



Land Through the Context of Culture

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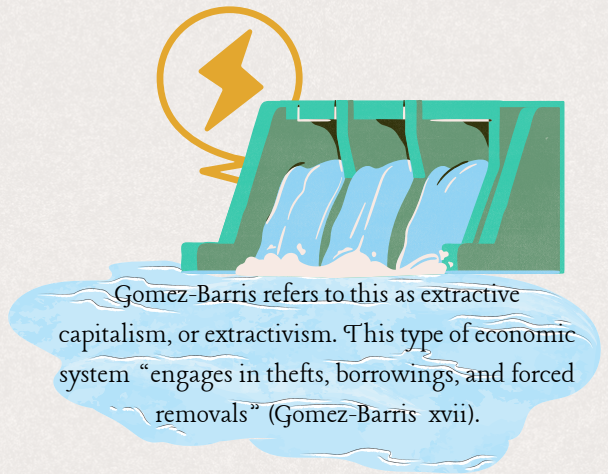
Human beings hold a great amount of power over the planet we reside on. The ways we choose to source our energy and use the Earth's resources can either sustain or deplete them.



Cultural differences, as depicted in Kapesh's "What Have You Done to My Country?" and Sam-Cromarty's "James Bay Memoirs," can become a significant factor in how people treat each other as well as the Earth's resources, due to consumption methods, socioeconomic structures, and behavioural patterns.



Western cultures tend to see the land as a source of fuel or energy (Cariou 18). Land may be altered and used as a source to provide energy for large societies of people, despite immediate and long-term consequences towards wildlife or the climate, as we see demonstrated by the construction of hydro dams.



Gomez-Barris refers to this as extractive capitalism, or extractivism. This type of economic system “engages in thefts, borrowings, and forced removals” (Gomez-Barris xvii).

CULTURAL NORMS OFTEN DETERMINE THE WAY A GROUP OR SOCIETY VIEWS LAND AND RESOURCES.

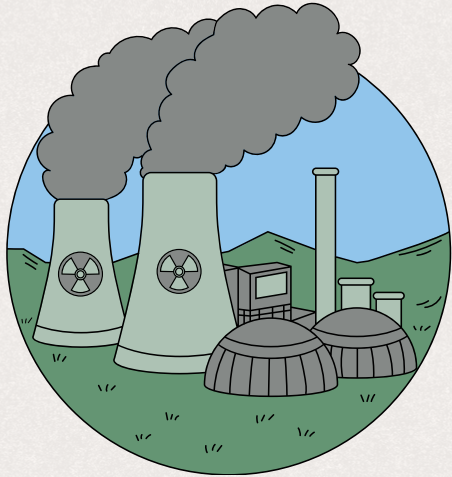
Most Aboriginal cultures engage in what Cariou defines as energy intimacy. Each community member maintains a personal relationship with their sources of energy and with the land, taking responsibility to nurture the land for future generations. Respect for nature is often considered to be a strict obligation and one can expect consequences if this obligation is neglected.



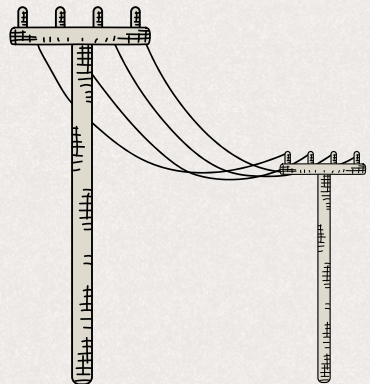
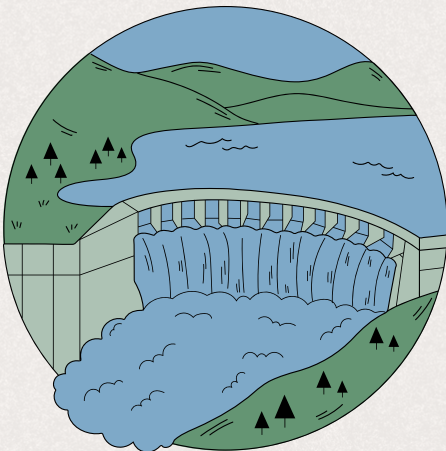
Animals and ecosystems are treated with respect and nothing more is taken than needed for survival.

"EXTRACTIVISM"

Western cultures tend to view the land as something to take from and profit off of. The wildlife may be disrupted despite immediate and long-term consequences on surrounding plants, animals, and communities. Gomez-Barris refers to this as "extractivism," a practice which involves "violently reorganizing social life and the land" (Gomez-Barris xvii).



Economic growth is typically a relevant goal in Western cultures, and the construction of large structures such as dams and power lines are considered progressive for society, despite clear repercussions for the environment. Infrastructures distribute energy widely and individuals within the society have little to no direct connection to their energy.



"ENERGY INTIMACY"

"In most Aboriginal cultures there is little interest in generalized concepts of energy or fuel as they are understood in Western cultures, but instead there are teachings about the vitality of all beings, including the earth itself.

Therefore, energy in Aboriginal contexts is almost always about relationships and inevitably about ethics. Two of the most important teachings in many Aboriginal traditions are that no one should make demands upon nature and no one should ever waste resources by using more than immediate needs dictate.

Omushkego Cree Elder Louis Bird explains his people's ethical obligation toward the environment when he says, 'there were rules about respecting nature and the environment—the animals and the birds. If one of these were broken by a member of the family . . . the punishment was a retraction of the benefits from nature' (2007, 75–76)." (Cariou r8)

This cultural divide is a fascinating phenomenon, as our mindsets are simply products of socialization depending on the culture and family we happen to be born into... and even more fascinating is how the simple human mindset can have such enormous impacts on the fate of the entire planet.

This excerpt succinctly describes the overall perspective typically held by Aboriginal cultures regarding energy, land, and resources.

While a Western view on energy often includes extracting mass amounts of resources at a time and providing energy for large groups of people, many Indigenous cultures revolve their teachings around connections to the land. It is crucial within these cultures to not demand anything of nature and to not take anything more from it than what is immediately required. Gratitude towards the earth is a meaningful teaching shared by many Indigenous communities; thus, each individual is fully aware of (and involved in) how their food and other forms of energy are sourced, and their methods tend not to disrupt nature's rhythm.

Compare this, then, to Western ideologies where "extractivism" is common for the sake of wealthy groups increasing their wealth and status. By extracting resources, creating hydro dams, and disrupting once-thriving ecosystems, there is more focus placed on economic growth than the flourishing of the planet which is shared with other people, animals, and future generations. Energy is sourced to be distributed amongst a large population, so each citizen has no connection or knowledge of how their own food, electricity, water, and belongings came to be. This disconnect then allows corporations to get away with potentially unethical and damaging events, since the average consumer is unaware— and thus not alarmed— by where their energy is coming from, or how it impacts the planet.



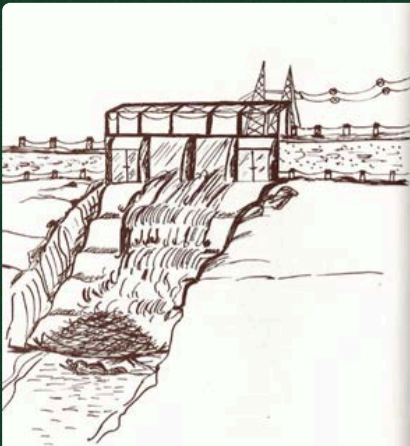
The power of storytelling

In many Indigenous cultures, information is passed down through storytelling. Kapes's *"What Have You Done to My Country?"* tells the story of a young boy, raised by his grandfather who teaches him how to live off of, and respect, the land. When settlers arrived in the boy's territory, they gradually take his culture and ways of life away from him, replacing them with their own Western cultural norms. While the story is written as though it follows this boy's life, it may also be interpreted as the story of colonization as a whole, as felt by a vast population of Indigenous communities.

This story demonstrates the jarring contrast in the ways Indigenous cultures tend to treat the Earth compared to how Western cultures do. Regrettably, the extractive perspectives of the West resulted in the attempted erasure of Indigenous perspectives and practices. Kapes's utilization of storytelling functions as a method of preserving her culture while providing information which explains the various ways in which Western ideals have disrupted the livelihood of countless Indigenous communities.

Margaret Sam-Cromarty's

"James Bay Memoirs"



SEVEN STEPS

At the reservoir
are Cree trap lines.
Little did the trappers know
their lives would change.

The trappers watch
the massive hydro dam
Out of rock, seven steps.
In their tongue they spoke of
the cunning of the white man.

No one heard
the lowly trappers'
whisper there was a garden.
The big corporations
said Indian land was worthless.

Across snow and bitter cold
the work went on
on the trappers' land.
They were startled
to see rolling hills
disappear at a man's command.

One day the trappers saw
the seven steps again.
They did not enjoy
the wonders of the seven steps
as do tourists from the south.

The trappers seldom spoke.
To learn the other man's ways
would not be wise.
They move on
with their beaver traps.

(1988)

The collection of poems depict the narrator's childhood memories, sharing a great appreciation of the land with her family. Her father hunted with respect for the animals, taking only what he needed to provide for their family. They gained knowledge from the land and felt a strong connection to it.

The narrator returns to James Bay years later to find it completely changed; a dam in the river which affected the wildlife and the local Indigenous trappers.

Western methods of extracting energy, in this case the construction of a dam, interfere greatly with ecosystems, making it extremely challenging for Indigenous people to continue in their own methods of acquiring energy.

Implications of cultural differences in energy sourcing

When considering methods of obtaining energy, it is crucial that the future of the planet is also taken into consideration. If the Earth's resources are depleted, many species will not be able to survive very far into the future. Climate change and global warming have become growing concerns in recent decades, and Western trends of extractivism are largely at fault due to their massive destruction of ecosystems. It would be extremely beneficial for the planet as a whole if more sustainable methods of sourcing energy became more common.



The authors of “What Have You Done to My Country?” and “James Bay Memoirs,” along with many other Indigenous artists, affirm that their culture has not been lost, and countless Indigenous communities continue to stand strong and pass down traditions which they fought to preserve.

The creative and theoretical works previously discussed bring up other topics of importance: for one, traditional Indigenous hunting, trapping, and gathering has been made difficult as a result of Western settlers extracting resources from their land and pushing wildlife away.

Even further, Western settlers were persistent enough in the pursuit to extract resources and increase wealth that they attempted to westernize Indigenous communities and force them to forget about their own culture which has taught them to respect the environment.

Normative practices in different cultures often dictate the way a society views the planet and its resources.

Different norms also determine the ways people treat others, and other species which coexist in our ecosystems.



Western methods of extracting energy in massive quantities, AKA extractivism, often lead to drastic consequences for the planet. In comparison, common Indigenous practices revolve around energy intimacy and are much more likely to sustain the planet for generations to come. Respect for the environment is a focal point in many Indigenous cultures.

Despite settlers' attempts to extinguish Indigenous communities and terminate the practice of their own cultures, many communities still persevere despite more challenging consequences, keeping traditions alive to this day. We see examples of this resilience in many creative works such as "What Have You Done to My Country?" and "James Bay Memoirs.

Works Cited

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