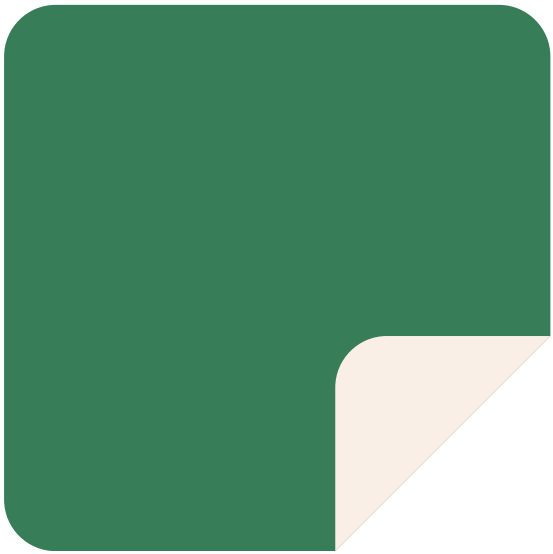
I WALK MY WORDS

BY ZIYUAN YANG



INDIGENOUS NARRATIVES RESISTING COLONIAL "SUSTAINABILITY"

ASTU 399: PLACE & POWER

CONTENTS

WHY STORIES MATTER

In the face of colonial systems that continue to claim lands and silence Indigenous voices, stories become more than memories—they become acts of resistance.

This zine explores how Indigenous narratives challenge the myth of "sustainable development" as a benevolent project. Through the powerful voices of Kapesh in «*I Am a Damn Savage* / *What Have You Done to My Country?*», and Virginia Pésémapéo Bordeleau in «*Blue Bear Woman*», we see how so-called development disguises ongoing dispossession and environmental destruction.

An unmarked river inland along the way to the Manicouagan–Uapishka Biosphere Reserve, which was first designated by UNESCO in 2007. (Ossie Michelin)

But these stories do more than critique. They reclaim Indigenous agency, affirm relationships with land and kin, and imagine futures beyond extraction. Guided by the theories of Macarena Gómez-Barris, Warren Cariou, and Caleb Behn & Karen Bakker, this zine traces how narratives refuse colonial frameworks and create pathways toward decolonial futures.

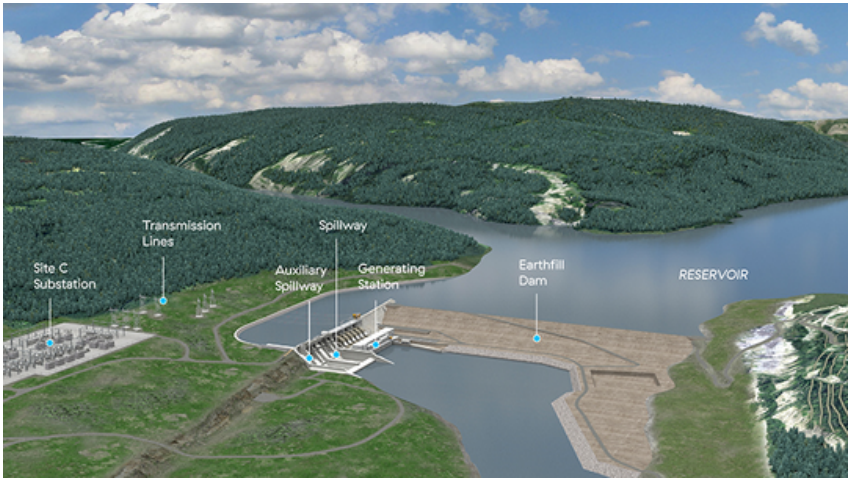
I WALK

To walk our words is to carry memory forward, to refuse forgetting, and to honour the land that holds our histories.

This is why stories matter.

MY WORDS

SEEING THROUGH THE FAÇADE OF "SUSTAINABILITY"



Site C Project Components
Site C will be a third dam and generating station on the Peace River in northeast B.C. The project will provide 1,100 megawatts of capacity and about 5,100 gigawatt hours of energy each year to the province's integrated electricity system.

Development promises progress.
But for Indigenous peoples, these promises often hide the violence of dispossession.
The following thinkers help us read between the lines of colonial "sustainability."

Macarena Gómez-Barris
— The Extractive Zone

“Colonial development buries Indigenous worlds beneath the promise of progress.”

Gómez-Barris introduces the idea of neo-extractivism—a new form of colonial exploitation that presents itself as sustainable development. Beneath the language of progress, she reveals submerged perspectives: the Indigenous knowledges, memories, and relationships to land that persist under the weight of extraction.

Behn & Bakker
— Rendering Technical, Rendering Sacred

“What the state renders technical, Indigenous voices render sacred.”

Behn and Bakker critique how governments render technical the sacred spaces of Indigenous peoples—reducing rivers, forests, and lands into numbers and data points. In contrast, Indigenous stories render sacred these places, refusing the cold logic of colonial development.

Warren Cariou
— Aboriginal Energy

“Energy is not a resource to be consumed, but a relative to be honoured.”

Cariou focuses on the concept of energy intimacy—understanding energy as part of kinship, not as a commodity. He reminds us of pastahowin, the belief that disrespecting natural forces leads to consequences. Colonial energy projects sever these relationships, but Indigenous narratives restore them.

STOLEN LIVES, BORROWED HOUSES

Kapesh writes with stark honesty:

It is not my life that I am living, it is the White man's life.

This simple but powerful statement reveals how colonial development projects, far from supporting Indigenous autonomy, instead impose rigid systems of control and dependence. Through government housing programs, the Innu people are confined to predetermined spaces that sever their connection to the land and traditional ways of life.

What is presented as "modernization" or "progress" functions as a mechanism of surveillance and cultural erasure. The homes are not shelters of comfort but tools of discipline. These houses, designed by colonial authorities, regulate daily life, restrict movement, and enforce sedentary living on a once nomadic community.

Kapesh exposes the sharp irony: under the guise of development, colonial powers enforce dispossession. By framing their policies as benevolent, colonial governments obscure the realities of cultural loss and environmental alienation.

This aligns closely with Macarena Gómez-Barris's concept of dispossession under development narratives. Gómez-Barris argues that so-called sustainable development projects often mask extractive motives, prioritizing economic expansion over Indigenous relational ontologies. In this light, Kapesh's words uncover the colonial logic that renders Indigenous peoples as objects of state management rather than subjects of their own futures.

Kapesh's narrative is not just a personal lament; it is a political indictment of the systems that claim to "improve" Indigenous lives while dismantling them from within.

STORIES WE CANNOT TELL

Kapesh sharply critiques how colonial media misrepresent and silence Indigenous realities. She recounts encounters with journalists and filmmakers who visit Innu territory, supposedly to tell their stories. Yet, as she observes, their narratives are constructed not to reflect Innu truths, but to satisfy outsider expectations.

“They came to see us, to film us, but they never heard us.”

This reflection captures the core issue: the violence of misrepresentation. The cameras are present, the questions are asked, but the answers are filtered through colonial frameworks. Innu voices are extracted, edited, and repackaged into palatable fragments for settler audiences.

Kapesh reveals that these so-called documentary efforts strip Indigenous people of narrative agency. Rather than amplifying Innu voices, they reproduce colonial fantasies of “noble savages” or communities in need of salvation through development.

This dynamic connects directly with Warren Cariou’s critique of narrative extraction. Cariou describes how colonial systems not only extract resources from Indigenous lands but also appropriate stories, transforming them into commodities while erasing their true meaning. Kapesh’s frustration with media intrusion exemplifies this process.

The silencing of Indigenous voices perpetuates colonial myths of benevolent development. By controlling the narrative, settler institutions justify extractive projects and marginalize Indigenous resistance.

Kapesh’s narrative becomes a powerful act of reclamation. In writing her own account, she reclaims her voice from the distortions of colonial media and asserts the right to self-representation.

The traditional territory of the Innu of Unamen Shipu

THE WOUNDS OF THE LAND

In this second part of her work, Kapesh shifts to a broader, more allegorical critique of colonial violence. She moves beyond personal testimony to address the systematic devastation of her homeland.

Her words carry a deep anguish:

> **They have ripped the earth open, they have stripped the forest bare, they have drained the rivers dry.**

Through this vivid imagery, Kapesh illustrates how extractive industries—mining, logging, dam construction—have mutilated Innu lands under the pretense of progress.
Her depiction of environmental destruction reveals the true cost of colonial development: not only ecological collapse but cultural disintegration.

WHAT HAVE YOU DONE TO MY COUNTRY?

Wild caribou roam the tundra near The Meadowbank Gold Mine located in Nunavut, on March 25, 2009. Nathan Denette/The Canadian Press

This resonates strongly with Behn & Bakker's concept of rendering technical. In their analysis of hydroelectric projects, they explain how governments frame sacred Indigenous landscapes as neutral resources for technical management and economic gain.

Kapesh exposes the same process, showing how her land has been turned into an object of exploitation, its spiritual and cultural significance stripped away.

Yet, even amid despair, Kapesh's writing is an act of resistance. By documenting these devastations, she performs what Macarena Gómez-Barris calls submerged perspectives—bringing buried truths to the surface and refusing to let colonial erasure succeed.

TRACING FOOTSTEPS, FINDING HOME

In Blue Bear Woman, the journey back to ancestral land is both physical and spiritual. The narrator's path leads her to Lake Matagami, a place intertwined with family memory and loss.

She reflects:

We stop on the shores of Lake Matagami…
We drink to Jos and Allaisy's spirit and to their huge lake.

This moment captures the act of honoring both place and ancestors. The return to Lake Matagami is not simply a visit to a geographic location; it is a reconnection with history, kinship, and the living memory embedded in the land.

Through this journey, the narrator resists the colonial displacement that has sought to sever Indigenous people from their territories. Even as the environment bears the scars of extraction and industrial encroachment, memory persists.

TRACING FOOTSTEPS, FINDING HOME

Macarena Gómez-Barris's concept of submerged perspectives helps illuminate this moment. Gómez-Barris emphasizes that beneath the visible impacts of extractivism, Indigenous epistemologies survive and resurface, carrying the weight of relational knowledge. The lake becomes a living archive, holding stories that colonial forces could not erase.

Matagami Lake

The narrative also echoes Warren Cariou's notion of energy intimacy. The water is not merely a natural resource—it is kin, a source of life and memory, deserving of respect and care.
By returning to these sites of memory, Blue Bear Woman enacts an ontological refusal of colonial forgetting, affirming that the land remains a vessel for Indigenous presence and continuity.

BEYOND CRITIQUE:
NARRATIVES AS ACTS OF CREATION

“I WALK MY WORS”

NARRATIVES AS ACTS OF CREATION

Indigenous narratives do not stop at revealing the violence hidden behind the façade of sustainable development. They move beyond critique to create visions of decolonial futures.

Kapesh, through her sharp irony and unapologetic voice, reclaims narrative sovereignty. By telling her own story in her own language, she defies colonial erasure and transforms personal testimony into collective memory. Her writing does not ask for inclusion—it asserts autonomy.

Similarly, Blue Bear Woman does not simply mourn displacement. Instead, it walks the path of memory and kinship, weaving together fragmented histories into a living future. When the narrator learns her ancestor's name means "I Walk My Words," it becomes both a declaration and an invitation: to live one's stories, to carry them forward into new generations.

These narratives perform what Gómez-Barris calls counter-cartography—mapping land and identity not through extractive boundaries, but through stories, relationships, and responsibilities.

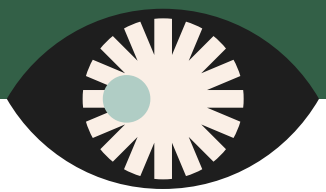
Warren Cariou's concept of energy intimacy also shines through: recognizing the land not as a resource but as kin shapes futures built on reciprocity rather than exploitation.
Finally, Behn and Bakker remind us that Indigenous voices render sacred what colonial systems attempt to render technical. By centering Indigenous epistemologies, these stories refuse the technocratic logic of development and instead affirm relational worlds.

In this way, Indigenous narratives do not merely resist—they build. They imagine futures where the land remembers, the water flows with stories, and the people continue to walk their words.

CONCLUSION:
FUTURES BEYOND EXTRACTION

Indigenous narratives do more than resist the violence of colonial development — they open pathways to futures rooted in respect, reciprocity, and survival.

Through Kapesh's fierce reclamation of voice, we see how colonial systems of control are exposed and rejected. Her sharp irony and personal testimony transform imposed identities into defiant declarations.
Through Blue Bear Woman, we witness how family memory and the land intertwine. The story becomes a journey not just to recover what has been lost, but to walk new futures into being—futures carried in names, in steps, in words.



The theories guiding this zine remind us that these are not isolated stories. Gómez-Barris teaches us to read the submerged perspectives beneath extractive practices. Cariou emphasizes intimacy with the land and the consequences of forgetting our responsibilities. Behn and Bakker show us how Indigenous narratives render the land sacred, resisting its reduction to mere technical projects.

Together, these voices remind us: to walk our words is to live in relation with the earth, and to imagine futures beyond the logic of extraction. But this journey does not end here.

STORIES,
LIKE RIVERS,
CARRY LIFE FORWARD.

Cree Indians in camp

THEY REMEMBER
WHAT THE LAND HAS ENDURED,

AND THEY IMAGINE
WHAT THE LAND COULD BECOME.

WHAT FUTURES MIGHT EMERGE IF WE LISTEN, NOT TO THE PROMISES OF DEVELOPMENT, BUT TO THE STORIES OF THE LAND ITSELF?

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to the Indigenous writers and communities whose stories, knowledge, and resistance shape the heart of this project.

To Kapesh and Virginia Pésémapéo Bordeleau, thank you for your powerful narratives that continue to walk the words of your peoples, keeping memory alive and futures open. Your work illuminates the truths hidden beneath the façade of development and inspires pathways beyond colonial frameworks. Finally, I would like to sincerely thank Professor Dr. Isabella Huberman for fostering an environment of learning, respect, and critical engagement in this course. Your guidance encouraged me to think deeply and creatively about the intersections of land, narrative, and power.

This zine is a small step in continuing the conversation—one that honors the voices of those who have long spoken against colonial silencing, and those who continue to imagine futures grounded in relation and respect.

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