

# THE POWER TO PROTECT:

Climate Change, Intersectional Environmentalism  
and the Leadership of Indigenous Women

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Our Elders teach us that is important to acknowledge the ancestral lands and offer gratitude to the First Peoples for their care for, and teachings about, our earth and our relations. May we honour those teachings. The lands, Mother Earth, is not separate from us. She is part of us. If we look closely, we can see: the bones of Mother Earth are the rocks and mountains; her hair is the forests, trees and grass; her skin is the dirt upon which we walk, rest, pray and play; and her blood is the water that we drink. We are all inter-connected, living upon our Mother Earth – the Two-legged, Four-legged, Winged, Finned, Rooted, and Flowing beings. Upon Mother Earth are the footprints of so many who have come before us, the First Peoples. It is important that we honour those footprints, be curious about them and learn about them. It is also important to be keenly aware of the footprints that we are all are making and to think of the footprints that are yet to be made. In this way, we acknowledge the history and the stories of those who came before us and pay homage to Mother Earth's persistent and continued existence. Eventually, we too will join the bones, skin and blood of our ancestors, nourishing the future generations. Acknowledge the sacred bond between each of us and Mother Earth every day and give thanks.

We are deeply grateful for the knowledge that has been shared with us from the part of Turtle Island also known as Canada. We acknowledge the ancestral and unceded territories of all the First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples that call this part of Turtle Island home.

We are also immensely grateful for the knowledge of the Native Peoples who have shared with us from the part of Turtle Island also known as the United States. We acknowledge the ancestral homelands of the many diverse and vibrant Native communities who make their home in this part of Turtle Island. We also acknowledge the Sami (also Sámi or Saami) as the Indigenous peoples who originate from Sápmi, which encompasses the northern areas of Norway, Sweden and Finland, and the Russian Kola Peninsula and the knowledge and the gathering on these ancestral lands that has been shared with us. It is an honour to sit in Indigenous Ways of Knowing and learn globally about the histories and diversity of Indigenous Peoples, the First Peoples.



*Knowing that you love the earth changes you, activates you to defend and protect and celebrate. But when you feel that the earth loves you in return, that feeling transforms the relationship from a one-way street into a sacred bond.*

—Robin Wall Kimmerer,  
Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous  
Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the  
Teachings of Plants

# SUMMARY

This report is concerned with the central question: What are the gendered impacts of climate change and increased environmental insecurity in Turtle Island? [1] We seek to understand the nexus between gender, climate change and contentious sites of conflict and security beyond traditional armed conflicts. We are therefore interested in: (1) how climate change impacts Indigenous women and girls in Turtle Island and (2) what roles Indigenous women play in the mitigation and strengthening of communities' resilience in the face of the climate crisis. We grounded our research in theoretical and embodied frameworks that relate to gender, climate change and conflict, namely (1) Indigenous feminisms (2) feminist theories on the ethics of care (3) and "intersectional environmentalism" (Thomas, 2022).

To answer these questions, we braided together Indigenous and non-Indigenous approaches to research and co-constructed a research design that foregrounded four main tenets, grounded in the Seven Teachings [2]: (1) focusing on making relations and "showing up" in community (2) grounding engagements in Ceremony and Indigenous protocol (3) focusing on in-depth conversation and storytelling over formal interviews and (4) including ethical community engagement and giving back where possible. These elements dovetail with principles of decolonial and Indigenist research methods, and in particular, principles of Indigenous data sovereignty. We strive to protect and steward Indigenous knowledge and stories in our research design and adhere to the First Nations principles of ownership, control, access, and possession (also known as OCAP) in this report. We also call in our own positionality as an urban Métis female living in northwestern Turtle Island and a non-Indigenous settler immigrant of Filipina-descent living in Europe. Our intersecting identities as women and mothers have also influenced our research design and process, as we needed to stay flexible, mutually respect each other's backgrounds and create trusted relationships between ourselves as researchers.

Over the course of four months (February – May 2023), we conducted case study research in four spaces. On the east coast of Turtle Island, we chose to explore the areas of Standing Rock (including North and South Dakota, United States), Kahnawá:ke Mohawk Territory (near Montréal, Quebec, Canada), with a focus on the experiences of Indigenous women on Indigenous reserve territory. Second, we chose to focus on the west coast of Turtle Island (now known as Vancouver, Seattle and Bellevue), with a focus on the experiences of Indigenous women on Indigenous urban areas. Lastly, to understand how our research question might resonate and be relevant to Indigenous women's agency beyond Turtle Island and calling in Indigenous Ways of Knowing around relationality and inter-connectedness, we spent time with the Sámi peoples and other female leaders in Finland.

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[1] In this report, we use the term Turtle Island to refer to the areas also known as North America.

[2] Also referred to as the Seven Sacred Teachings or the Seven Grandfather Teachings. More details can be found in the section, "The Seven Teachings and Lessons Learned."

In each place, we conducted in-depth conversations, community engagements and set aside time to be with the land in each place. We transcribed and coded our in-depth conversations with nVivo coding software.

We explored our findings through the embodied theme of water and the special roles and knowledge that Indigenous women, in many of the communities we spent time with, have as Water Protectors and Defenders. Overall, our research reveals that:

- The perceived risk factors of insecurity of climate change is not a future risk for many Indigenous communities, but a current lived reality (e.g. water scarcity and land dispossession) as a direct result of systemic oppression and colonial violence in both North America and Europe (Turtle Island and Sápmi).
- Indigenous women’s knowledge about resolving conflicts within a backdrop of climate change has always been there, but has been neglected or disavowed in scholarship, policy and practice in peacebuilding. However, while often unrecognized, Indigenous female leaders have been leading through conflict in their communities, ensuring that the foundations for peaceful and inclusive societies have been kept alive and embedded in everyday life.
- There are many different strategies Indigenous women peacebuilders are developing to adapt and mitigate the impacts of conflicts related to climate change, and many are grounded in Indigenous Original Teachings. By virtue of living these teachings, revitalizing them and teaching them to younger generations, the women we have met are strengthening their communities’ resilience and capacity in the face of the climate crisis.
- There is a need for researchers, policymakers and practitioners to redefine and expand notions of “conflict” and “insecurity” to understand the intersecting, complex and often invisible impacts of climate change in places experiencing past and ongoing forms of colonialism.

In each of our case studies, we have also learned the following insights mediated through the visual and embodied theme of water (as Land):

### *Water has memory*

In our case study of urban Indigenous women, we learned that a gendered approach to climate change can mean healing intergenerational trauma. Indigenous women play a central role in gathering spaces of resistance to the erasure of colonial violence ongoing today, such as the community vigil in Vancouver, British Columbia, to remember the children that never came home from the Canadian residential school system. From an Indigenous perspective, embodying a connection to land is inseparable from thinking about what type of world children will inherit. Processing grief and trauma is an important avenue to healing ourselves, our communities and our land – it is all connected.

### *Water connects us*

In Kahnawá:ke Mohawk Territory, we learned that Indigenous women as clan mothers and community leaders have been essential in the resolution of conflict between communities after traumatic events such as the 1990 Crisis, that pit communities against each other. Through initiatives such as restorative justice, we saw that Indigenous women viewed protecting and defending their land and asserting their sovereignty as inseparable from taking care of relations and relationships within their communities.

### *Water is life*

In our case study of Standing Rock, “Water is Life,” an important phrase bringing together thousands of people in a movement against the building of the Dakota Access Pipeline from 2016-2017, is continued storytelling and testimony. We learned that community care is the most important way to mitigate the present and future impacts of climate change and that Indigenous women are asserting their own agency through storytelling, filmmaking and community-led initiatives around “energy sovereignty.”

### *Water as confluence*

In our scoping case study of the Sámi in Finland, we learned that state-centric notions of borders separate what should be indivisible, and making visible the connected lived experiences of Indigenous peoples, especially Indigenous women, in both North American and Europe is central to understanding the key issues of how Indigenous sovereignty, environmental activism and extractive industries are intimately tied to any discussion of climate change.

# THE SEVEN TEACHINGS AND LESSONS LEARNED

There are many Original Teachings, also known as the Original Instructions, across Indigenous cultures globally. These teachings offer important lessons about how to live in a good way and expectations for how to treat all living beings, including oneself. We conducted our research with a grounding in these teachings. For the Anishinaabe, in Turtle Island, the Seven Grandfather Teachings, also known as the Seven Sacred Teachings, (the Seven Teachings) have been passed on for generations. More information about the Teachings can be found widely, including in the seminal book, *Mishomis*, by Ojibwe Anishinaabe author Edward Benton-Banai.



*Mishomis is the word for grandfather in Ojibway.*

—The *Mishomis* Book  
A Book on the Anishnaabe People  
by Edward Benton-Banai

## DIAGRAM OF THE SEVEN TEACHINGS[2]

The Seven Grandfather / Seven Sacred Teachings according to Anishinaabe traditions are:

love, wisdom, respect, truth, humility, honesty and courage.



[3]<https://www.southernnetwork.org/site/seven-teachings>

We have organized the lessons learned during our engagement with communities around the Seven Teachings. In this way, we can see the inter-connected and holistic teachings shared with us from across Turtle Island and Sápmi related to climate change, intersectional environmentalism and the leadership of Indigenous women.

## **LOVE**

- Love is unconditional;
- Come from a place of love, always.

## **WISDOM**

- Never lose sight of the big picture, the meanings of life;
- Come from a place of 7 generations, grounded in those who came before us and those yet to come.

## **RESPECT**

- Understand the delicate balance of life;
- All living beings matter and deserve respect.

## **TRUTH**

- There are many complex, shared histories;
- Critical roles of Indigenous female leaders and co-conspirators as truth holders.

## **HUMILITY**

- All living beings have equal importance;
- Live in a place of learning.

## **HONESTY**

- Sit in the truth; histories and everyday realities are filled with atrocities;
- Be in relationship based on reciprocity; be honest with each other.

## **COURAGE**

- Live your values, at all costs;
- Speak truths, at all costs.

# COURAGE

live your values, at all costs;  
speak truths, at all costs.

# LOVE

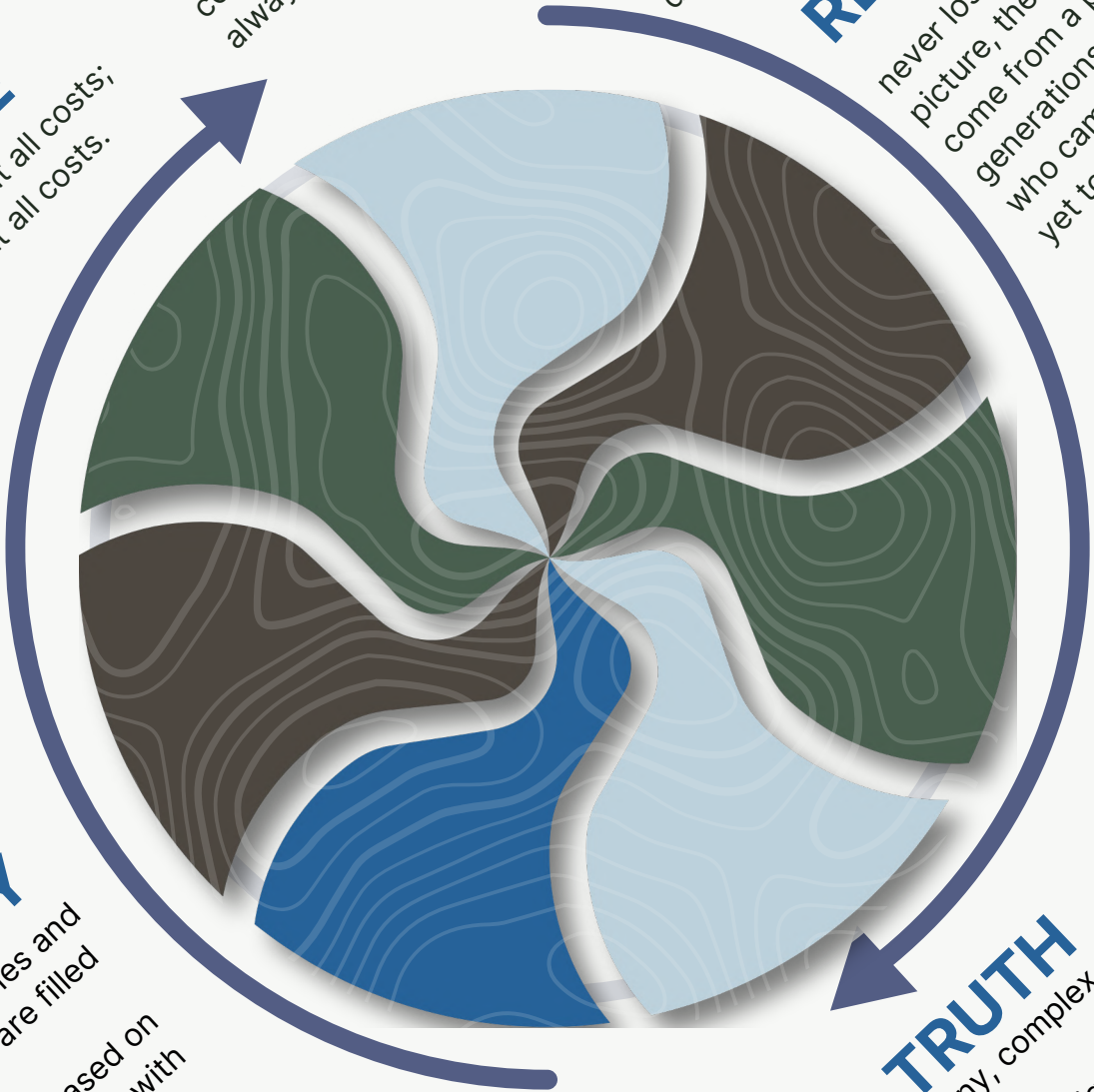
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# TRUTH

there are many, complex shared  
histories;  
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*Photo: In Relationship, Vancouver, February 2023*

# PART I: INTRODUCTIONS AND OUR OWN STORIES: “WHY WE ARE HERE”

## WHAT IS TURTLE ISLAND?

Turtle Island is the place many Indigenous peoples call the lands also known today as North and Central America. In fact, some Indigenous peoples refer to all of the world as Turtle Island. [4] There are many different origin stories across Indigenous cultures in Turtle Island. In many of these stories, life begins here with Sky Woman falling from the sky and it is on the back of a turtle that life on earth begins. This is an important orientation for the stories shared with us and what we have learned throughout this journey. For this reason, we share this.

Here is one version of the story, as shared collectively on the Canadian Museum of History website by Shelley Niro, Keller George and Alan Brant. [5]

*Long before the world was created, there was an island in the sky inhabited by sky people. One day a pregnant sky woman drops through a hole created by an uprooted tree and begins to fall for what seems like eternity.*

*Coming out of darkness, she eventually sees oceans. The animals from this world congregate, trying to understand what they see in the sky. A flock of birds is sent to help her. The birds catch her and gently guide her down onto the back of Great Turtle. The water animals like otter and beaver have prepared a place for her on turtle's back. They bring mud from the bottom of the ocean and place it on turtle's back until solid earth begins to form and increase in size.*

*Turtle's back becomes Sky Woman's home and the plants she's brought down with her from Skyworld, including tobacco and strawberries, are her medicine. She makes a life for herself and becomes the mother of Haudenosaunee life, as we know it today.*

In the version of the story adapted from oral tradition and Shenandoah and George in the book Braiding Sweetgrass by Robin Wall Kimmerer, it is Muskrat who brings back a small handful of mud from the bottom of the ocean. [6]

*When muskrat arrives back, “Turtle said, “Here, put it on my back and I will hold it.”*

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[4] <https://www.southernnetwork.org/site/seven-teachings>

[5] <https://www.historymuseum.ca/cmhc/exhibitions/aborig/fp/fpz2f22e.html>

[6] <https://www.tweetspeakpoetry.com/2018/12/20/skywoman-falling-reprint-from-braiding-sweetgrass-by-robin-wall-kimmerer/>

*Skywoman bent and spread the mud with her hands across the shell of the turtle. Moved by the extraordinary gifts of the animals, she sang in thanksgiving and then began to dance, her feet caressing the earth. The land grew and grew as she danced her thanks, from the dab of mud on Turtle's back until the whole earth was made. Not by Skywoman alone, but from the alchemy of all the animals' gifts coupled with her deep gratitude.*

*Together they formed what we know today as Turtle Island, our home.*

*Like any good guest, Skywoman had not come empty-handed. The bundle was still clutched in her hand. When she toppled from the hole in the Skyworld she had reached out to grab onto the Tree of Life that grew there. In her grasp were branches—fruits and seeds of all kinds of plants. These she scattered onto the new ground and carefully tended each one until the world turned from brown to green. Sunlight streamed through the hole from the Skyworld, allowing the seeds to flourish. Wild grasses, flowers, trees, and medicines spread everywhere. And now that the animals, too, had plenty to eat, many came to live with her on Turtle Island.*

With these origin stories of Turtle Island, we are invited to Indigenous Ways of Being, Knowing and Doing which include Indigenous beliefs, histories, relationships and foundations for the future we are co-creating.

As Robin Kimmerer says, “[i]mages of Skywoman speak not just of where we came from, but also of how we can go forward.”

—Robin Wall Kimmerer,  
Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous  
Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the  
Teachings of Plants



*Skywoman Kanien'kehaka (Mohawk)  
Ontario 2001*

Made By Shelley Niro (1954)  
Foam, fiberglass resin, oil paint, canvas  
and metal

Canadian Museum of Civilization,  
2000.129.1.1-10, D2004-11229



## **GOALS AND AIMS OF RESEARCH: WHAT ARE WE RESEARCHING AND WHY?**

This report is concerned with the central question: What are the gendered impacts of climate change and increased environmental insecurity in Turtle Island? We see climate change as a current manifestation of colonialism and the continued legacy of colonial practices exacerbate the challenges already faced by Indigenous communities around the world and in Turtle Island. Our proposed research project seeks to investigate the nexus between gender, climate change and contentious sites of conflict and insecurity beyond traditional armed conflicts. We seek to understand and highlight (1) how climate change impacts Indigenous women and girls in Turtle Island and (2) what roles Indigenous women play in mitigation and strengthening communities' resilience in the face of the climate crisis.

Therefore, the main aim of this research is to explore the nexus between climate change, conflict and Indigenous women's agency through a gendered lens. To achieve this aim, our research is focused on three objectives. First, we seek to name Turtle Island as a site of conflict to mitigate and prevent the erasure of Indigenous' people's experiences and interrogate mainstream narratives in peace research and practice that conflict only happens "over there" in the Global South (Azarmandi, 2018). Second, we seek to re-centre Indigenous feminisms and the agency of Indigenous women in peacebuilding research and practice - whose knowledge has always been there as a form of resistance and resurgence against erasure. Third, we seek to model an actual dialogue of relationality between two systems of knowledge and ways of moving through the world: through our relationship as researchers, peacebuilders and friends.

## **OUR RATIONALE: WHY IS THIS QUESTION IMPORTANT?**

In the two decades since the United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 on Women, Peace and Security (WPS) was passed, the "WPS Agenda" has become a central normative, legal and political agenda focusing on the role of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts and in peacebuilding. However, as the climate crisis unfolds, destabilizing communities already bearing the impacts of conflict and insecurity, there is a need to understand the gendered impacts of climate change in such settings. At the same time, it is crucial to recognize the intensity of the gendered impacts of climate change on Indigenous women and girls as an "intersection of gender with class, race, and ethnicity" (Smith et al., 2021: 1).

In spite of being on the front lines of these challenges, Indigenous women have been excluded from colonial male-dominated decision-making spaces and mechanisms (Smith et al., 2021). Nonetheless, although Indigenous women are often disadvantaged in the current economic and political arenas, they are traditionally uniquely positioned “as the unrecognized backbone” of Indigenous communities that implies their ability to make an impact on sustainability in natural resource management, climate-resilient communities, peace and stability, as well as economic development (Smith et al., 2021; Settee, 2011). Despite existing research and policy work on the gendered effects of droughts, natural disasters and water scarcity in conflict-affected communities, the majority of prominent cases take place in the Global South (Jaggernath, 2014; Prescott, 2018; Wenden, 2011). While there is a growing body of literature on Indigenous climate governance tying climate change to the interwoven forces of colonialism, patriarchy, and neoliberal resource extraction (Cameron, 2012; Whyte, 2017), there is little existing research and policy work in mainstream peacebuilding policy discourse on climate-related issues in the Global North (Azarmandi, 2018, PeaceDirect, 2021). As the climate crisis does not heed political boundaries and geographic regions, this research gap presents a missed opportunity. There is an “urgent need for the WPS agenda to be made operational and extended into other contexts as well, beyond the conventional understanding of conflict” (Csevar, 2021), especially as climate change worsens existing social and economic inequities for vulnerable segments of the population, particularly women with other marginalized social identities (Williams et al., 2018).


## **OUR OFFERINGS: WHAT THIS RESEARCH PROJECT CONTRIBUTES**

First, this research project contributes to the Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s Calls to Action as we walk a path together to create increased knowledge about Indigenous Ways of Knowing. It also contributes to the urgent need to centre and highlight Indigenous Ways of Knowing as policy considerations in a co-equal and authentic way. Second, we further the WPS agenda’s discourse by redefining and interrogating terms such as “conflict,” “insecurity,” “protection” and “participation,” by expanding their use beyond conventional armed conflict settings as well as researching contexts in the Global North as conflict contexts. Third, by relaying the lived experiences of Indigenous women through oral histories and storytelling, we hope to make recommendations to local, national and international policy-makers and donors about how to effectively promote women, peace and security in the context of the unprecedented and urgent climate crisis.

## OUR STORIES: WHY WE ARE HERE

This report centers storytelling as a lens through which to understand the themes of climate change, gender, conflict and peace. In line with both Indigenous research methods (Wilson, 2008) and feminist ethnographic and decolonial research methods (Smith, 1999) that challenge the notion that research is “objective” and “value-free” (ibidem), we understand that our own stories matter in how we conduct, analyse and approach the research process as a whole. As a starting point, we discuss our own positionality [7] in approaching this research project to be explicit about our how our own personal histories, perspectives and narrative inform and influence the process and outcomes of our research. Rather than utilizing mainstream qualitative methods such as case studies, semi-structured and/or expert interviews and focus group discussions, we plan for an embodied and experiential approach that focuses on oral histories and storytelling. In Turtle Island, painful intergenerational trauma surrounding the lasting political, socioeconomic and psychological effects of colonialism and extractive research requires applying a decolonial approach (Tuck & Yang, 2021). Basic concepts and assumptions in mainstream conflict resolution literature must be redefined and questioned to bring the field forward. In order to mitigate our positionality, we focus on content analysis and secondary sources highlighting non-traditional outputs and unwritten forms of Knowledge. In the words of Eve Rodsky, “research is me-search” [8] and understanding how our own stories influence our researchers is seen as an ethical starting point.

### Lorelei



*Tanshi! Lorelei dishinihkaashoon. I am an urban Métis female living in northwestern Turtle Island. I have made my home at the base of the Rocky Mountains, in the heart of Southern Alberta, Canada. These are the traditional territories of the Blackfoot Confederacy (comprised of the Siksika, the Piikani, and the Kainai First Nations), the Tsuut’ina First Nation, and the Stoney Nakoda (including Chiniki, Bearspaw, and Goodstoney First Nations). These are the peoples of Treaty 7. This is also home to the Otipemisiwak Métis Nation of Alberta (Districts 4, 5 and 6) and all Indigenous peoples who now call this place home. My family’s Indigenous roots can be traced back to the Red River in Manitoba, Winnipeg, Canada. We are from a Métis settlement known as Roostertown. I spent the early years of my life re-discovering my family’s cultural roots, many of which were repressed and hidden due to policies and practices of assimilation and colonialization.*

[7] Self-location of social identities, such as gender, race, class, age, language, ability, religion in relation to how one engages and views the world.

[8] <https://dralexandrasolomon.com/podcasts/gender-family-and-the-home-why-fair-play-helps-our-relationships-thrive/>

My strong connection to all living things is deeply embedded in my own Métis worldview that we are all one, as so beautifully depicted by one of the symbols of the Métis Nation, the infinity symbol. This symbol teaches us that as Métis, we are two peoples (Indigenous and European) together, forever. I am the proud mom of two children, ages nine and eleven.

### **Julia**

I identify as a woman of colour settler immigrant. I was born in Manila, Philippines, and raised on the unceded territories of the xʷməθkʷəyəm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and səliwətaʔ (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations (Vancouver). I have been researching and working in the peacebuilding and conflict resolution field for over a decade. Overtime, in the back of my head and in the core of my heart, I realized that dominant tools, approaches and methods were Western-centric and unevenly applied only to places in the Global South and not the Global North. I therefore seek to be an ally and comrade (Dhillon 2019) in resisting the erasure and disavowal of Indigenous Ways of Knowing and Being in mainstream peacebuilding and conflict resolution research and practice. I also seek to locate Canada as a site of conflict in need of peacebuilding and healing. I also seek to confront my own positionality as a colonized diaspora person of Filipina descent. This research project is being conducted alongside an initiative called the Turtle Island Peacemakers Knowledge Network, consisting of a small group of Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers and practitioners seeking to create a space exchanging on how Indigenous approaches to peace and informal approaches to dialogue and negotiation such as Track Two peacemaking can learn from each other. It is also, at a deeply personal level, an opportunity to support reconnection to my own cultural heritage and healing; including Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in my “motherland.” It is also a way to better understand myself through healing and ancestral work mediated through community-oriented research. I am a mother of two wonderful children, ages two and four.

Together, as an Indigenous and non-Indigenous team, our positionalities and approaches as women and as mothers and friends have influenced this research project in a fundamental way. We aim to model relationality and relationship-building as a core underpinning approach to this research project.

# PART II: CO-CREATING A BRAIDED RESEARCH APPROACH

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

We ground our research in theoretical and embodied frameworks that relate gender, climate change and conflict, namely (1) Indigenous feminisms (2) feminist theories on the ethics of care (3) and intersectional environmentalism.

## INDIGENOUS FEMINISMS

First, we center our research within the framework of Indigenous feminisms. Indigenous feminisms relates an intersectional approach to feminism with anticolonial and decolonial lens. Centering an Indigenous feminist worldview also emphasizes the importance of relationships between humans but also ones that are “more-than-human” and treat human’s relationships to the Land such as air, water, animals and plants as equally important, relevant and significant (Settee, 2011, Hughes, 2020).[10] We ground our research lens in Indigenous worldviews around reciprocity and relationship with the living world, including the Land on which we live. This principle moves beyond human-centered modes of understanding and acknowledges the reciprocal relationship we have as stewards, protectors and caretakers of the living world (Wall Kimmerer, 2015).

An Indigenous feminist lens centers sovereignty and critically interrogates reproduced and ongoing forms of colonialism, racism, heteropatriarchy and other forms of structural or physical oppression (Dhillon, 2020). This can be realized through disrupting structures, illustrated in Dhillon’s critical study of North American partnerships in environmental science, where elder Indigenous men and White women dominate governance despite rhetoric of inclusion in climate science (2020), or Mulray’s presentation of an “intersectional model of feminist sustainability” in Fondes Amandes, Trinidad, which emphasizes localized systems responding to community needs, aligning with natural climate cycles that challenge permaculture design and practices dominated Western and masculine perspectives (2021).

Sovereignty and anti-colonialism in the realm of Land and climate change can also be realized through the aesthetics of protest, illustrated by the “Water is Life” discourse in which the Indigenous feminist notion of “radical relationality” is exemplified (Hughes, 2020) or the aesthetics of art (Huhndorf, 2021) or the act or embodied practices of environmental defenders, land protectors and water protectors (Schneider et al., 2020; Suzack, 2015; Hughes, 2020), notably many of those on the

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[10]Thanks to Lena Dedyukina for this point.



frontlines of these movements are women. In this vein, Indigenous feminisms centers relationality, obligation and caretaking in which personhood and existing in this world cannot be separated with the Land in which we live. This view also relates to Maori value systems known as tikangam that have an integrated concept of whanaungatanga (kinship, including human to non-human), manaakitanga (the act of providing care), and kaitiakitanga (guardianship) that are interconnected through a sense of “nearness.”

## **FEMINIST THEORY AND THE ETHICS OF CARE**

As the WPS agenda evolves, an intersectional feminist lens becomes critical in furthering concepts of “meaningful participation” and “protection”, cornerstones of the WPS agenda. Considering how to increase meaningful participation in light of the overburdening of care work has made, but intersectional understandings of how “structural discrimination, such as the gender inequitable distribution of un(der)paid care work, sexual and gender-based violence, racism and exposure to violence as a security issue and invisible form of violence” (Bias et al., 2022).

Centering an Indigenous women’s rights lens elevates and enriches this concept further by making visible the different dimensions of care work and their impact on different communities. For instance, what does meaningful inclusion in peacebuilding mean when considering the central role that Indigenous women play in their communities against a backdrop of structural oppression and racism in Turtle Island (Palmiano Federer, Dedyukina and Walker, forthcoming 2024)[11] Therefore, we expand on the large body of work on feminist theory and the ethics of care to reframe structural oppression as a form of violence and as a peace and security issue.

## **INTERSECTIONAL ENVIRONMENTALISM**

This dovetails with “Intersectional environmentalism,” a concept coined by activist Leah Thomas that incorporates intersectional theory with environmental justice (Thomas, 2020) and the ethics of care in critical feminist approaches. The nexus between the WPS, climate change and peace has been critiqued for lacking intersectionality [12] and erasing Indigenous and Black feminist perspectives, especially when it comes to considering the relationships between humans and bodies of water (Barker, 2019).

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[11] See the United States Institute of Peace’s podcast episode: “Who ends up being included in peace processes?” <https://soundcloud.com/usip-academy/e3-inclusion?in=usip-academy/sets/inclusion-podcast-draft>

[12] Intersectionality refers to the overlapping categories of identity such as gender, race and class that can manifest in oppression and systemic disadvantage (see Crenshaw, 2013).

It erases the lived experiences of voices for whom the apocalyptic narratives of environmental collapse, water scarcity and insecurity is not a projection into the future, but a present reality as a byproduct of past and ongoing forms of colonialism and violence (Whyte, 2017). Therefore, we turn to the emerging theory of intersectional environmentalism (IE) as “an inclusive approach to environmentalism that advocates for the protection of both people and planet” (Thomas, 2022: 39). IE moves beyond an ecofeminist approach towards a “space for all social injustices and marginalized groups within the environmentalist discourse” (ibidem: 40). The concept of IE stems from the “thoughts, experiences and the emotional labour of Black women” (15) that formed the Combahee River Collective in 1974 to combat the marginalization that those with overlapping and intersecting oppressed identities faced. Black feminism and the politics of moving beyond single-issue struggles (Lorde, 1984: 138) ) infuse IE in its embrace of how social justice, including capitalism and colonialism, are inextricably linked to the degradation of the planet. Together, these three frameworks help us study in both a theoretical and embodied way, the intersections between climate change, gender and conflict.

## **CENTERING INDIGENOUS WAYS OF KNOWING, BEING AND DOING AND UNLEARNING**

At the heart of how we have approached this learning are Indigenous Ways of Knowing, Being and Doing, based on teachings that we have received. Utilizing the Seven Teachings (see above), we approached communities as our relations, the most critical component being about creating and growing relationships. Being in communities in this way means honouring protocols, taking time to sit with one another to get to know each other and to hold sacred what is shared with you by doing the best job possible to share exactly what was said. It also means being in a place of learning. We did not go to communities as experts. We came as relations, eager to learn from each other.

The most essential component of our engagement method was to “just show up.” What this means is that we had a general outline in place of key locations and contacts and sent requests in advance where possible. We left large pockets of time unscheduled with and openness to explore what came next, in true grounded research methods. With this approach, we showed up and the magic of being in communities took over. We quite often threw out the didactic, linear approach of what was supposed to come next and followed what presented itself in the moment. With this, we found ourselves spectacularly caught up in the divine flow of what emerged.

See the hand drawn route on the map on following page (p.20) as an example of the guidance given to us by community members along the way that shifted the course of route and explorations significantly.

Using this approach, we were taken care of during all of our community engagements. Rarely did we feel lost or unsafe. We were given directions and protected by those who guided us each step of the way. This approach of “just showing up” requires fluidity, flexibility, openness, course adjusting along the way, truth and faith in each other and the people guiding us, respect and reciprocity.

## **RESEARCH DESIGN**

On the east coast of Turtle Island, we went to North and South Dakota, Montreal and Kahnawá:ke, with a focus on the experiences of Indigenous women on Indigenous reserve territory. As our main case study, we gained a better understanding of the agency of Indigenous women in these communities through understanding their stories around the 1990 Crisis and the #NoDAPL movement in the United States. We also hosted community engagements on the west coast of Turtle Island (Vancouver, Seattle and Bellevue), with a focus on the experiences of Indigenous women on Indigenous urban areas. Lastly, to understand how our research question might resonate and be relevant to Indigenous women’s agency beyond Turtle Island and calling in Indigenous Ways of Knowing around relationality and inter-connectedness, we spent time with the Sámi peoples and other female leaders in Finland. We grounded our research in Indigenous and decolonial research methodologies, moving beyond incorporating Indigenous perspectives to researching from an Indigenous paradigm. We focused on oral histories and storytelling through sharing circles and kitchen table talks. Overall, our research design focused on the following tenets:

- Focusing on making relations in communities;
- Showing up in communities in person and virtually as needed;
- Being and learning through the land i.e. water walks and ceremony;
- Taking time for in-depth conversations;
- Continuation of the connections made (additional support for each others; and projects, creation of new projects together and ongoing correspondence).

The experience of engaging with all of these communities and leaders has been life altering. Many of the stories are about trauma so as we have been sharing in these stories, we have needed to take care of ourselves as well. Having a research partner that one can walk through this kind of journey with together is critical. We know we are forever changed, together.



Map of South Dakota: Hand drawn route provided by community member Jennifer Martel while at the Sitting Bull Visitor Center, March 2023.

SOUTH DAKOTA INDEX	
Battle, 1,080	F-11 World Lanes, 85
Beaumont, 19	F-12
Barnard	F-13
Bellevue, 138	F-14
Bert	F-15
Bismarck, 3,584	F-16
Brookings, 49	F-17
Brown	F-18
Buffalo, 330	F-19
Butte, 333	F-20
Cadwell, 27	F-21
Canton, 139	F-22
Casper, 1,241	F-23
Cedar Falls, 2,256	F-24
Chadron, 49	F-25
Chamberlain, 2,381	F-26
Chancellor, 264	F-27
Cherry Creek, 27	F-28
Chickney, 14	F-29
Chickney, 27	F-30
Chickney, 27	F-31
Chickney, 27	F-32
Chickney, 27	F-33
Chickney, 27	F-34
Chickney, 27	F-35
Chickney, 27	F-36
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Chickney, 27	F-95
Chickney, 27	F-96
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Chickney, 27	F-98
Chickney, 27	F-99
Chickney, 27	F-100

## CASE STUDIES

Based on our own positionalities and our rationale explored above, we selected our case studies to support our argumentation that there is a need to expand the notion of “conflict,” “security” and “peace.” The devastating finding of Indigenous children in unmarked graves in former residential school sites, to the continued gender-based violence committed against Indigenous women and girls are exacerbated by the mounting environmental, health and economic challenges brought on by the climate crisis. There is a need to move beyond “single issue” thinking (Lorde 1984) and allow responses and programming around peacebuilding to not only include such issues within the scope of peace, conflict and security, but create a co-equal space for Indigenous ways of knowing and Western approaches when planning responses. This approach is supported by the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People (UNDRIP) report, recognizing “the urgent need to promote the inherent rights of indigenous peoples which derive from their political, economic and social structures and from their cultures, spiritual traditions, histories and philosophies, especially their rights to lands, territories, and resources.” It is also cited and reaffirmed in the 2015 report of the Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s Calls to Action, in which there was an explicit call for the need to incorporate Indigenous wisdom and teachings as policy considerations.

## STANDING ROCK SIOUX RESERVATION (NORTH DAKOTA, UNITED STATES)

We chose Standing Rock as a main case study as it embodies the connection between gender, climate change and conflict through the #NoDAPL<sup>[13]</sup> Indigenous-led peaceful resistance at the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation in North Dakota (United States) (Kring, 2021; Fox et al., 2017). Between 2016 and 2017, Indigenous community members and supporters from around the world (Indigenous and non-Indigenous) gathered in opposition to the Dakota Access Pipeline that was planned to pass through the Missouri River, a source of drinking water for over 18 million people and seen to many as the desecration of the sacred. This movement highlights the notion that the scarcity of clean water as a climate-change induced risk factor is not a future risk, but a reality for Indigenous communities who seek to defend their communities over clean water, the environment, and a shared better future.

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[13] For a wealth of information about the movement, see: #NoDAPL Archive – Standing Rock Water Protectors. (n.d.). What does #NODAPL mean?

“No Dakota Access Pipeline”. Retrieved December 27, 2022, from <https://www.nodaplarchive.com/articles-about-the-camps.html>

The standoff that unfolded at Standing Rock occurs globally, as communities and institutions clash over the building of dams, pipelines and other extractive projects in spaces where sovereignty and self-determination are contested, including in settler-colonial contexts. Standoffs over water are standoffs over worldviews: they are bound to issues of identity, self-determination and deeply-entrenched forms of societal conflict (Mazer and Danyluk, 2017). Despite being tied up with issues of identity and self-determination, such conflicts are rarely studied through a conflict resolution/peace lens, let alone an Indigenous feminist perspective. Standing Rock is a central case study as it featured women water protectors who, as in the case of Jewett Chas in telling her story, understanding the confrontation at Standing Rock as taking place within a context of gendered and racialized backdrop of oppression, cultural and material control (Jewett, 2019). Chas and other Indigenous women water protectors in the #NoDAPL movement foreground an Indigenous perspective around “the ethos of responsibility” and reclaim agency through traditional teachings, reaffirming that Indigenous women and society’s survival is based on the recognition and interconnectedness of life and water (Privott, 2019).

## **KAHNAWÁ:KE (MOHAWK TERRITORY & MONTRÉAL, QUÉBEC, CANADA)**

We chose to study this case to understand the agency of Indigenous women in their collective labour of leading community programming to fight the contamination of their lands and reclaim their health and culture in the ongoing history of land dispossession and land enclosures. For instance, see a performance of a Water Song by the Akwesasne Women Singers.

Kontiwennenhá:wi (Carriers of the Words) hail from Ahkwesahsne, a Kanien’kehá:ka Territory that straddles the St. Lawrence River and incorporates portions of northern New York and southern Ontario and Quebec. In Ahkwesahsne, as in other Kanien’kehá:ka communities, women’s singing societies have always functioned to help community members in time of need. In the spirit of this traditional role, Kontiwennenhá:wi, the Carriers of the Words, have embraced the “duty to help our language survive [...] We proudly share our songs and teach children so that we may honor everything that is natural to us [14].

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[14] Edwards, R. (Producer), & Kontiwennenhá:wi (Performers). (2013). Water Song by the Akwesasne Women Singers [Music Video]. Retrieved from [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9MvNaFWcQf4&ab\\_channel=MohawkMediaCreations](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9MvNaFWcQf4&ab_channel=MohawkMediaCreations)

Through a deeper understanding of the role of women leaders, especially clan mothers who through their land defending and water protecting roles, are signalling a cultural and Indigenous resurgence (Alfred, 2023) in their traditional knowledge. We seek to learn more about how core principles around women's roles, responsibilities and relationships to the natural world can be centred in approaches to water governance and climate change mitigation (McGregor, 2012)

## **MUSQUEAM TERRITORY (VANCOUVER, BRITISH COLUMBIA, CANADA)**

We were interested in qualitatively comparing the experiences of Indigenous women on their ancestral lands and territory with the experiences of Indigenous women in urban areas, for instance in urban Western Canada, particularly the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver, from an urban Indigenous feminist lens. Some of the main existing themes centre on women's "active resistance" to erasure and invisibility of their stories, lived experiences and political expression, especially in relation to public narratives about them, through initiatives such as the Valentine's Day Women's Memorial March (Culhane, 2009); Indigenous-led health centres (Benoit et al., 1982); or the creation of the Downtown Eastside Women's Centre (DEWC, 2019).

These initiatives are deeply linked to the reports themes, as the life stories and testimonies of these women recount reports of sexual abuse and domestic violence as a result of family separation from the Ministry of Children and Family Development (BC), overpolicing and the Residential School system; the loss of languages and tradition as a protection measure against colonial violence; widespread housing and food insecurity, mass incarceration, and shorter life expectancy (ibidem). Existing policy and academic literature provide numerous recommendations to policymakers ending both societal and state violence, beginning with the coloniality of the production of knowledge about Indigenous women: women "are not silent victims or stereotypes" but are instead unique individuals with their own stories, hopes, dreams, and dedication to justice (ibidem; Bushnell, 2009; Longstaffe, 2017). We seek to continue in this vein and seek to understand how women in these communities are mitigating the effects of colonial violence in relationship to land and water.

## COAST SALISH LANDS - DUWAMISH, SUQUAMISH, STILLAGUAMISH, AND MUCKLESHOOT PEOPLES (SEATTLE & BELLEVUE, WASHINGTON, UNITED STATES)

As an emergent part of the project, we had the possibility to follow the Coast Salish Sea and engage further in urban Indigenous experiences on traditional Coast Salish Lands. In Seattle and Bellevue, we hosted Design Circles to discover further the relationships to land and water. The Coast Salish Sea has long connected people, serving as a place of exchange and confluence. The Design Circles were centred on this inextricably connected between peoples, land and water as well cross-cultural sharing. Highlighted throughout the Design Circles was the criticality of Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples coming together and the impact of this in particular related to women and girls.



Similar to the themes found in other urban settings like Vancouver, some of the main themes that emerged are related to women's resistance to erasure and invisibility of their stories, lived experiences and political. At places like the Duwamish Longhouse and Cultural Center heritage walks are helping people experience the environment and teaching traditional knowledge about conflict. A commonality spoken about was the pursuance of the legalities of impacts to the environment and the related significant impacts to ways of life. For example, a petition was filed to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights seeking relief from human rights violations resulting from the impacts of climate change caused by acts and omissions of the United States. As per the petition: "Petitioner requests the Commission to recommend that the United States adopt mandatory measures to limit its greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, consider the impacts of GHG emissions on the Arctic in evaluating all major government actions, establish and implement a plan to protect Inuit culture and resources and provide assistance necessary for Inuit to adapt to the impacts of climate change that cannot be avoided." [15]

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[15] <https://climatecasechart.com/non-us-case/petition-to-the-inter-american-commission-on-human-rights-seeking-relief-from-violations-resulting-from-global-warming-caused-by-acts-and-omissions-of-the-united-states/>





## SÁPMI (FINLAND)

We also added a scoping case of the Sami (also known as the Sámi or Saami) as the Indigenous peoples who originate from Sápmi, (northern areas of Norway, Sweden and Finland, and the Russian Kola Peninsula and the only recognized Indigenous peoples in Europe. We were interested in understanding the parallels between the intersecting topics of colonialism, extractivism and Indigenous mental health as part of a wider trend of Indigenous Cosmopolitics and eco-activism that “centre the recognition of intergenerational, evolutionary space and time required for not just the survival of all species, but for the recognition of the ‘rights’ to life for all humans and non-humans” (Fuller, 2018). In the Sami context, the increasing tension between Swedish extractive industries (including the vast majority of Sweden’s metal mines) and the traditional Sámi practice of reindeer herding (ibidem) as well as the Sami community’s assertions of Indigenous nationalism and sovereignty (Oskanen, 2020) further augment our argumentation. It’s central to look at places in the Global North, such as North American and Europe as sites of conflict from an Indigenous perspective. There is also an emerging field of Sami Indigenous feminist literature (Knoblock, 2022, Kuokkanen, 2019) that is central to threading our research together.

## PART III: “OUR SHARED STORIES: A JOURNEY THROUGH WATERWAYS”

We share our findings through intersecting themes, patterns and parallels made visible through our analysis, and model this through highlighting the stories and conversations from different women we spoke to on this research journey, seeking to share their stories and oral histories in a good way. Therefore, we begin with the relationship between women and water that came through our embodied experiential approach to our research. We realized that waterways and rivers were the connection points, both physically and figuratively, of our research engagements and the stories and experiences that we heard. Therefore, on a meta-physical level, our findings and research approach are intimately connected to each other and to the land. These stories embody an intersectional environmentalist approach as tied up with Indigenous feminist themes of self-determination and its meta-physical relationship to land (Barker, 2019). In all the cases in Turtle Island, we learned that women take on primary roles in the protection of water resources and are viewed as holders of “water knowledge” (Brewster et al., 2006; McGregor, 2008; Chiblow, 2019) on the nature of water as a relative and sacred element – as life. This “water knowledge” is “discounted” in current approaches to water policies, strategies and governance and is embedded in the legacy and ongoing forms of colonialism (Anderson et al., 2013; Chiblow, 2019).

Therefore, these findings seek to amplifying women’s “water knowledge” and its intimate connection to to self-determination as representative of how Indigenous women’s knowledge is central in mitigating the converging crises of climate change and colonial violence. Our research, on a broad level, make visible the efforts to resist the erasure and decentering of Indigenous women’s perspectives of relationality, stewardship and obligation as mediated through the aesthetics and embodiment of community-level protest and care (Thomas, 2020; Mulroy, 2021; Havercamp, 2021). Our research also highlights the ontological differences between non-Indigenous/settler and Indigenous worldviews of water against the backdrop of climate change. The former tends to see water primarily as a resource that can be owned, managed, and exploited, while Indigenous worldviews often consider water as a living entity or a relative, connecting generations over time, and to which they (and women in particular) have a sacred responsibility. Our case studies highlight the agency of Indigenous women in claiming their traditional responsibilities and decolonizing water through healing journeys (Anderson et al., 2011; McGregor, 2013; Norman, 2015; Dennis & Bell, 2020).

The stories and lived experiences below illustrate the different strategies women peacebuilders are developing to adapt and mitigate the impacts of conflicts related to climate change, and how in the process they strengthen their communities' resilience and capacity in the face of the climate crisis.

Under the theme of gender, the stories highlight the agency of women leaders. Despite difficult circumstance, intergenerational trauma and the ongoing effects of colonial systems, the women we have talked to have expressed hope and a sense of being able to do what is need for their families and communities. Agency is in their DNA. Acknowledging this is a strategy that is strengthening their community's resilience.

Under the theme of climate change, the stories show that the understanding of the inter-connectedness of life to the land, water and air is critical. When we hurt Mother Earth, we are hurting our own mother and we are jeopardizing the future of our children. For all of the female leaders we have met, this understanding is innate. Grounding climate action in Indigenous Ways of Knowing is a strategy is deepening action towards climate change and creating more collaborative action globally among Indigenous female leaders.

Under the theme of conflict, we are learning that conflict lives in deep and insidious places where there are no guns as hallmarks. Conflict shows up in women's lives as domestic violence, sexual violence, lateral violence, systemic racism, sexism and continued systemic barriers to meeting the basic needs of life – among many other ways. Acknowledging this is creating greater resilience in the women we spoke to and creating greater collaboration amongst female leaders. This strategy is moving the peace-building field into a much more trauma-informed direction overall. We delve into these stories through weaving the story of the research project itself through four waterways (and not state borders): the Coast Salish Sea, the St. Lawrence River, and the Lohjanjärvi.

# THE COAST SALISH SEA: WATER HOLDS MEMORY (VANCOUVER, BRITISH COLUMBIA, CANADA/SEATTLE & BELLEVUE, WASHINGTON, UNITED STATES)

The Coast Salish Sea was a waterway that guided us through lived experiences of urban Indigeneity in Vancouver, Seattle and Bellevue. We learned about embodied healing, for instance the practice of yoga as healing and way to process grief in our own bodies. Our bodies are made up of water, and we think that we are separate from it - but we are not. We heard powerful testimonies of Indigenous women around giving life, childbirth, agency, resurgence and resistance as moving through healing generational trauma. We learned that connection with Land is about healing and thinking of the type of land and world that our children will inherit (a crucial connection to climate change). We learned that this waterway was a way to hold the memory of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls, highlighting this endemic site of conflict and contestation through a family and community-led vigil and memorial in the middle of urbanized Vancouver. We talked about water protectors in standoffs over pipelines on unceded territory. Water knows no boundaries, communities are not separated by borders but connected by the Salish Sea in this area. In this setting, coming together as Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples is critical – locally and globally. We also learned that impacts to the environment are impacts to ways of life.



Malina Dawn @Indigenous Yogini

*I would agree that like the way that we're living, the current systems are dominated by the patriarchal sort of view of life, which is [...] conquer and divide and the matriarchal view. So I mean, as a woman, you're a life giver. And as a life giver, you're instantly a life protector in a different way. Not that men can't be at all because there are those that who do have that connection. But having, you know, the female body, having a womb having, that experience of life giving, it changes things and, and historically, we are known to be more. Nurturing and sensitive to the needs of family, you know, and, in our connection to, to earth as such. So, I think that if we had more matriarchal leadership, and value systems, we would be protecting the earth rather than extracting from it without thinking of the generations to come, or even the current generation. And not to say that, yeah, I mean, we see some of those women that are out on the frontlines, fierce [...] it's not all... being matriarchal doesn't mean you're, like, soft and submissive. But you stand up for what is sacred, and what needs to be protected in the system.*

So yeah, but even you know, even in Indigenous culture, those who would identify as Two Spirit had a really special place within ceremony to like help strike that balance. So it's not only about like the masculine and the feminine. There is a place for those that don't identify as...or who are like non binary or are Two Spirit. But I do think that for those who do identify as female and mother, there is that pull to protect and to preserve and, and appreciate the beauty of life and want to experience beauty and pass that down the generations. It's different than what's in the mostly conditioned, male experience right now.

QR Code to Malina's Story and Space  
at [www.malindawn.com](http://www.malindawn.com)



Water Walk on location in  
Vancouver, February 2023



# THE ST LAWRENCE RIVER: WATER CONNECTS US (KAHNAWÀ:KE, MONTREAL, QUEBEC & TORONTO, ONTARIO, CANADA)

This waterway, the St Lawrence River, made visible the efforts of Indigenous women healing their communities experiencing divide and conflicts as a direct consequence of land-based structural violence and oppression.

Based on our approach of showing up in community and based on existing relationships created in the context of the Peacemakers in Turtle Island Knowledge Network that we are part of, in March 2023, we were able to be in community with members of Kahnawà:ke (Mohawk Territory) located over the St. Lawrence River by Montreal through a knowledge exchange between Indigenous and non-Indigenous conflict resolution and peace practitioners organized by the Kahnawà:ke Governance Project (KGOV) and the Ottawa Dialogue that took place at the Mohawk Trail Longhouse in Kahnawà:ke. In this space, we were able to listen to a community Elder share her story and her approach of community conflict resolution, especially in the context of her community that had experienced raids conducted by Royal Canadian Mounted Police in the late 1980s in the leadup to the 1990 Crisis and how that affected her and her community. Her and other stories of community Elders and clan mothers protecting their land and sovereignty in the context of raids but also more subtle and insidious forms of structural oppression were accompanied with stories about what resolving conflicts meant, from an Indigenous perspective.

Conflict resolution occurs through recognizing and acknowledging the presence of conflict and trauma (including intergenerational trauma) and moving through a process of healing and grieving. For instance, Elder Dale Dione Dell gave a sharing on her approach to restorative justice, making visible that many approaches to conflict resolution that are mainstream today have drawn from Indigenous approaches:



*Dale Dione Dell*

*I have a passion to see our people get together to be as one. That's all, that's been my passion. [...] We were all born the same way and everything. But we've gone on different paths: this way, that way, everybody's got a different story. So through this process, when there's a conflict, like say, even within a family, and a lot of times it is within families, I mediate families, to create a safe space, where they can come and talk to each other and listen to each other's stories [...] and together, come together and try to fix whatever it is that was broken within their family or within, you know, whatever the conflict is. So this is what all stems from all of this history, and all of this culture that we have.*

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*So then I went around the world to learn about conflict resolution and everything. And then I went and came back around. And then I looked, and I realized, hey, we got it all. You know, we got it all. So to kind of intertwine with what works here and what works there. It's especially good because like in the families, often there's so much anger, so much hatred [...] and it's about releasing that and being able to let it go. But one of the most important things that I see in our community, I've seen for a very long time. If we could just get over that hump, to be able to forgive: because our people can't forgive each other. That's the big issue. If we could forgive each other, we could go a very long way. But then I look at it again from outside perspective. I know why it's difficult for forgiveness, because we've been bombarded from everywhere else. Trauma, trauma, from generations to generations. And it's very difficult for that, but we can find a way to be able to forgive each other and work towards healing. That would be amazing. We would be the strongest nation ever. I mean, we're still strong, but we would be, we would be better.*

Our time in community in of Kahnawà:ke also introduced us to a new generation of women who are taking leadership roles in their community, including a community member who was elected as a Council Chief under the age of 30, who shared her story exhibiting leadership and community strength to bring the community forward. This waterway highlighted the experience of Indigenous women's experiences protecting and defending their territory in contested spaces within a backdrop of land dispossession and structural violence. In follow up in-depth conversations with prominent community members, shifts in land use as a result of climate change again was not viewed as something taking place in the future; the loss of land has already been experienced by such communities due to land dispossession and extractive industries within a settler colonial context – as existing research, art, stories, and now our time in community in Kahnawà:ke show.



QR Code Link to KGOV  
project recording of Dale;  
Knowledge Exchange



# STANDING ROCK AND PINE RIDGE RESERVATION: WATER IS LIFE (NORTH AND SOUTH DAKOTA, UNITED STATES)

This waterway, the Cheyenne River, made visible the story of Indigenous-women led, community responsibility as a form of resistance. In March 2023, we flew from Montreal to Bismarck, North Dakota after conducting a comprehensive review of written and unwritten sources of writing, testimony, video, and art about the #NoDAPL movement and contacted several organizations that according to community organization sites around the movement, were open to speaking about their own work. We were able to set up meetings with a few of them, which required us to drive from Bismarck, North Dakota, through the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation in North Dakota through to Pine Ridge, South Dakota.

In line with our research approach of grounded theory underpinned by Indigenous Ways of Knowing, we kept our time in Standing Rock open to focus on being with the Land and what that meant to the Lakota Nations who lived in this area.

We started our journey visiting sacred sites and were able to meet with three community organizations whose work embodied a main theme identified by our review of the stories, oral histories, and academic work emerging out of the #NODAPL movement: the Sitting Bull Visitor Center located in Fort Yates, North Dakota; the Cheyenne River Youth Project situated along the Cheyenne River; and the Thunder Valley Community Development Corporation located in Porcupine, South Dakota. All three organizations are led by Indigenous women and focus on the liberation and healing of their communities, through their lifeways and honouring their own communities' sacred ways of life.





This “ethos of responsibility” and agency of the Indigenous women here is based on the interconnectedness of life and water – the Lakota phrase Mni wičoni (water is life) was not only a phrase to gather together during the #NODAPL movement but defines their ongoing resistance efforts. While the flags and signs are still present while driving through the land, these organizations’ forms of resistance through storytelling and art, illustrated by community leader and Elder Jennifer Martell’s film about the journey of the #NODAPL movement’s organization and gathering towards a mass movement; as well as the numerous murals, signs, posters and visual embodiments of resistance that are found while journeying across the reservation.



QR Code Link to Oyate



After spending time with Thunder Valley CDC, it was made clear that their resistance and agency is through their comprehensive and distinctive programming and initiatives which seeks to achieve food sovereignty, energy sovereignty, housing and land regenerative development; all couched with a clear focus on the community, including multigenerational and intergenerational learning and connection.



The interconnectedness of land, community and sovereignty is powerfully echoed through the physical space for gathering and programming of the Cheyenne River Youth Project. This Indigenous-led organization includes programming around social enterprises, family services and an art institute – but also physical spaces for children and youth to gather together.

The interconnectedness between climate change and conflict was put into stark relief in the context of the #NODAPL movement; but our time at Standing Rock seeks to amplify the ways in which Indigenous women are responding through community responsibility and resistance through community care.



Standing Rock combines “formal” resistance movements with broader forms of resistance, such as breaking generational trauma, finding one’s voice and learning one’s language.

QR Code to Cheyenne River Youth Project

QR CODE to Thunder Valley CDC



# LOHJANJÄRVI: WATER AS CONFLUENCE (FINLAND)

We spent the majority of our time in Finland in the Helsinki area, which has the largest population of Sámi people than anywhere else [16]. We explored the urban environment as well as Finnish nature in the area, through the lens of the challenges the Sámi face in maintaining their language, culture and identity, especially in an urban setting. Water was a constant throughout the explorations. Helsinki has a diverse number of water areas, comprised of sea areas and freshwater areas, which include the Vantaanjoki River, streams, ditches, ponds and springs [17]. Helsinki's archipelago of 300 islands stretches from the sheltered inner archipelago to the open sea. As the various waterways meet and merge, there is a coming together that offers a confluence of challenges and opportunities. It is difficult to maintain Sami identity with such disbursement of the population. However, there is such opportunity to connect and create spaces of cultural sharing and revitalization. It takes effort to continue to live culturally but people are coming together to find ways to imbue everyday life with traditional Sámi ways. We experienced this while spending time with local Sámi peoples as well as others in a wide range of settings. We had engagements with representatives from the Martti Ahtisaari Peace Foundation, the United Nations (UN) Women Finland, the University of Helsinki and Think Peace Learning and Support Hub as well as the Mary Hoch Center for Reconciliation. With these, we took part in urban land and water explorations across Helsinki and in the open sea in the Gulf of Finland. We also had ceremony and time on the land in the Uusimaa region while exploring Lohja and Torhola as part of the engagements.

- Rethinking our relationships and re-connecting with the Earth, Sámi Lands, and Relations in more meaningful ways [18].
- The power of Original Instructions and the guides around us. There is everyday magic and serendipity all around us. The many stories shared of the Little People and the guidance they offer give credence this.
- Land and earth are more than human; they are part of the larger, interconnected whole that unite us as peoples.
- There are many complex and shared histories. Resilience is needed and the deep realization of the importance of community. Communities transcend borders.
- It is critical that we work together, across sectors. Companies, institutions and economic and societal actors are key sustainability catalysts. They can help create and sustain significant actions.
- There is an interconnectedness between the healing of oneself and between each other and Reconciliation.

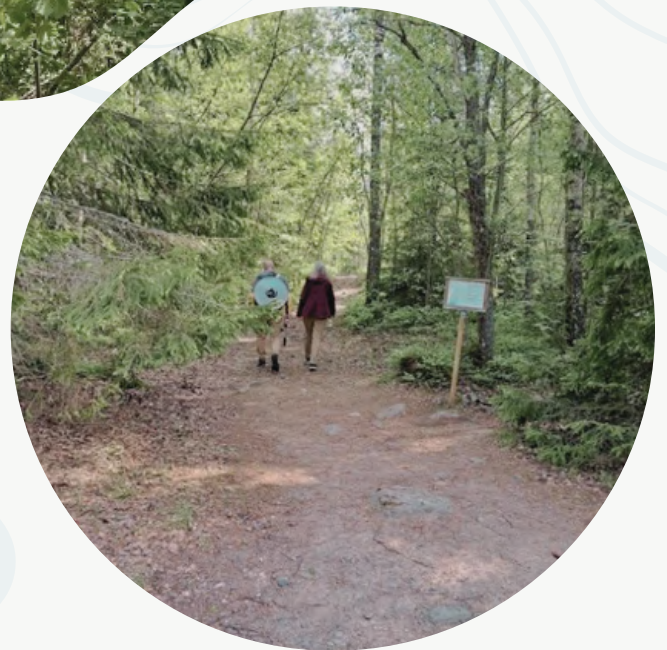
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[16] <https://finland.fi/life-society/sami-fly-their-flag-in-helsinki/>

[17] <https://kestavyys.hel.fi/en/water-ecosystems/>

[18] [https://helda.helsinki.fi/bitstream/handle/10138/341102/bridging\\_cultural\\_concepts\\_of\\_nature\\_8\\_becoming\\_64t\\_h\\_rethinking\\_and\\_re\\_connecting\\_with\\_t.pdf?sequence=1](https://helda.helsinki.fi/bitstream/handle/10138/341102/bridging_cultural_concepts_of_nature_8_becoming_64t_h_rethinking_and_re_connecting_with_t.pdf?sequence=1)

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*Becoming Earth: Rethinking and  
(Re-)Connecting with the Earth, Sámi Lands  
and Relations (Guttorm 2021)*





*Water as confluence.  
Torhola, Finland, May 2023*

# PART V: “WHERE WE GO FROM HERE”

## CONVERGENCE AND INSIGHTS

We explore our findings through the embodied theme of water and the special roles and knowledge that Indigenous women, in many of the communities we spent time with, hold as Water Protectors and Defenders. Overall, our research reveals that:

- The perceived risk factors of insecurity of climate change is not a future risk for many Indigenous communities, but a current lived reality (e.g. water scarcity and land dispossession) as a direct result of systemic oppression and colonial violence in both North America and Europe (Turtle Island and Sápmi).
- Indigenous women’s knowledge about resolving conflicts within a backdrop of climate change have always been there, but have been neglected or disavowed in scholarship, policy and practice in peacebuilding. However, there are many active Indigenous women scholars and community leaders. What we are finding is that while often unrecognized, Indigenous female leaders have been leading through conflict in their communities, ensuring that the foundations for peaceful and inclusive societies have been kept alive and embedded in everyday life.
- There are many different strategies Indigenous women peacebuilders are developing to adapt and mitigate the impacts of conflicts related to climate change and many are grounded in Indigenous Original Teachings. By virtue of living these teachings, revitalizing them and teaching them to younger generations, the women we have met are strengthening their communities’ resilience and capacity in the face of the climate crisis.
- There is a need for researchers, policymakers and practitioners to redefine and expand notions of “conflict” and “insecurity” to understand the intersecting, complex and often invisible impacts of climate change in places experiencing past and ongoing forms of colonialism.

In each of our case studies, we have also learned the following insights mediated through the visual and embodied theme of water (as Land):

- **Water has memory:** In our case study of urban Indigenous women, we learned that a gendered approach to climate change can mean healing intergenerational trauma. Indigenous women play a central role in gathering spaces of resistance to the erasure of colonial violence ongoing today, such as the community vigil to remember the children that never came home from the Canadian residential school system. From an Indigenous perspective, embodying a connection to land is inseparable from thinking about what type of world children will inherit. Processing grief and trauma is an important avenue to healing ourselves, our communities and our land – it is all connected.
- **Water connects us:** In our case study in, we learned that Indigenous women as clan mothers and community leaders have been essential in the resolution of conflict between communities after traumatic events such as the Oka Crisis, that pit communities against each other. Through initiatives such as restorative justice, we saw that Indigenous women viewed protecting and defending their land and asserting their sovereignty as inseparable from taking care of relations and relationships within their communities.
- **Water is life:** In our case study of Standing Rock, Water is Life, an important phrase bringing together thousands of people in a movement against the building of the Dakota Access Pipeline from 2016-2017, is continued storytelling and testimony. We learned that community care is the most important way to mitigate the present and future impacts of climate change; and that Indigenous women are asserting their own agency through storytelling, filmmaking, and community-led initiatives around “energy sovereignty.”
- **Water as confluence:** In our scoping case study of the Sami in Finland, we learned that state-centric notions of borders separate what should be indivisible, and making visible the connected lived experiences of Indigenous peoples, especially Indigenous women, in both North American and Europe is central to understanding the key issues of how Indigenous sovereignty, environmental activism and extractive industries are intimately tied to any discussion of climate change.

Based on the key findings as identified in the summary section of the report, the following Calls to Action and Next Steps have been identified:

- Continue to support and grow initiatives focused on Climate Change, Intersectional Environmentalism and the Leadership of Indigenous Women. There is important knowledge to be shared and expanded. There are significant portions of Turtle Island and Sápmi yet to be explored and connected with these beginning explorations. Consider a Phase II of the Power to Protect project specifically.
- Support the continued growth of the Power to Protect network of women that has coalesced as a result of these engagements. Consider greater semination of this knowledge and the power of this network.
- Publish further on the research methodologies utilized in this exploration as an example of community-centric, Indigenous Ways of creating relations.

*Along the journey, we have met many incredible people involved in climate justice work. One of the powerful mother daughter duos we met, Kasha and Marla Slavner, are based in Toronto, Canada, and their knowledge and research as impacted our understanding. They have created the Global Sunrise Project and share stories to paint a vision of the way things can be, and highlight the people bringing that vision to life. With this connection, it was possible to bring our research to the United Nations Climate Conference, COP28!*



Marla & Kasha Slavner with Lorelei Higgins Parker at the United Nations Climate Conference COP28



*There are many potentials for this work to continue. Please contact Julia and Lorelei if you are interested!*



*Thank you for sharing this  
journey with us.  
All our relations!*

*Julia & Lorelei*

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Cover Photo:

Cheyenne River Youth Project community space, North Dakota, 2023.

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