fluctuations destroy the ecologically rich riparian wetlands that normally edge rivers and lakes in boreal country. Water becomes undrinkable, fish become dangerous to eat, and cultural heritage becomes a casualty. Like other extractive industries, hydroelectric development occurs within Canadian state and market frameworks that make racial redistribution of wealth ‘common sense’ for subjects performing their interests.

Relationship is a fundamental concept within the epistemology of bush people. An intricate and interconnected web of relations among people and the animate and inanimate worlds governs Anishinaabe, Inineew, Dene, and Inuit ways of seeing, knowing, and doing. Bush cultures, the symbolic expression of the practices of people still immersed in the life of the forest, perform face-to-face relationships; situational ethics; respect for personal autonomy; casual informality belying firm, long-established local protocols; and, not least, a humorous temperament.

Bridging the settler-colonial chasm demands that we build and nurture relationships that challenge and disrupt socially pathological hierarchies of colonial dominance. These

relationships require ‘wahkohtowin’: a Cree term that is typically used to refer to ‘kinship’ but can also denote cultural codes of conduct, thus mediating or informing relations and relationships. In 2014, we (Peter Kulchyski and Ramona Neckoway) began touring hydro-impacted Inineew communities. This now-annual hydro tour is an intense seven-day circuit filled with long drives, boat tours, discussion, revelation, outrage, and—above all—kindness and generosity. Relationships on the hydro tour involve engagement with bush dispositions, with ways of life developed in and through an engagement with the temporalities, spatialities, subjectivities, languages, and knowledges of egalitarian gathering and hunting peoples.

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In the city, hydroelectricity is taken for granted; it is seen through the possessive, instrumental rationality that underlines people’s roles as workers and citizens. This contrasts with the face-to-face encounters between community- and urban-based activists, artists, and academics that occur during the hydro

tours. Those participating may witness Inineq performances and embodied practices that are both culturally specific and fundamentally human. The relationships developed on the hydro tour enact performances of care and vulnerability in which ethical concern responds to festering social wounds. Perceiving vulnerability and responding to it with care is labour, the work of relationship. Distribution of social wealth is unequal, raced, and gendered, yet it can be transformed through caring practice; such transformations require Inineq leadership.

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Misipawistik/Grand Rapids

In Misipawistik, the site of the first large-scale hydro project in the mid-sixties, we meet up with Gerald McKay, who drew us into political action in 2005. Gerald is an outstanding host; for years, he has fed the tour group fried pickerel and taken visitors to important sites in and near the community. We gather around Gerald's table; walk to look at the dam and silenced rapids, which is now gravel bed; and drive through the fancy hydro workers' town, a sharp contrast with nearby Inineq communities. Gerald points out numerous indignities and tragedies. He looks us in the eyes and shakes his head mildly in disbelief, condemnation, and awe at what he, his family, and his community have had to survive, and at Manitoba Hydro's vicious decisions. His smiling blue eyes flash occasionally with anger that is rueful, urgent. Gerald points out that hydro employees' houses have subsidized heating, while local people have their power cut off. Hydro tours starkly reveal these dichotomies.

The province thought little of Misipawistik, paid little respect to Aboriginal treaty rights, and engaged in no negotiations when the first northern dams were built in 1960–68. A small, intergenerational community, poor in Western goods but culturally rich, was swamped by a thousand-strong camp of workers from far and wide. Fishing, trapping, and the rapids that gave the community its name were ruined. Gerald tells us, evenly and with patient attention, that a cabin “right over there” was bulldozed mid-winter, without notice, while the family was on their trapline because Hydro wanted to build a dock at the site. The story of Gerald's grandmother waking up to the quiet because, for the first night in her life, the rapids had been silenced is haunting. He describes making the cold, kilometres-long trek to school watching the warm kids in Manitoba Hydro's school bus drive by. He recalls a local woman in labour trying to get help with giving birth from the nursing station and being told that she, as a non-employee, was not of concern. Showing us a site known as the “apartment graveyard,” he tells us about how bones were discovered during gravel excavation. Archaeologists designated an interment area, but digging continued around it, creating a high hill in a desolate landscape. Gerald says bones from graves outside the demarcated area belonging to his ancestors, are in the dike.

Feasting in Gerald's kitchen, driving to the dam and along the dike, we get a multi-layered sense of a deeply traumatic history. When we witness Gerald's performances of stories and sites, when we feel our tears behind our eyes, when we feel cozy in his kitchen, when we admire his style, when we negotiate the feelings that arise face-to-face, we are being opened up to hear the call of those who bear the embodied cost of ‘development.’

Kinasoa Sipi/Norway House

We are woken up to history with a stark, ethical splash in the face as we move north and encounter the effects of the so-called Lake Winnipeg Regulation project, undertaken in the seventies. Members of the Norway House Fisherman's Cooperative eagerly show us the impact of Hydro activities, taking us by boat from the cooperative's docks upstream to Playgreen Lake and across to Two-Mile Channel. Over the years, Langford Saunders and Chris Clark, the former and current presidents of the cooperative, along with other fishermen, have acted as our guides. At the channel's south end, we watch Lake Winnipeg's north shore eroding, trees falling off mud cliffs into the lake. Chris says that in the sixties, his cousin walked east along the sandy shore all the way to Warren's Landing, the historic site where Lake Winnipeg ‘naturally’ spills into Kitche Sipi/Nelson River. The beach is now gone, and in its place is an impassable morass of dirt and falling trees. Hydro calls this erosion natural; however, it happened only after the changes they made. Meanwhile, at Two-Mile Channel, long-buried construction equipment emerges from the eroding shoreline like dead fingers reaching out of graves. In all the communities we visit, fishermen are among the most impacted by the production of green energy and have expressed their experience with tremendous humour, grief, and reverence for the land. Langford and Chris describe the rise and fall of their fishery and Playgreen Lake's disappeared species. They tell us about nets filled with debris, hidden logs and new reefs damaging boats, and “apple core” islands, where erosion has created hanging banks so the islands resemble apple cores. Their kindness and concern for our safety as we travel by boat are an important element in the relationships we are building. They awaken us to the fact that the boats, nets, and livelihoods far out from the land are at the front lines of this struggle.

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Pimicikamak/Cross Lake

By the mid-seventies, additional dams and infrastructure were constructed on waterways throughout northern Manitoba; by then, treaty rights factored more significantly in national politics than they had during the Misipawistik debacle. For example, the federal government provided funding for several hydro-affected First Nation communities to negotiate for compensation for the loss of reserve lands. A Northern Flood Committee was created, and the Northern Flood Agreement (NFA) was signed in 1977; however, provincial and federal signatories, along with Manitoba Hydro, have generally refused to implement it. By the 1990s, many frustrated community leaders accepted 'buy-out' agreements, which effectively terminated NFA rights. Pimicikamak refused such a deal, instead creating its own four-council system of governance.

We often visit Pimicikamak offices on our tours. During one visit, Rita Monias tells us how in 2014 she made tea on her land, which is now in the middle of the Hydro golf course near the Jenpeg dam. By making tea in that place, perhaps guided by the principles of *wahkohtowin*, Rita performed relationships of care for her ancestors and the land, articulated through an Ininev everyday action, in all its *kitchee*/grand significance. She did this because she was lonely for the elders who had a vision for her people's way of life, a life that was now at deep risk of being lost or eroded. Her husband, Tommy, who would serve a term as the community's elected chief, joined her. After a few days, so did much of the community. They posted a notice that Manitoba Hydro was unwelcome. A skeleton crew of dam workers stayed. The Premier and Hydro's CEO travelled to Pimicikamak, negotiating a 'process agreement' for NFA implementation.

During another tour, Darrell Settee, an emergency response coordinator, talks about the altered landscape with a quiet demeanour, a practical kindness, and dignified grief. He tells harrowing stories of snowmobiles falling through unnaturally thin ice in areas that were once reliable and stable. He told us (in words he repeated at a recent hearing), "Elders said before the development, *Kitchee Manitou* filled their traditional Territory with food and health much like a plate that was set before them. Somehow our plate was broken and taken from us; turbines are a wheel of fortune on one side, and a meat grinder on the other, and the Pimicikamak People are on the receiving end along with fish, wildlife, lack of benefit." We can see the light, warmth, and connectivity hydro produces for some in relation to the industrial death it metes out to others, and we note that life needs care, not 'interests.'

If we want to transform hydroelectric connections, as our Ininev guides encourage, we are responsible for caring for the parts of others they take back for themselves, the parts that capitalism and the Enlightenment, their nation-states, their hydro projects, have stolen. One must take these back over and over. Rita Monias does this by making tea, *kitchee iskwew*.

Pimicikamak is one of the capitals of Indigenous resistance in Canada: not negotiating self-government, but establishing and living a system of their own. *They exist and need no one's permission*. Sovereignty is needed in order to build a better relationship to the land, in order to build a way of caring. Former chief John Miswagon told Kulchyski that he would frequently talk to federal and provincial officials about funding agreements. He would say,

"I'll have to take this back to the four councils for approval." A pause from Ottawa or Winnipeg, and the official might say, "Well, you know, we don't really recognize your system..." to which John would reply, "That's fine, that's fine. We don't recognize your system either!"

Makeso Sakaihikun

Noah bulldozed a lot of bush before he retired as a heavy equipment operator. Late in life, he began to work his father's trapline along the Butnau River, near Gillam. He has bush skills. He also has Kennedy's Disease, a degenerative neurological disorder strikingly resembling mercury poisoning. Noah's trapline abuts the soon-to-be-completed Keeyask dam site. During the Manitoba Clean Environment Commission hearings, Manitoba Hydro officials said they would make a "small footprint" on Noah's trapline as part of the Bipole transmission line project, which included the construction of converter stations, roads, camps, and dikes. We visited in 2015. Faced with the newly created wasteland, we looked back at each other through tears.

Noah tells many stories. In one, his elderly mother asked him for fish. He went out with his little dog, *Lady*, to a creek off the highway and set his net. *Lady* started barking: when he looked up the creek bank, he saw a conservation officer. The officer said, "You can't set a net like that, across a creek! I'm going to confiscate it." Noah insisted, "It's not all the way across!" A few choice words were exchanged. Noah calmed down and asked to take the conservation officer for a ride to show him something. They drove, and Noah asked, "What do you see?" The conservation officer said, "The sky, the trees." Noah replied, "What about that dam there? It's all the way across the river. What is that doing to the fish? Are you going to give them a ticket?" What kind of law fines a man for catching a few fish for his mother while letting a corporation destroy a river system with no penalty at all? The conservation officer may still be scratching his head. Like Rita's, Noah's everyday gestures are set against the context of grand historical developments.

Tataskweyak/Split Lake

Robert Spence, a fierce critic of hydro, is our most regular host in Tataskweyak. Generous and welcoming, he is a fighter, a trapper, an artist, and an elected member of the band council. Robert brims with moral indignation, ethical clarity, and a firm determination to make things right. At Tataskweyak, we often set out by boat to observe the damaged shoreline: riparian zones are gone, trees topple into silted water, islands have now become reefs, fish have sores. Small areas are cleaned up with 'rip-rap,' rough rocks used to stabilize the shoreline, which comes nowhere close to mitigating the damage caused. The vastness of the damage—*thousands of kilometres*—starts to pool in our consciousness. No social or cultural benefits are visible after more than twenty years of working with industry consultants: many homes are plywood-foundation trailers, and in late spring, it can feel as if the whole community is sinking into the mud.

Robert's anger embodies another kind of care work, stemming from the knowledge that there must be another way. It circles around the many wounds suffered by his community, his friends, his family. It remains awake to the strata of pain layered over traumas already borne. Caught between two dams, Robert

reminds us that when the choice is between despair or moral outrage, anger too can have a healing function.

O-Pipon-Na-Piwin/South Indian Lake

O-Pipon-Na-Piwin/South Indian Lake was flooded in living memory. Families were offered money to burn their homes and move to trailers on the higher ground of the new shoreline. The lake level was raised three metres. The community's relatively prosperous fishery was nearly decimated. The tour initially had no established connection here, yet our first arrival proved a momentous occasion. Local people watched for us on the ferry and led us in a near-parade to the community centre for a meeting and lunch. We toured the lake by boat and were feasted to close the day. Since our first visit, they have been generous with boat tours, feasts, and meetings.

Here, the social impacts of hydroelectric development are particularly dire. Hilda Dysart, a woman of great strength, character, kindness, and wisdom, tells us that in 1969 she could name the three people in the community who were on welfare: a single mother, a physically handicapped man, and one other person. The community was blessed with an ecologically rich landscape, and it thrived. O-Pipon-Na-Piwin's lake is now a reservoir, effectively a 'battery' for the generating stations that we visited in Gillam. During several of our visits, we heard that the community's fishery could recover if the water fluctuations were kept within legally licensed levels; Hydro continually refuses to do so.

In the courtesy and strength of the people we meet here, we witness an echo of the good life people once had, of the values and purpose that have been passed on. This small community has had its lake, the source of its land-based life, transformed by outsiders into a reservoir, a giant battery. Manitoba Hydro will not even include them on its many maps of the system, perhaps wishing they could just be erased from memory and from its current operations. Their continued presence is itself an act of resistance. They have pride of place on the map they help forge in our hearts.

Nisichawaysihk/Nelson House

Ramona Neckoway comes from Nisichawaysihk, the last stop on the hydro tour. It is a community nestled on the Canadian Shield that has been devastated by the Churchill River Diversion. Like many other hydro-affected First Nation communities, it experiences profound impacts. Ramona comes from a part of Nisichawaysihk known locally as 'the Bronx.' Her family hosts the hydro tour when it comes to town. On this leg of the journey, we are taken to sites where Wesahkeychak (a Cree cultural icon, often referred to as the 'Trickster') once walked.

We go to a well-established family camp nestled in a small cove, where we are feasted with food and stories. We get a taste of bush camp life: the ease; the casual conversation; the smell of spruce, pine, and smoke from the indolent fire; the generous, affirmative hospitality. Bush life tastes like fresh pickerel and bannock. For a short while, we glimpse pimatisiwin, the Ininew notion of 'the good life' and are exposed to Ithinesiwin, loosely translated as a principle or philosophy that informs Cree ways of living. Here we also see the direct impact of the forces trying to crush pimatisiwin.

Embodied practices

The tour feeds the growing resistance movement through engagement with local activists, facilitating connections between them and tour participants, and performs relationship building. Whether by car on good old northern gravel roads or by boat coasting along hydro-affected shorelines, we are reminded that Cree peoples and communities viewed and used the land and water in ways that challenge Western capitalist ideals and practices. Throughout the tour, we are reminded that land and water are not 'resource' commodities to be bought, bartered, or sold. We are shown that the lands and waters throughout this region are sites of cultural significance, where decolonization is taking place in real time. We see performance here in the manner defined by Diana Taylor as "embodied practice." The definition is particularly apt here, where relationships are built through a wide range of practices that enact care, represent vulnerability, and reveal a world that those with power prefer to smother in silence.

Performances of anger, hospitality, story, and everyday gesture, read through the lens of settler criticality, allow us to see how performative acts lead to an understanding that gently asks us to care. They also remind us of the importance of the land. Gerald McKay, Langford Saunders, Rita Monias, Noah Massan, Robert Spence, and Hilda Dysart, among many others, performatively embody the best spirit of Keewatino/the north and of pimatisiwin. Through the tour, amid all the painful sights we witness, their presence, courage, and wisdom allow us to glimpse an alternative way of experiencing the land as something other than a commodity. The hydro system built in the past forty-five years rests on a foundation of more than 500 years of settler-colonial activities. It will take many years to undo. We close with a whisper, echoing the performance of Ininew dispositions, the whisper of words used in many places where old environmental impacts need correcting, words that are not yet in the policy lexicon in Manitoba: river rehabilitation.

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About the Authors

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