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OPEN RIVERS :
RETHINKING WATER, PLACE & COMMUNITY

# RIVERS AND MEANING

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The cover image is of low clouds in Glen Forsa on the Isle of Mull, Scotland, UK. Image by Jill Dimond on Unsplash.



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TEACHING AND PRACTICE

# THE RIVER AND THE BRIDGE

## By Robert Snikkar

I am a white man, settler, second-generation Finnish Canadian.

I stand on a bridge. It spans a river that has flowed longer than our imagination can picture. The river is life on this planet.

My bridge connects me to others' beliefs and understanding, to the world's living and non-living inhabitants, to the past and to the future.

My bridge is learning—learning about oneself, others, and one's place in this world. This learning requires listening, questioning, and self-reflection to see one's privilege and to investigate one's biases and perspective. It involves taking the steps to put oneself into discussions and collaborations with others, to see oneself through the mirror of others' perceptions.

That will require many bridges to be built.

*Chaudière Falls in Ottawa in June, as seen during a hot air balloon ride. Image via Flickr user Shanta. (CC-BY-2.0)*

# The Settler Paradigm

I stand now on an actual physical bridge over the Ottawa River.

It connects one colonial province, Ontario, to another, Quebec, spanning a Canadian federal waterway. An imaginary border divides the river and forms the basis for ownership rights in settler property law. These laws supersede Indigenous peoples' rights, customs, justice systems, and sovereignty.

This bridge sits on contested and unsurrendered Anishinaabe land.


*Morris Island Train Bridge.*





# The Land

This bridge over the Ottawa River was built to transport iron ore from the Bristol Mines to the railway system.[1]

Mining displaced Indigenous people, polluted the land and waters, and disrupted complex ecosystems. The railway accelerated the extractive and destructive practices of settlement across this country leading to the decimation of the buffalo, and the forced displacement and genocide of Indigenous peoples.

Our first prime minister, Sir John A. MacDonald (b. 1815 in Glasgow, Scotland–d. 1910, Ottawa, Canada) was known as the "Father of Canada" for uniting the country by rail—and simultaneously establishing residential schools and the Indian reserve system to remove the "Indian."

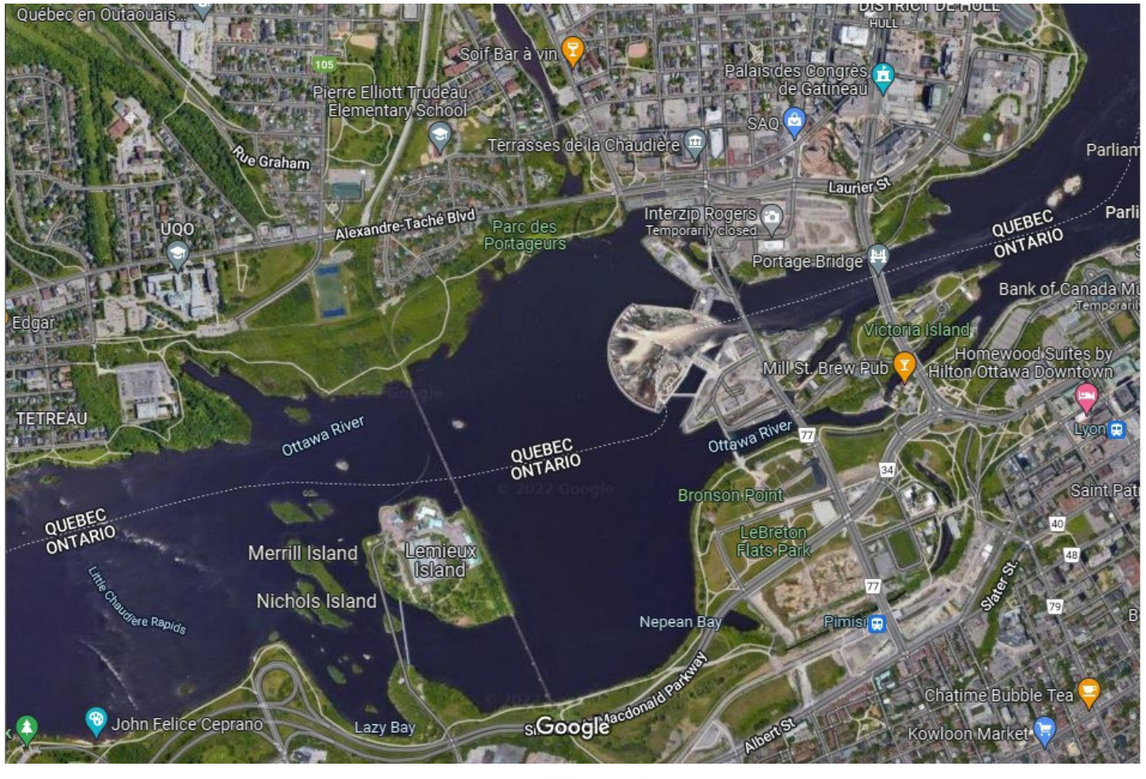
It is by no mistake that John A. Macdonald chose to call the Canadian state a "dominion" (as per Christian biblical scripture).[2] This belief in domination was a component of the colonial "discovery doctrine," and it was imposed in many ways on the Indigenous peoples and onto the land. Although this region was contested between the Indigenous and the settler populations, settler property law principles were imposed. Other Indigenous peoples signed legal treaties with the Crown, but these agreements were eventually ignored or invalidated.[3]


*Bristol Mines.*

Eventually the forestry industry cleared this area of land that borders what is now two Canadian provinces, clearing trees (and of the majority of the Indigenous inhabitants as well) and creating devastating effects on the environment. Settler agricultural practices demanded ever-expanding area. This had the effect of displacing and disrupting natural ecosystems; later, chemical effluents were spilled, and large-scale production and transportation systems added to the imbalance of natural patterns.

# The River

The River was used to transport logs from the cutting of mature forests with destruction to woodland and water habitats for many living systems.  Much of that timber ended up downstream at the E. B. Eddy lumber mill at Chaudière Falls. Ezra Butler Eddy, who became its first president, founded this lumber mill, incorporated in 1886 as the E. B. Eddy Manufacturing Company.[4] The dam at Chaudière Falls was placed in an unusual position to account for the irregular topography and contours of the land and water.[5] The river was also used to transport beaver pelts that ended up in Europe at a time when overhunting had already eliminated the European beaver. Damming rivers for hydropower accelerated the progress of extraction, settlements and incomers, displacement and destruction of Indigenous cultures, and devastation of the ecosystems, including the *pimisi* (American eel).[6]




*Chaudière Falls.*





# The Indigenous Knowledge—We are a small part of nature

This is contested land of the Algonquin/ Anishinaabe peoples, where three rivers meet at Chaudière Falls, and is "sacred" to many of these Indigenous peoples in the sense that traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) contains a knowledge-practice-belief complex. Inherent within TEK is a worldview—a belief system—that aligns the observation of the environment with a religious, ethical and philosophical order of understanding.[7] The Indigenous names of the three rivers in English and *Anishinaabemowin* are:

- the Ottawa, Kitche Zibi/Sibi, or "Great River"
- the Gatineau, Te-nagàdino-zìbi, "The River that Stops One's Journey"
- the Rideau, Pasapkedjinawong, "The river that passes between the rocks"[8]

Nearby is a most sacred site for the Anishinaabe. Called Chaudière Falls by the French, it is known as "The Sacred Pipe" and other variations in English. In the *Anishinaabemowin*, the name for the sacred site is *Akikodjiwan*, and the falls there are known as Asinabka.[9]

It is both an insult and an irony that the E. B. Eddy Company produced tiny wooden matches from mature felled trees in the area of "The Sacred Pipe." From "Sacred Pipe" as the river, to pipe as a ceremonial artifact, these Eddy matches were often casually used to light cigarettes by the settlers, whereas by contrast, the Anishinaabe and Algonquin peoples use tobacco as a religious offering. They believe tobacco was one of the four medicines from the great Creator.[10]  In either case, the trees that were felled for matches and other uses were strategically floated downriver to the lumber mills, effectively transforming the river into a transport system as well.

# My Learning Bridge

My bridge to learning Indigenous and traditional history and knowledge was built with the help of two friends—Carmel Whittle and Patsea Griffin. Whittle, who is Mi'kmaq and Irish, and Griffin, who is Métis, invited me to collaborate on art projects. Bridge-building and sharing of cultures and Indigenous knowledge is their approach to teaching avid learners such as me. Carmel has land at Quyon, Quebec, near the railway bridge. Here, she and Patsea have organized gatherings and art projects including the erection of a tipi. That tipi was featured in Carmel's projects *On The Land* and *Bringing The Land to The City*.

These projects created videos, gatherings, and workshops on Indigenous beading and artwork.

Patsea's program, the *Thunderbird Sisters Collective's Youth Artists Council*, will teach Indigenous youth about their culture, language, and wisdom.[11] Together, Patsea and Carmel have established the *No Borders Arts Festival* and *podcast#83*, and many more examples of their works can be found in the Media Appendix. I am grateful to them for inviting me to work with and learn from them and their network of friends.

# For Further Exploration

## *Note from the Guest Editor*

*As an artist, Robert Snikkar practices engagement with the environment, its histories, its inhabitants, and its wildlife. He seeks to learn as much as possible, and in doing so, relies upon his creative practice to ask questions about history, privilege, politics, and social relations, especially as they are in balance with the natural environment. The following videos and poem reflect this quest for understanding, and the media appendix offers links for further reading and listening.*

*—Mary Modeen, Guest Editor*

## Video

The River and The Bridge, https://youtu.be/gt1cMt00GwM

## Field Journals

Walking the White Way—with The Unknown Settler

The Unknown Settler Goes to the Bridge, https://youtu.be/gJyRaRoN1WM

The Unknown Settler on the Bridge, https://youtu.be/yA9EdLPcM8A

The Unknown Settler Meets Other Settlers, https://youtu.be/wuk5KX8EHiw

The Unknown Settler Comes Across Deer, https://youtu.be/rtha1KCVeJ0

## Poetry

"Whose Blood? Whose Soil?" A poem investigating white privilege, https://youtu.be/FDalrHnxXo0

## Other Artworks and Projects

Indigenous Artists Coalition

Bringing Land to the City—Digital Arts Resource Centre

Music On Our Land—The Thunderbird Sisters Circle

1 Contrary 5 Agokwe-Nini (Documentary Film Screening)—Canadian Art

RedCircle podcast#83





# Panels & Discussions

Ria Links: Salon in the Clouds #2

## Footnotes

[1] Ore from this mine helped build rail lines and was exported as far away as Belgium, England, and Pennsylvania. "Bristol Mine," Capital Gems, accessed February 4, 2022, http://www.capitalgems.ca/bristol-mine.html.

[2] "God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth'" Gen 1:26–28.

[3] The American War for Independence and the official recognition of the United States in 1783 began a long process of land surrenders and treaties, not only between Great Britain and its former allies, the Indigenous populations, who fought against the French, but also between incoming European settlers and Aboriginals. Between 1783-1812, fifteen separate land surrenders were negotiated in the Upper Canadian region. Throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Chippewa (Anisihinaabe) of the Lake Simcoe region and the Mississauga of the north shore of Lake Ontario had complained that some of the treaties concluded during the colonial period were highly problematic, with faulty descriptions, incomplete documents, and failed payments. In 1923, the Williams Treaties marked the conclusion to the continuous claims made by people in the Aboriginal lands and, with the exception of two small parcels of land, facilitated the cession of lands to the Crown. "Upper Canada Land Surrenders and the Williams Treaties 1764–1862/1923," Government of Canada, updated February 15, 2013, https://www.rcaanc-cirnac.gc.ca/eng/1360941656761/1544619778887.

[4] "Eddy had begun business in 1854 making and selling wooden matches out of his home in Hull, Canada East (now Quebec). The company expanded into pulp and paper." Wikipedia, s.v. "E. B. Eddy Company," last modified September 2, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/E._B._Eddy_Company.

[5] "The dam was built in 1908 and put into operation in 1910 with the aim of controlling and standardizing the water level and distributing the waterpower. This structure, which mirrors the eccentric geomorphic shape of the falls, was a rare example of a dam with stoplogs." "The Chaudière Dam," Canadian Museum of History, accessed February 1, 2022, https://www.historymuseum.ca/cmc/exhibitions/hist/hull/rw_28_ie.html.

[6] "Kichisippi Pimisi, the American Eel, is sacred to the Algonquin people and has been an essential part of Algonquin culture for thousands of years. Algonquins have a deep connection to Kichisippi Pimisi as a provider of nourishment, medicine and spiritual inspiration." "Returning Kichisippi Pimisi, the American Eel, to the Ottawa River," Algonquins of Ontario, accessed February 1, 2022, https://www.tanakiwin.com/current-initiatives/returning-kichisippi-pimisi-the-american-eel-to-the-ottawa-river/.

[7] Firket Berkes, *Sacred Ecology,* 4th ed. (New York: Routledge, 2018), 14-21.

[8] Wikipedia, s.v. “Ottawa River,” last modified February 4, 2022, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ottawa_River; Wikipedia, s.v. “Gatineau River,” last modified February 6, 2022, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gatineau_River; Wikipedia, s.v. “Rideau River,” last modified September 20, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rideau_River.

[9]Lynn Gehl, “Chaudière Falls: Creator’s Sacred Pipe,” *Black Face Blogging*, June 8, 2016, https://www.lynngehl.com/black-face-blogging/chaudiere-falls-creators-sacred-pipe. See also Lindsay Lambert, “Chaudière Falls is an Indigenous Cathedral,” *Anishinabek News.ca*, October 1, 2016, http://anishinabeknews.ca/2016/10/01/chaudiere-falls-is-an-indigenous-cathedral/.

[10] Harold Flett, “Offering Tobacco,” *Customs and Beliefs*, accessed Feb. 1, 2022, http://en.copian.ca/library/learning/chikiken/page30.htm. The tobacco symbolized honesty, as honesty between two people talking, or talking to the spirit world. Smoke from the tobacco went ahead as a wish or a prayer.

[11] Bruce Deachman, “Ontario Announces $13M Funding for Youth Projects,” *Ottawa Citizen*, July 13, 2021, https://ottawacitizen.com/news/local-news/ontario-announces-13m-funding-for-youth-projects.

## Correction

In an earlier version of this text, Carmel Whittle was incorrectly identified as Métis; the text now correctly reflects that she is Mi’kmaq and Irish.

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## About the Author

Formerly a computer programmer and educator, Robert Snikkar is now a full-time artist. His art examines white privilege and decolonization and he collaborates with Indigenous and other artists on these themes. Learn more about his art at www.snikkar.com.