

SENTIMENT ANALYSIS AND THE WATER CRISIS

A Sentiment Analysis of The First Nations Water Crisis

Bryson Landriault

500871753

SOC 540

Ryerson University

Dr. Eva Jewell

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Introduction

In recent years, there has been growing calls to resolve the dire crisis happening in First Nations communities across Canada. Since the mid-twentieth century, the quality of water in these communities has gotten significantly worse due to unprecedented levels of pollution and contamination, making the water unsafe to use, whether that be for washing one's hands or, in many cases, for consumption (Vowel, 2016). Various water advisories are, thus, commonplace for many First Nations communities, ranging from 'Boil Water Advisories', requiring individuals to boil their water for at least one-minute in order to drink from their water supply, to the more extreme 'Do Not Consume' and 'Do Not Use' advisories. In all cases, this problem is widespread, disproportionately affecting First Nations and Indigenous peoples. A video by *Human Rights Watch* (2016), an organization that calls attention to people in crisis around the world, documents these experiences through the lives of three Indigenous families, offering insight into how water contamination has deeply affected them, impeding on their right to clean water and healthy lives. The video is up-close and personal, showing how they and their children have developed infections due to bathing in contaminated water. Such media is important in exposing the reality of the situation, but it is also important for exploring how the public approaches such topics in through the YouTube's comment section.

Indigenous feminist theory is particularly concerned with these forms of analysis, as they offer insight into the views Canadians share on the crisis and how certain narratives dominate their understanding of Indigenous peoples more broadly. These general 'understandings' can be characterized as sociopolitical imaginaries (Million as cited by Meissner, 2017), which Indigenous feminists have popularized in describing the Felt knowledge of Canadian settlers towards Indigenous peoples. Using the YouTube forum of the *Human Rights Watch* (2016)

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video, this paper seeks to analyze the sentiments of Canadians on the crisis to explore these imaginaries. More specifically, this paper will 1) examine the sociopolitical imaginaries which settlers speak to, using a select number of comments under the YouTube video by *Human Rights Watch* (2016), and then 2) offer a counter-narrative to these imaginaries, as informed through the work of Indigenous Feminist scholars (Daigle, 2019; Meissner, 2017; Watts, 2013). The methods for analyzing these YouTube comments will be qualitative, investigating three separate posts, allowing for a deep analysis of their sentiments and which sociopolitical imaginaries they are informed by.

Analysis

As previously stated, this analysis is qualitative and will rely on the sentiments expressed in a few of the comments under the *Human Rights Watch* (2016) video. Throughout most of the comments, almost all of them were overwhelmingly negative, as a large number of people expressed a lack of empathy for the Indigenous families. Generally, many resorted to attacking the families in the video and Indigenous peoples more broadly, instead of showing support for them. The first prominent sentiment expressed is that Indigenous peoples are 'lazy', and that having a contaminated water supply is a problem caused by the Indigenous way of life. YouTube user *G* shares this sentiment when they attack a fourteen-year-old Indigenous boy from the video, who has constantly suffered infection and has developed eczema from bathing in the water as a child. *G* comments that "this is not because of the water, it's because he's fat and eats unhealthy foods", and declares that the solution is for him is to "move to a town and pray to jesus" (Human Rights Watch, 2016). The idea that the inherent 'laziness' of Indigenous peoples is the reason for the water crisis was a common sentiment expressed by others as well, but the idea that he should "move to a town and pray to jesus" reveals more about this sociopolitical

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imaginary. *G* proposes that the solution is Western spirituality and civilization, meaning that Indigenous spirituality and civilization are the symptom. Comments like these communicate how settlers may feel that the reason for there being contaminated water on First Nations communities is a result of Indigenous peoples' inaction, which can only be fixed with the help of colonization and the influence of Canadian society.

The second noticeable sentiment expressed in the comments seems closely related to the 'laziness' attribute, yet instead accuses Indigenous peoples of not 'paying' their fair share. User *Mushman 603* shares this when they say that "Reserves don't pay taxes that's why" (Human Rights Watch, 2016), arguing that First Nations people are dealing with a water crisis because they do not pay taxes to the Government of Canada. In this case, this user argues that if they did, it would allow for the government to fix their water supplies. In saying this, the individual simply believes that paying taxes to the Canadian government is the solution to such an issue, but that Indigenous people do not partake in this process. Thus, this comment similarly insinuates that Indigenous people are 'lazy' or susceptible to inaction due to their Indigeneity.

Lastly, there was one final sentiment that was notable throughout this analysis, that revealed a settler-sociopolitical imaginary of Indigenous peoples by settlers. Some users asserted that the water issues on First Nations communities were solely a consequence of Indigenous people's actions, without any responsibility on the settler nation-state of Canada. User *Apple Tree* felt this way when they said that "Groups always bitch bitch bitch about white people. Those white men did this. Those white men didn't do that" (Human Rights Watch, 2016). This person seems to think that the water crisis is self-inflicted, not resulting or influenced by anyone or anything else. Specifically, this statement simultaneously acts as an accusation towards Indigenous peoples and a defence for Canada. Moreover, Indigenous peoples are portrayed as

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individuals which complain of their situation as being a result of settlers, and settlers as being excused from responsibility altogether. Along with the other two comments, this statement ignores the victimization of Indigenous peoples during the crisis, instead choosing to subject them to these other narratives that define Indigenous peoples as 'lazy', 'self-destructive' and without any accountability towards the settler-nation state of Canada.

A Counter Narrative

Each sentiment in the above section speaks to one of the numerous sociopolitical imaginaries of Indigenous peoples, which informs settler understandings of the First Nations water crisis. These imaginaries are important, as they are the narratives which help form the thoughts of settlers on Indigenous peoples. Prominent Indigenous feminist, Million (as cited by Meissner, 2017) has addressed some of the imaginaries discussed in this paper, including the idea that Indigenous people are 'lazy'. Million speaks of this association, arguing that the link between 'laziness' and Indigenous peoples is based in what the speaker "feels to be true" (15). This is an unspoken, commonly held knowledge which reveals itself in the comments section by G in the *Human Rights Watch* (2016) video. The presumption that the Indigenous boy's ascribed 'lazy' qualities has caused his suffering, only projects a popular mythology which already exist in the minds of settlers about Indigenous peoples. Years of complex social fabric has defined Indigenous people as lazy by settlers, which is constantly reproduced through sociopolitical imaginaries. Million (as cited by Meissner, 2017) uses 'drunkenness' as an example of this in her work, where she describes how Indigenous men have been ascribed the 'drunkenness' attribute based on years of settlers building up these imaginaries. In the minds of settlers, there are many other imaginaries which have helped construct their Felt knowledges of Indigenous peoples as well.

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Now that we know how sociological imaginaries work to define Indigenous peoples as 'lazy', the next few sentiments give us an opportunity to investigate other counter-narratives to popularly held Felt knowledges by settlers. With the comment by *Mushman 603* that "Reserves don't pay taxes" (Human Rights Watch, 2016), another sociopolitical imaginary becomes apparent. This idea that Indigenous peoples do not pay taxes is a commonly misunderstood mythology, implying that Indigenous peoples and First Nations are in poverty because they do not contribute to capitalism. In reality, Canada's wealth has been funded from Indigenous land and resources, with Canada selling these resources in the capitalist market and accumulating international wealth (Yellowhead Institute, 2021). Furthermore, this money has largely been kept from First Nations people, manufacturing poverty and inequity amongst these communities. Meanwhile, Canadians actively benefit from this wealth, without realizing Canada's current role and history in stealing resources from Indigenous populations. Therefore, when discussing the water crisis in First Nations communities, the issue is not whether or not Indigenous peoples should pay federal taxes, it is how Canada is responsible for generations of theft which has led to such a crisis. The solution for settlers should be, at the very least, to gain some awareness of this history. Indeed, it is only when non-Indigenous peoples can break these imaginaries through better educating themselves, that space for transformative change can occur (Daigle, 2019). However, in our analysis there is still another sentiment which requires a deeper understanding to comprehend settler mythologies of First Nations people.

The final comment in our analysis is perhaps one of the more important sentiments to counter, considering how it attempts to erase the history of colonization and violence enacted upon Indigenous peoples. When user *Apple Tree* argues that settlers did not have a role in the water crisis (Human Rights Watch, 2016), they fail to understand the actual histories,

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epistemologies, and cultures of Indigenous peoples. Indigenous place-thought (Watts, 2013) asserts that every aspect of the land, from the animals to the soil, possesses agency in their existence. The role women play, in particular, in maintaining these relationships is important, considering they are the ones responsible for the world which future generations are born into. With colonization, these relationships with the land have been threatened, taking a profound toll on Indigenous women. Presumptions of settlers not playing a role in this process is entirely false, failing to realize the damage which has been done for centuries up until this point to the environment and Indigenous peoples. In addition, this sociological imaginary which *Apple Tree* speak to fails to acknowledge the effects of resource mining that is still occurring today, which is polluting the waters near (and sometimes on) Indigenous communities (Women's Earth Alliance, Native Youth Sexual Health Network, 2016). Even when taking a surface level examination of this issue, it becomes clear that Indigenous people have suffered significant health outcomes due to these contaminations. Infant mortality rate is higher for Indigenous communities more than any other in Canada, along with the increased levels of infection and disease due to these facilities (Women's Earth Alliance, Native Youth Sexual Health Network, 2016). What this sentiment largely reveals, is that some of the mythologies of Indigenous peoples are so far detached from reality that they obviously have no real comprehension of the reality for so many First Nations peoples.

Conclusion

In this paper, I analyzed some of the sentiment's settlers have on Indigenous peoples based on three comments from a video by *Human Rights Watch* (2016) on YouTube. This video documents how the water crisis on First Nations communities has affected three Indigenous families, having shaped their health outcomes, and impeding on their human rights. In the paper,

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we explored how the comments under the video are based in sociopolitical imaginaries of settlers about Indigenous peoples, followed by a deeper examination of these mythologies compared to the actual realities of Indigenous life. In producing a counter-narrative to these imaginaries, this paper effectively deconstructs the falsehoods associated with the First Nations water crisis, while redefining the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples within an Indigenous feminist lens. As for my perspective while conducting this analysis? Being a non-Indigenous, white Canadian settler, I was not too surprised to see some of the comments by non-Indigenous people under this video. A lot of work needs to be done in order for these mythologies to be addressed by non-Indigenous peoples, but I believe the first step is by challenging one's positionality. Indigenous feminist theory can be a resourceful place to start, as Indigenous feminists have been at the forefront of decolonization and challenging settler mythologies of Indigenous peoples. In listening and educating oneself of the history of colonization and resistance by Indigenous peoples, settlers may finally find compassion and empathy for First Nations people.

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