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The cover image of Asin-badakide-ziibi, the Baptism River, is courtesy of M. Baxley, Bear Witness Media.

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CONTENTS

Introduction

Introduction to Issue 26 | Commitment
By Laurie Moberg, Editor 4

Features (Peer Review)

Rivers of Lake Superior’s North Shore: Historical Methodology and Ojibwe Dialects
By Erik Martin Redix 7

On The Physicality of Hope
By Joanne Richardson 27

Rights of Nature and the St. Louis River Estuary
By Emily Levang 46

Geographies

Libraries Burning
By Phyllis Mauch Messenger 64

In Review

Stories to the Surface: Revealing the Impacts of Hydroelectric Development in Manitoba
By Caroline Fidan Tyler Doenmez 85

Perspectives

Reflections on *UPRIVER: A Watershed Film*
By Chris O’Brien 98

Primary Sources

Ghost Streams and Redlining
By Jacob Napieralski 102

Teaching and Practice

Centering Water: Practices of Commitment
By Boyce Upholt, Katie Hart Potapoff, Michael Anderson, Britt Gangeness, Angie Hong, Coosa Riverkeeper,
Greg Seitz, and Andy Erickson 107

IN REVIEW

STORIES TO THE SURFACE: REVEALING THE IMPACTS OF HYDROELECTRIC DEVELOPMENT IN MANITOBA

By Caroline Fidan Tyler Doenmez

Author's Note: All photographs included in this piece were taken by photographer Aaron Vincent Elkaim and are shared with his permission.

Manitoba, although known as one of Canada's prairie provinces, is arguably more defined by its waterways. One story tells that the very name "Manitoba" was born from water, derived from the Cree words Manitou, "Great Spirit," and wapow, "sacred water," to describe the

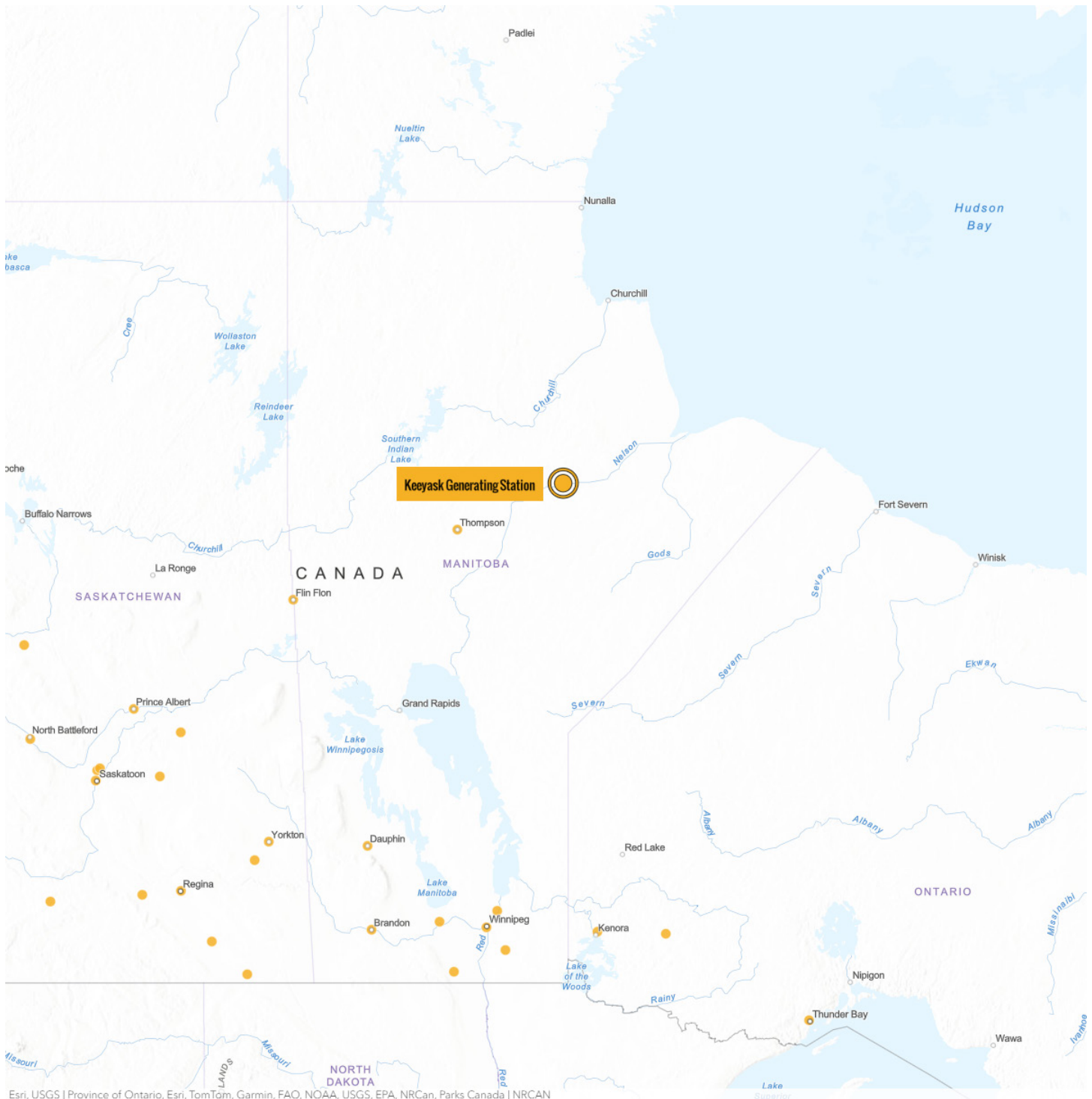
sound of waves crashing against an island on Lake Manitoba (Sinclair and Cariou 2011, 4–5). The Red and Assiniboine Rivers, two prominent entities of movement and memory, meet in the heart of the province's capital city of Winnipeg. The northward-flowing Red River empties into Lake Winnipeg, the tenth-largest freshwater lake in the world. The northern area of the province is dappled and threaded with thousands of lakes, abundant rivers, and watersheds. It is here, in the north, that water has been harnessed and



Detail from The Keeyask Dam site on the Nelson River, 2019. Image courtesy of Aaron Vincent Elkaim.

commodified as a source of energy by Manitoba Hydro for the past six decades. Today, according to provincial and Manitoba Hydro websites, a staggering 97 percent of electricity generated in Manitoba is derived from hydropower (Manitoba Hydro 2023a, 9).

The 2022 anthology *In Our Backyard: Keyask and the Legacy of Hydroelectric Development* provides a critical case study of the most recent of six hydroelectric dams built along the Nelson River in northern Manitoba. In operation since 2021, the dam was named



Map of the Keeyask Dam in Manitoba. Image via ESRI.

Keeyask, which means “gull” in Cree. The book is organized into four parts. The first two sections focus on the evolution and impacts of hydroelectric development in northern Manitoba while the third interrogates the nature of the partnerships between Manitoba Hydro and First Nations. The fourth section provides reflections

on the question: What is good development? The fifteen chapters are interspersed with eight brief “Community Voices,” which consist of excerpts of testimony offered by Indigenous people at the Keeyask project’s regulatory hearings. It also features several poems by Ovide Mercredi, former national chief of the Assembly of Nations and



The Keeyask Dam site on the Nelson River, 2019. Image courtesy of Aaron Vincent Elkaim.

former chief of Misipawistik Cree Nation. The anthology totals just over 400 pages and is filled with information and analysis of this specific dam and its broader historical and environmental context. This context is crucial for readers to develop a critical understanding of the realities of hydropower. Manitoba is the third-largest producer of hydroelectric energy in the world, and hydroelectric power is often celebrated as a responsible and safe form of energy production. However, the expert voices in this anthology sound a sobering note of caution and compel its readers to grapple with the often-effaced realities of dispossession and devastation that underlie and attend hydro development. They offer incisive and detailed records of harm that have been caused by hydroelectric development and illustrate visions of other possible scales and strategies for living and surviving in good relation to the lands, waters, and more-than-humans around us.

This anthology's content is varied and interdisciplinary, reflecting editors Aimée Craft (Anishinaabe-Métis) and Jill Blakley's commitment to move beyond "the confines of each discipline and world view to draw knowledge together to assess the full scope of impact of the project" (7). The contributors include Indigenous Elders, Knowledge-Keepers, trappers, fishers, hunters, and community members from areas impacted by the Keeyask dam and other hydroelectric development projects. Other contributors are lawyers, scholars, consultants, advocates, scientists, and the former chair of the Clean Environment Commission (CEC). The majority of the contributors took part in CEC hearings held in Manitoba, many of which occurred between 2012 and 2014. Several of the chapters offer notably technical

environmental and legal analyses of concepts such as sustainability, development, social license, conservation, partnership, and the Honour of the Crown, while others center the power and texture of firsthand narratives and lived experiences. Craft and Blakley note that environmental review processes have often fallen short of integrating Indigenous people's perspectives and knowledges, writing, "The weight ultimately given to those voices is arguably not as significant as it should be" (6). This anthology serves as a valuable corrective by sharing the testimony and expertise of various Indigenous people impacted by hydroelectric development.

While grounded in the specific environmental, political, and social context of Manitoba, this anthology asks fundamental questions that concern us all about energy consumption: Where does our energy come from, and who pays the price for the energy we use? Whose expertise guides our energy development, and whose is silenced? Do we really need further development? When will we make energy conservation our "overwhelming priority" (58)? How else might we envision our future beyond the current energy paradigm? The contributors to this anthology look to both the past and the future to offer responses to these questions. On the one hand, they testify to the impacts of hydropower that have already occurred. On the other, they also serve as cautionary tales which disprove the notion that hydroelectric development represents a harmless substitute to fossil fuel energy production, as it is so often touted. Instead, several contributors explicitly ask us to reflect on the violence and unsustainability of our energy consumption habits and to challenge ourselves to imagine living otherwise.

“Clean” Energy

While this anthology contributes many thought-provoking insights and considerations, there are two dominant critiques of hydroelectric development and the regulatory review processes that are particularly salient.

The first is the notion of hydro as a form of “clean” energy. As the need to shift away from fossil fuels grows increasingly urgent, hydroelectricity has been painted as a “green” climate change solution by the hydropower industry in Manitoba. Indeed, a [teaching resource](#) on the Manitoba Hydro website opens with the statement: “Manitoba’s Energy supply: Good for Manitobans, good for our environment,” and continues, “Manitoba has one of the cleanest and most reliable electricity systems in the world. Our electricity supply is renewable, efficient, cost-effective and environmentally responsible” (Manitoba Hydro 2023b). The provincial government, which has a partnership with Manitoba Hydro, also describes hydroelectricity as “clean and renewable” on their government [web-site](#) (Manitoba n.d.). As Annette Luttermann notes, Manitoba Hydro supporters “frequently cite climate change as a reason to support dam development in the Canadian North” (173). This anthology calls into question many of the core terminologies, frameworks, and processes used to designate hydroelectricity in these glowing terms. “Clean” energy refers to the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions, but the formulation of hydropower as a clean and responsible form of energy production requires the disavowal of the widespread harm its causes to Indigenous people, waterways, lands, fish, birds, and animals.

The anthology counters this disavowal through its focus on the counternarratives of impacted Indigenous people. Their testimony describes various forms of devastation caused by the sudden flooding of areas due to hydroelectric development. In the various submissions, we learn that these floods have caused buried ancestors to

be displaced from their resting places. They have drowned caribou, beavers, and rabbits; destroyed fish populations; and wiped out important patches of berries and medicines. Contributors also testified to the various disruptions to their ways of life, including being forced out of their homes, hearing loud dynamite explosions, dealing with the construction of access roads and increased traffic, and coming upon piles of dead animals in the bush, wantonly slaughtered by Manitoba Hydro workers for mere entertainment. Another harmful outcome of hydroelectric development is the paradox of both an excess and scarcity of water; lands are flooded due to the dams, but the water itself becomes contaminated. As Ivan Keeper and Robert Spence from Tataskweyak Cree Nation bemoan, “Hydro gets ‘clean’ energy, while we don’t even have clean water to drink” (52). Further, while only mentioned fleetingly, a former Councillor from Fox Lake Cree Nation offered testimony at a CEC hearing in 2013 implying that hydroelectric development had led to uninvestigated beatings, murders, and rapes committed in his community (146). A few years after this testimony was offered, news stories reported that nine cases of sexual assault had been investigated at the Keeyask dam construction site (von Stackelberg). Canada’s 2019 National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls recommended an additional inquiry to look into the allegations of sexual violence at hydroelectric project sites. As many Indigenous scholars and advocates have noted, energy infrastructure projects often result in increased rates of gender-based and sexual violence in local communities.

This emphasis on being attuned to the wide range of impacts caused by infrastructure projects is further amplified by Indigenous worldviews in which the existence and survival of animals, humans, waters, lands, and other life-forms are all intimately connected. Aimée Craft emphasizes



A Manitoba Hydro mural in Winnipeg shows two Indigenous children lying in a lush field of grass next to a calm body of blue water. Images like these play into the narrative of hydro-electric energy as “clean.” Image courtesy of Aaron Vincent Elkaim.

that these principles of kinship are also integral to Indigenous legal relationships and systems (334). As Tommy Monias (Pimicikamak Cree Nation) expresses in his testimony at a CEC hearing, “We are part of the animals...We gather berries, we heal our bodies, we gather medicines to heal our bodies. We are one with this land, we are one with the water, we are one with these animals. We are also one with the very fibre of such ecological destruction that’s happened to us. So we die inside” (194). Robert Spence (Tataskweyak Cree Nation), references traditional birth ceremonies which connect Indigenous people to their lands when attesting to the harm caused by hydrodevelopment: “My umbilical cord is tied to the land that we walk on every day. I

come here to speak the truth, that what Manitoba Hydro is doing is killing our mother. Every day we watch what Manitoba Hydro is doing. You go out and watch your mother die of cancer [every] day. You watch her die over and over and over and over again” (214).

These testimonies also make vividly clear how infrastructure projects can be a destructive form of settler colonial power which dispossess Indigenous people of their waters, lands, resources, cultures, and ways of life in the service of energy production for settler societies. Infrastructure as a mode of colonial violence has been analyzed in multiple other contexts by Indigenous Studies scholars including



An old photo held by Jackson Osbourne shows an area before it was flooded by the JenPeg Dam in northern Manitoba. Image courtesy of Aaron Vincent Elkaim.

Nick Estes (2019), Elan Pochedley (2021), and Anne Spice (2018). This is enunciated in this anthology in the words of Dr. Ramona Neckoway (Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation) in her

testimony against hydroelectric development: “I see this project as another colonial apparatus that will destroy our autonomy creating further dependence and despair” (73). Agnieszka



A man named Jonathan Kitchekeesik from Tataskweyak Cree Nation collecting medicinal tea on his family’s land on Gull Lake in northern Manitoba. While he originally hoped the Keeyask dam would help bring jobs to the area, he now worries about the destructive impacts of the dam on the land and his community. Image courtesy of Aaron Vincent Elkaim.

Pawlowska-Mainville adds, “To this day, hydro development continues to represent the largest form of destruction of Inninuwak values, history, and local mino-pimatisiwin (well-being) people have ever seen” (159).

This attention to the coloniality of energy infrastructure is crucial to note in the unique context of the Keeyask dam, which was the result of a partnership forged between Manitoba Hydro and four First Nations in northern Manitoba. Contributors to this book note that some members of these nations supported the partnership and hoped it would bring prosperity to their communities. Yet many of the chapters also highlight voices of dissent from within these nations, complicating homogenizing narratives of community buy-in and consent. Several authors suggest that when maximizing economic profit remains the priority, such projects risk reproducing asymmetrical power relations rather than transforming them.

Such insights trouble the pervasive Canadian discourse of reconciliation, in which politicians and institutions have sought to address and rectify their colonial relations with Indigenous people. This shift was largely catalyzed by the 1996 Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples’ report, which discussed the Indian Residential School System and offered a Statement of Reconciliation (Institute on Governance 1997). A subsequent national Truth and Reconciliation Commission

examined the country’s Indian Residential School System and included 94 Calls to Action to ameliorate the ongoing harms and injustices Indigenous people experience in Canada (Government of Canada 2022). This era of reconciliation has been marked by an affective register of goodwill and regret, articulated through promises and apologies.

Audra Simpson (2020) cautions that such public performances of grief, or what she calls “the move to sorrow” by state actors, constitute a contemporary form of governance which often masks the ongoing violence of the state. Against this backdrop of a purported effort to transform Indigenous-settler relations, the voices in this anthology reveal how Indigenous people continue to experience dispossession through infrastructure projects that lay claim to their territories and waterways.

In sum, the voices in this anthology refute the fantasy of an innocent and harm-free form of energy, forcing the readers to confront the underlying issue: our seemingly insatiable consumption of energy. Rather, they demand that we consider the impacts of hydroelectric development on those communities, lands, and more-than-humans that are sacrificed, or “wastelanded,” to invoke Traci Voyles’ (2017) terminology, to meet these relentless demands, showing who is forced to “carry the burden of this sixty-year-old growing energy need” (148).

Limitations of Regulatory Review

The second critical contribution of the anthology is its focus on the limitations of the regulatory review processes that were conducted prior to the Keeyask Dam’s approval. Various contributors ask: What kinds of underlying assumptions and motivations animate these studies and proceedings? Which kinds of knowledge are excluded from consideration, and at what cost? James P. Robson notes, for example, that environmental assessments are still fundamentally

grounded in “an epistemological Western bias” and “couched in the ‘language of technocratic fixers; of rigorous, rational inquiry; of a world-view which holds the economic as the highest value,’ and guided by the values, structures, and policies of a dominant Eurocentric society” (119). Aimée Craft, in her analysis of the “two-track” approach which sought to bring together Western science and Indigenous Knowledge in the environmental assessment, states that the effort

ultimately privileged Western science, values, and evaluation methods (338). Several examples follow in the book that repeatedly show how the assessments employed narrow frameworks and definitions that failed to account for the full scope of the dam's impacts. One specific example of this myopia is that certain communities, such as South Indian Lake, were not consulted or considered in the environmental assessment processes because the community was not designated as lying within the "footprint" of Keeyask. Co-authors Asfia Gulrukh Kamal, Joseph Dipple, Steve Ducharme, and Leslie Dysart argue that "regulatory gaps and oversimplified narratives" fail to grasp the reality of the *interconnection* between the waterways in the region, and how changes to any given area of the river system ripple outwards towards others (79).

The Cumulative Effects Assessment (CEA) undertaken as part of the Environmental Impact Statement similarly employed a narrow scope. Authors Jill Blakley and Bram Noble explain that the CEA was meant to account for the impacts on the environment precipitated by a certain action in tandem with other actions (past, present, and future). The CEA concluded that the Keeyask Project would result in "no significant adverse cumulative effects" to the environment, despite acknowledging that the environment had already been significantly altered by previous hydroelectric development projects. Blakley and Noble cogently argue that the scope of the CEA eclipsed a rigorous and meaningful consideration of how hydroelectric development affects the environment. The authors soberly conclude with a quote which warns that such CEA processes may actually cause more damage than good (114). This submission, in tandem with several others in the anthology, provide important critiques of the various assessment and review procedures that allowed the dam to be built. They show how processes, put in place to purportedly ensure community input and assess the impacts of this hydroelectric development, often operate from

restrictive frameworks that then fail to account for the very evidence they claim to seek.

In a related example, the Keeyask Environmental Impact (EIS) Statement fell "into the trap of human-centric scales" when assessing the impact of Keeyask on the caribou population. Scholar James A. Schaefer notes that the EIS defined "habitat" as being the area where a population lives. However, this framing did not reflect the critical importance of expansive areas of undisturbed space required for caribou survival, specifically for calving and postcalving females (203). Without being able to account for the "vast spatial and temporal scales" that the caribou occupy, Schaefer explains that "we risk vastly underestimating the loss of caribou habitat due to Keeyask and other industrial developments" (203). Schaefer leaves us with this striking summons to accept the invitation of caribou to expand our temporal and spatial imaginaries: "To conserve this species, we must consider more than the short-term and the immediate: we must embrace whole landscapes and multiple decades. Caribou conservation entails a rethinking of scales—a reassessment of the duration and scope of our desires, plans, and actions...They are an invitation to a world view that is expansive, forward-looking, and hopeful" (205–206).

Schaefer, like other contributors in this book, also expresses deep skepticism about Manitoba Hydro's "mitigation" efforts, which are meant to offset the negative impacts of development. He writes, "Typical mitigation measures—like avoiding calving areas or minimizing blasting during the calving season—are too narrow in space or time to secure the conservation of this mobile animal" (205). Another example we learn of is the "Alternative Resource Use Program," which proposed to transport Indigenous harvesters to other areas in Manitoba that were unaffected by the development. However, contributors to this anthology note that this solution ignores the importance of specific sites for Indigenous people's

land knowledges, cosmologies, and identities, revealing the erroneous fantasy that some of what is lost in these floods can simply be replaced or

recreated elsewhere; as the Trapline 15 family states, “that would degrade who we are because we are about the relation to our land” (348).



A young girl named Aalaiyah from the Split Lake community wears a hat with the word “Keeyask” on it. Elders grieve the fact that their grandchildren are unable to swim and play along the shoreline as they once did, due to flooding and pollution from hydro development. Image courtesy of Aaron Vincent Elkaim.

Speaking Another Record into Existence

Given the incisive, meticulous critiques of the shortcomings of the environmental review processes and mitigation strategies articulated in this collection, some readers may leave this book with deep sense of cynicism and despair concerning the story of Keeyask. And yet, Indigenous people engaged in the review process as a powerful site of articulation of their expertise, philosophies of being, and sense of accountability to past and future generations. They also engaged the process as a way of forging connections with non-Indigenous scholars and practitioners who shared their concerns about the project.

Indeed, in my own reading, one of the deeply impactful contributions of this anthology is the discussion of the Cree concept of *achimowinak*, “stories [seen as facts]/ personal narratives” (150). This concept is presented in a chapter which documents conversations between scholar Agnieszka Pawlowska-Mainville and Noah Massan, an Inninu Elder from Fox Lake Cree Nation. They note that such stories can challenge hegemonic metanarratives of progress propagated by Manitoba Hydro. The *achimowinak* assembled on these pages vividly speak another record into existence, one in which the destruction of the lands, waters, and ways of life cannot be rationalized or disappeared from memory, and other ways of being in the world are possible.

These *achimowinak* also serve as reminders of Indigenous connections to place that precede and exceed the extractive and invasive logics of settler colonial infrastructure development. Massan described his reaction to the “No access” signs put up by Manitoba Hydro around his territories: “This is my trapline...I am more authorized to be here than they are. I don’t need a visitor’s pass—they tell us to get a visitor’s pass now... This is *my* land” (160). Dr. Ramona Neckoway (Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation) grounds her testimony with a declaration of her need to speak on behalf of both her ancestors and descendants: “It is not only my right to voice my concern, it is my responsibility. It is my responsibility to my children and their children as well as to those who came before us...I want my children and their children to know that I did my part to save the land that my grandfather loved” (69, 73). In this sense, the anthology represents both a record of Indigenous people’s dissent to these projects and their insistence on maintaining philosophies and praxes of interconnection and responsibility to the lands, waters, animals, and their ancestors and descendants. These stories are powerful illuminations of expansive and relationship-based ways of knowing and being. This anthology compellingly illustrates that such philosophies and praxes of interconnection and accountability must animate decisions about the waterways upon which our lives and futures depend.

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