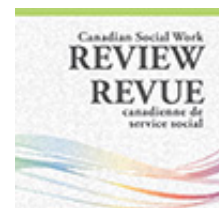


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# THESE ARE INDIGENOUS LANDS Foregrounding Settler Colonialism and Indigenous Sovereignty as Primary Contexts for Canadian Environmental Social Work

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### Article abstract

The recent upsurge of interest regarding environmental social work is unfolding against a backdrop of centuries of continuous struggle on the part of Indigenous peoples to protect their lands and waters. In this article, we consider the ways in which environmental social work frameworks engage the realities and resistances of Indigenous peoples in the context of settler colonialism. We contend that to ethically engage with environmentalism, social workers living and working on Indigenous territories must understand and resist settler colonialism, our implication in upholding its structure and practices, and its contribution to ecological destruction. Drawing upon the work of Indigenous scholars, we briefly describe Indigenous peoples' conception of their relationships to land and sovereignty and how settler colonialism as a structure is organized with the explicit aim of eliminating these relationships. We then review prominent texts addressing several competing environmental social work frameworks, considering how each takes up (or not) histories of colonialism and Indigenous dispossession and addresses Indigenous identities, relations to land, and assertions of sovereignty. We conclude by offering principles and practices that might foreground the disruption of settler colonialism and respect for Indigenous sovereignty as necessary frameworks for Canadian environmental social work.

# THESE ARE INDIGENOUS LANDS

## Foregrounding Settler Colonialism and Indigenous Sovereignty as Primary Contexts for Canadian Environmental Social Work

*Chris Hiller*

*Elizabeth Carlson*

**Abstract:** The recent upsurge of interest regarding environmental social work is unfolding against a backdrop of centuries of continuous struggle on the part of Indigenous peoples to protect their lands and waters. In this article, we consider the ways in which environmental social work frameworks engage the realities and resistances of Indigenous peoples in the context of settler colonialism. We contend that to ethically engage with environmentalism, social workers living and working on Indigenous territories must understand and resist settler colonialism, our implication in upholding its structure and practices, and its contribution to ecological destruction. Drawing upon the work of Indigenous scholars, we briefly describe Indigenous peoples' conception of their relationships to land and sovereignty and how settler colonialism as a structure is organized with the explicit aim of eliminating these relationships. We then review prominent texts addressing several competing environmental social

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*Chris Hiller's German, Scottish, and English ancestors settled on the traditional territories of the Haudenosaunee, Anishinaabe, and Huron-Wendat peoples and never left. Chris now lives with her family on Anishinaabe, Haudenosaunee, and Attawandaron territories, on lands supposedly sold to the Canada Company for the founding of Guelph, Ontario. She is an assistant professor at Renison University College, and seeks to uphold and live into principles of the 1701 Nanfan Treaty and the Two Row Wampum. Elizabeth Carlson's Swedish, Saami, German, Scots-Irish, and English ancestors have settled on lands of the Anishinaabe and Omaha Nations, which were unethically obtained by the US government. Liz is both complicit in, and resisting, settler colonialism on lands occupied by the Canadian state. She is an assistant professor in the School of Social Work at Laurentian University and is learning how to live in Indigenous sovereignty on Anishinaabe lands as a treaty relative of the Robinson-Huron Treaty.*

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work frameworks, considering how each takes up (or not) histories of colonialism and Indigenous dispossession and addresses Indigenous identities, relations to land, and assertions of sovereignty. We conclude by offering principles and practices that might foreground the disruption of settler colonialism and respect for Indigenous sovereignty as necessary frameworks for Canadian environmental social work.

**Keywords:** Indigenous sovereignty, settler colonialism, environmental social work, Indigenous lands

**Abrégé :** La récente recrudescence de l'intérêt pour le travail social environnemental se déroule sur un fond de siècles de lutte continue des peuples autochtones pour protéger leurs terres et leurs eaux. Dans cet article, nous examinons les façons dont les cadres de travail social environnemental engagent les réalités et les résistances des peuples autochtones dans le contexte du colonialisme des colons. Nous soutenons que pour s'engager éthiquement avec l'environnementalisme, les travailleurs sociaux qui vivent et travaillent sur les territoires autochtones doivent comprendre et résister au colonialisme des colons, à notre implication dans le maintien de sa structure et de ses pratiques, et à sa contribution à la destruction écologique. En nous appuyant sur les travaux d'universitaires autochtones, nous décrivons brièvement la conception qu'ont les peuples autochtones de leurs relations à la terre et à la souveraineté et la façon dont le colonialisme des colons en tant que structure est organisé dans le but explicite d'éliminer ces relations. Nous passons ensuite en revue des textes importants traitant de plusieurs cadres de travail social environnemental concurrents, en examinant comment chacun d'entre eux reprend (ou non) l'histoire du colonialisme et de la dépossession indigène et aborde les identités indigènes, les relations à la terre et les affirmations de souveraineté. Nous concluons en offrant des principes et des pratiques qui pourraient mettre en évidence la perturbation du colonialisme des colons et le respect de la souveraineté autochtone comme cadres nécessaires au travail social environnemental canadien.

**Mots-clés :** Souveraineté autochtone, colonialisme des colons, travail social environnemental, terres autochtones.

*THE UPSURGE OF INTEREST AMONG* social work students, scholars, and practitioners in addressing environmental and ecological concerns is unfolding against a backdrop of centuries of continuous struggle on the part of Indigenous peoples to protect their lands and waters. While we conducted research for this article, hundreds of people from over 200 Indigenous nations and their supporters were encamped along the shores of the Cannonball River in Lakota-Dakota ancestral territory to support

the Standing Rock Sioux in resisting the construction of a 3.8 billion dollar pipeline extending from North Dakota to Illinois and running directly through the heart of their homeland. The history of devastation endured by the Standing Rock Sioux—of imported disease, decimated traditional economies, disregarded treaties, flooded, expropriated, and contaminated lands, deep racism, exploitation, and governmental neglect—resonates uncomfortably with the histories of many Indigenous nations in Canada and across Turtle Island. So too, this “flashpoint” (Russell, 2010, p. 30) of conflict and resistance finds a resonance in others struggles: in the coalescence of resistance against expansion of the Kinder Morgan pipeline and similar developments at Muskrat Dam and Unisto’ten; in the ramming of Mi’kmaq boats at Esgenoôpetitj (Burnt Church) and the RCMP crackdown against an anti-fracking blockade in Elsipogtog First Nation; in ongoing blockades, some a decade old now, to protect traditional Algonquin and Anishinaabe territories from being clear-cut; in the defaming and criminalization of so many Indigenous land defenders who seek to oppose unfettered resource extraction on their territories without their consent.

In a moment when Canada as a settler nation is being prodded by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s 2015 *Calls to Action*, by international bodies, and by a groundswell of Indigenous-led activism to account for its colonial past and present, and as social work continues to grapple with its role and implication in colonial oppression, it is essential that we consider carefully the ways in which all social work theory and practice engages with the realities and resistances of Indigenous peoples. As non-Indigenous scholars who have been impacted by almost two decades of involvement with Indigenous communities, Knowledge Keepers, scholars, and activists engaged in land defense struggles, we hope to contribute to this important conversation by focusing critical attention on the analytical frameworks currently used to articulate environmental approaches to social work.

In this article, we explore three overlapping environmentally-oriented frameworks for social work practice: eco-social work, eco-spiritual social work, and environmental justice. Considering their representation in prominent social work texts, we ask: What does each of these frameworks enable us to see of the realities and resistances of Indigenous peoples, and what remains sidelined, elided, distorted, or invisible? How does each framework conceptualize social work practice in relation to these realities and resistances? How does each address—or perhaps cover over or perpetuate—ongoing structures and practices that dispossess Indigenous peoples and disregard their sovereignty, rights, and relationships to land? And what might it look like to place analyses of ongoing colonization, Indigenous land dispossession, and Indigenous resistance and sovereignty at the *centre* of environmental social work theory and practice?

In traversing the terrain of these questions, we begin by utilizing the work of Indigenous scholars to briefly describe Indigenous peoples' conception of and relationships to their lands, as well as how these relationships inform Indigenous understandings of sovereignty. Next, we turn our attention to defining and describing settler colonialism as a structure organized with the explicit aim of eliminating Indigenous relationships to land, attending as well to how social work as a profession has participated in or failed to address practices aimed at Indigenous dispossession and erasure. We then use these concepts as an analytical lens through which to review key environmental social work literature. Here, we attend to the ways in which competing environmental social work frameworks take up (or not) histories of colonialism and Indigenous dispossession, as well as construct and delimit Indigenous identities, relations to land, and assertions of sovereignty. We conclude by offering principles and practices that might foreground the disruption of settler colonialism and respect for Indigenous sovereignty as necessary frameworks for Canadian environmental social work.

### **Indigenous Peoples' Relationships to Land and Sovereignty**

Nii Gaani Aki Inini (2016) speaks of the close and sacred connection Indigenous peoples have with Mother Earth, an entity revealing the face of the Creator and, offering love and abundance "that we feel in the food, the medicines, the natural materials we use in our homes and in our cooking, and most importantly, in the teachings, natural laws and connection she brings us" (para. 12). As Little Bear (2000) explains, this connection to Earth as Mother is literal, not metaphorical: "The Earth cannot be separated from the actual being of Indians" (p. 78). Traditional teacher Melody Andrews (2015) similarly points to connections to land as being core to Indigenous identities and cultures:

Being Hwulmuhw [Indigenous]...is about having a genetic connection to the people of the land and to the land itself. It is about understanding your connection to the land, where you come from, and knowing the origin stories of the land and the sacred responsibility for defending your territories from destruction and exploitation ... To realize you have a sacred responsibility for the land and help protect it for the next generation, you have to have an intimate relationship with the land. This means the land develops you as a person. It provides places, specific experiences, and wisdom for a person as they grow. (7:03-8:25)

Indeed, McAdam (2015) describes *nêhiyaw* (Cree) culture as so intertwined with the land that to "separate the two would mean death to many aspects of *nêhiyaw* culture" (p. 23). As Cajete (1994) notes, Indigenous identities derive not from a relationship to land in general,

but from longstanding lived relationships with very particular lands and places:

Every cultural group established their relations to [their place] over time. Whether that place is in the desert, a mountain valley, or along a seashore, it is in the context of natural community, and through that understanding they established an educational process that was practical, ultimately ecological, and spiritual. In this way they sought and found their life. (p. 113)

Practiced over millennia, these multidimensional relationships to their lands and territories are described as ontological and intrinsic; they are reflected in Indigenous peoples' laws and constitute the basis for Indigenous rights as well as responsibilities (Chiefs of Ontario, n.d.).

Indigenous understandings of their relationships to land also dovetail directly into Indigenous conceptions of sovereignty. Echoing many Indigenous political and activist organizations, the Chiefs of Ontario (n.d.) describe sovereignty as an extension and expression of these relationships to land—relationships that convey collective and inherent rights to self-determination and jurisdiction over political, legal, economic, social, and cultural realms, all “flow[ing] from the connection to the Creator and our lands” (para. 1). Importantly, there is some debate among Indigenous leaders and scholars regarding the risks and benefits of framing these relationships within concepts that are overdetermined by colonial relations and history.<sup>1</sup> For example, Mishig Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2015) emphasizes the importance of “understanding how sovereignty and nationhood are conceptualized within indigenous intellectual and political systems” (pp. 18-19). Basing her understanding on what she has heard communicated through the oral tradition of her Nishnaabeg elders, Simpson contends that Indigenous sovereignty “is at its core about relationships—relationships with each other and with plant and animal nations, with our lands and waters and with the spiritual world” (p. 18). Monture-Angus (1999) expresses this insight in a slightly different way, conceptualizing sovereignty as the right of Indigenous peoples to live out their relational responsibilities to land and territory:

Sovereignty, when defined as my right to be responsible, is really a question of identity (both individual and collective) more than it is a question of an individualized property right. Identity, as I have come to understand it, requires a relationship with territory (and not a relationship based on control of that territory). (p. 36)

Over and against settler colonial constructs of land as property, and of sovereignty as the political and social demarcation of territory over which one asserts exclusive jurisdiction and control, Indigenous scholars,

leaders, and Knowledge Keepers speak of sovereignty as living the powerful, complex, practiced, and sustaining relationships with specific lands that sustain them physically, relationally, culturally, spiritually, and as distinct peoples.

### **Settler Colonialism as a Structure of Erasure**

It is essential to hold in mind the integral importance of Indigenous relationships to their lands when seeking to understand the precise violence of settler colonialism, a structure and set of practices organized around an enduring imperative to elide, dismiss, deny, and extinguish these very relationships (Wolfe, 2006). Tuck, McKenzie, and McCoy (2014) distinguish settler colonialism in Canada from imperialism and forms of domination centred around the pillaging of resources,<sup>2</sup> describing it as a “form of colonization in which outsiders come to land inhabited by Indigenous peoples and claim it as their own new home” (p. 6). As an unfolding nation-making project tied to white supremacy, settler colonialism has drawn differently racialized peoples into its structures and logics over time: “Subsequent generations of settlers come to the settler nation-state for many reasons, under many circumstances—but at the heart of all of these rationales is the need for space and land” (Tuck et al, 2014, p. 6).

LaRocque (2010) elaborates the diverse strategies—political, legal, bureaucratic, geographical, cultural, military—that work in tandem to entrench this structure of invasion and erase the presence of First Peoples:

As the invasion deepens, the colonizer moves to protect and enhance his newly gained position of power. This is done in many ways...from the colonizer's perspective, ‘peopleing’ the ‘empty’ spaces, renaming the ‘natives’ and (their) landscape, building strategic points of entry and defence (i.e., forts), and occupying strategic roles as (re) educators, employers, and, gradually, as legislators. (p. 75)

Tuck, McKenzie, and McCoy (2014) further describe settler colonial states as characterized by their “refusal to recognize themselves as such, requiring a continual disavowal of history, Indigenous peoples’ resistance to settlement, Indigenous peoples’ claims to stolen land, and how settler colonialism is indeed ongoing, not an event contained in the past” (p. 7). As products and beneficiaries of settler regimes, individual settlers are similarly complicit in these processes of denial: “They do not consider themselves to be implicated in the continued settlement and occupation of unceded Indigenous land” (p. 7).

Settler colonialism sustains itself as a structure “by making Indigenous land into property” (Tuck et al., 2014, p. 7)<sup>3</sup> through a web of legal and bureaucratic processes, backed by police and military force, that actively target Indigenous understandings of land. Simpson (2013) traces the

cumulative impact of land being continually and deceptively redefined out from under the feet of Indigenous peoples:

Over the past two hundred years, without our permission and without our consent, we have been systematically removed and dispossessed from most of our territory. We have watched as our homeland has been cleared, subdivided, and sold to settlers from Toronto. We have watched our waterfronts disappear behind monster cottages...our most sacred places have been made into provincial parks for tourists, with concrete buildings over our teaching rocks. (p. 51)

As Manuel and Derrickson (2015) note, Indigenous peoples in Canada now control only 0.2 percent of the land while settlers control 99.8 percent: "It is the loss of our land that has been the precise cause of our impoverishment" (p. 8). According to LaRocque (2010), this process of dispossession is advancing with increasing speed and efficiency as a result of unfettered resource extraction and industrial capitalist development:

Native peoples continue to lose massive amounts of ecological space and resources to megaprojects to extract or produce hydroelectricity, lumber, gas and oil, and uranium and other minerals... Not only do Native peoples continue to lose their lands and resources, arguably the very ground of their cultural beings, but they, as a result, continue to lose their lives in disturbing proportions. (pp. 74-76)

Read in the context of what Indigenous peoples are saying about the vital and mutually-constitutive relationships they have with their lands, this extensive loss takes on a deeper meaning. When settler colonial practices and structures target the relationships of Indigenous peoples to their lands, the impact is pervasive, constituting attacks on Indigenous political orders (Coulthard & Simpson, 2016), laws (McAdam, 2015), cultures (McAdam, 2015), health (Manuel & Derrickson, 2015), economic survival (Manuel & Derrickson, 2015), and lives (Coulthard & Simpson, 2016). These practices also have devastating ecological consequences, as "environmental damage to the land/animals (through resource extraction, animal extinction, land clearance, and pollution) [is inherently] intertwined with socio-cultural genocide of the Indigenous peoples of the land" (Korteweg & Oakley, 2012; as cited in Tuck et al., 2014, p. 6). Circling back to Indigenous peoples' relational understandings of land, Simpson (2013) poignantly sums up the impact of this profound loss: "The land, our mother, has largely been taken from us" (p. 51).



### Social Work and Settler Colonialism

Although awareness of colonial realities is growing within social work, thanks largely to the efforts of Indigenous scholars, the profession as a whole remains slow to interrogate settler colonialism as an ongoing structure of dispossession in which social work itself is complicit. This complicity is manifested in myriad ways, including social work's surveillance and pathologization of Indigenous peoples (Weaver, 2000), and its imposition of Eurocentric helping frameworks and practices that displace Indigenous traditional helping systems (Carlson, 2016a; Hart, 2003; Weaver, 2010; Yellow Bird & Gray, 2010). Many scholars also highlight social work's implication in promoting agendas of assimilation: through administering 'Indian welfare' (Shewell, 2001, 2004); by participating in the forcible removal and transfer of Indigenous children to residential schools (Blackstock, 2009; Sinclair, 2004, 2007); and by orchestrating the separation of Indigenous children from their families and communities, through the 60s scoop (Sinclair, 2004) as well as on-going practices of child welfare and Indigenous child removal (Baskin, 2011; Blackstock, 2007, 2009; Sinclair, 2007, 2016; Waterfall, 2006).

In 2015, the Final Report of Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission highlighted this ongoing history of complicity, focusing its first four Calls to Action on the responsibility of social work as a profession, and of individual social workers, to root out colonizing practices, particularly in relation to Indigenous child welfare. The 2017 *Statement of Complicity and Commitment to Change* adopted by the Canadian Association for Social Work Education (CASWE-ACFTS), with its first commitment to "acknowledge that colonizing narratives, policies, and practices have been, and continue to be, embedded in social work education, research, and practice," represents an important initial response to these calls for accountability (CASWE-ACFTS, 2017). What remains marginal even in these analyses and declarations of complicity, however, is sustained attention to the role that social work processes and practices have played—and *continue to play*—in the dispossession of Indigenous peoples from their lands.

Indigenous scholars render explicit the interweaving of social work and Indigenous land dispossession. Sinclair (2016), for example, contends that the child welfare system—in which social work has played such a pivotal role—is part of a legal apparatus of assimilation that has been a "necessary precursor to land and resource acquisition" (p. 9) on the part of the Canadian state. Indeed, Mohawk scholar Marlene Brant Castellano (2009) states that the "link, as perceived by Aboriginal people, is pretty direct" (p. 6) between the colonial practices that social workers helped to implement and the broader colonial agenda to deal with Indigenous peoples as "an impediment to assertion of colonial authority over lands" (p. 6):

First responses were to deny that the original peoples were sufficiently evolved to have rights at all. When they mounted stiff resistance to displacement, treaties were introduced to pacify them and, in the view of colonial governments, to extinguish all rights. Just as Aboriginal claims to the land constituted a cloud on colonial jurisdiction, so the presence of peoples asserting those rights constituted an “Indian problem.” Official efforts to solve the Indian problem turned to eroding collective identity by aggressive assimilation, absorbing Indians into the body politic until there were no Indians. Since Aboriginal adults were likely to be too entrenched in their ways to be responsive, efforts were directed to their children. (p. 6)

Social workers also aligned with early social reformers in supporting policies of relocating Indigenous populations and promoting individual land ownership among Indigenous peoples as a means to assimilate them—policies which led to “approximately 2/3 of reservation land being lost to non-Native people” (Weaver, 2000, p. 8).

Yellow Bird and Gray (2010) argue as well that social work education colludes with settler colonial structures and agenda by failing to address the full range and extent of the atrocities perpetuated against Indigenous people, thus distorting and masking the true nature of settler-Indigenous relationships:

It is rare to find terms and readings that openly require social work students to undertake a serious and systematic investigation of how terms such as invasion, genocide, murder, occupation, takeover, imperialism, colonialism, decolonization, dispossession, reparation, apology, responsibility, justice, white supremacy, suppression, land and resource rights, spirituality, Aboriginal title, sovereignty and monetary compensation apply to Indigenous Peoples. (p. 64)

Thus, for us as social workers to fully take up and live up to the TRC’s *Calls to Action*, we need to begin by entering into deep and sustained learning about settler colonialism and its continuing “logic of elimination” (Wolfe, 2006, p. 388).

### **Environmentalism and Its Implication in Settler Colonial Practices**

Before considering how settler colonial assumptions play out in or are contested by environmentally-oriented forms of social work theory and practice, it is important to briefly explore how these assumptions are embedded in environmentalism more broadly. Many scholars and activists have explored environmentalists’ own complicity in settler colonial relations. Kitossa (2000), for example, critiques the ‘biocentrism,’ paternalism, and white supremacy that informs the practice of many (predominantly white) animal rights activists, environmentalists, and conservationists. In their quest to protect the environment, Kitossa argues, such actors often cast Indigenous hunting practices as barbaric,

thereby positioning themselves as knowing better how to protect the environment—this, notwithstanding that Indigenous peoples have cultivated and maintained respectful and reciprocal relationships with the lands and beings of their territories since time immemorial. Recognizing the importance of keeping Indigenous peoples and their rights and aspirations in the environmental frame, Kitossa notes: “[I]f we are to seriously ‘put nature first, this must be done by also putting Aboriginal peoples and rights first’” (p. 35).

Other scholars highlight the colonial narratives that circulate within mainstream environmental discourse in ways that frame settler environmentalists as rescuing saviours, or that enable them to claim ‘innocent’ ecological identities and forms of belonging to Indigenous lands through appropriations of stereotyped indigeneity (La Paperson, 2014). Simpson (2004) further notes the tendency among environmentally-oriented academics to co-opt traditional Indigenous ecological knowledge in ways that reify their privilege and marginalize Indigenous scholars and perspectives, all the while giving little attention to the wholistic contexts of this knowledge, based in Indigenous values, worldviews, spiritual understandings, and histories of dispossession, resistance and resurgence.

What’s more, Smith and Sterritt (2010) observe that settler environmental priorities and actions are often at odds with those of Indigenous peoples, noting the disparate goals between settler environmental organizations and Indigenous communities. Regarding the Great Bear Forest campaign, for example, mainstream environmental organizations “motivated by an aesthetic appreciation of nature” and a conservation ethic sought to “codify protection of remaining intact natural systems through mechanisms such as parks” (p. 145):

By contrast, the First Nations who have occupied the BC coast for at least 10,000 years, and have co-evolved with the ecosystems around them, held a more integrated view of nature. They carefully managed the abundant resources of both land and sea, relying on knowledge of seasonal cycles to harvest a wide variety of resources without depleting them. But while they had deep connections to—and concern for—the land, they also faced serious social and economic issues, many of them the legacies of colonization. First Nations’ vision of change thus involved both regaining control over their territories by asserting their title and rights, and addressing poverty by providing jobs for their communities. (p. 145)

As many scholars have noted, these divergent goals often provoke tensions between settler environmental activists and Indigenous communities regarding questions of authority, jurisdiction, and control (Davis, 2010). Without conscious efforts to interrogate and unsettle embedded colonial assumptions and relations, mainstream environmentalists can thus steamroll over the relationships of Indigenous peoples with their lands,

as well as Indigenous peoples' efforts to repatriate their lands, maintain their ways of life, and disrupt and recover from colonial assaults.

### **Tracing Settler Colonial Relations within Environmental Social Work Discourse**

As we now turn our attention to the ways these same settler colonial dynamics, assumptions, and agendas play out in, or are contested by, environmentally-oriented forms of social work theory and practice, we consider three frameworks of practice by examining how they are represented within prominent texts in the field. Specifically, we trace how each framework addresses settler colonialism and Indigenous dispossession as well as Indigenous sovereignty and rights and relations to land, as a contribution to ongoing efforts to uncover and disrupt the often unconscious ways in which we have been socialized to reify colonial relations. It is through listening closely to Indigenous peoples and reflecting together that we are able to move forward in this learning process and work together towards personal, collective, and structural decolonization.

#### *Eco-social Approaches*

We begin with eco-social work frameworks, which, in very broad strokes, seek to rework social work's foundational 'person-in-environment' paradigm by offsetting its over-emphasis on psychosocial dimensions with a more holistic recognition of the physical environment. Matthies and Närhi (2016) note: "One of the central theses in the ecosocial paradigm is that an environmental crisis is a social crisis, as it increases social inequality and causes the highest level of problems for the most vulnerable citizens in societies" (p. 4). From addressing public health crises arising from natural disasters, to advocating for the enforcement of environmental protections, to community practice involving community gardens and nature-based therapies, these approaches extend systems and ecological approaches and use social work's typical tools of the trade to seek to bring about an "ecologically and socially balanced society at the global and local level" (Matthies & Närhi, 2016, p. 3) that fosters sustainable human and social development (Hoff & McNutt, 1994; Hoff & Polack, 1993; Matthies, Närhi, & Ward, 2001). Like other systems-oriented frameworks, eco-social approaches focus on the disproportionate negative impact of development on marginalized peoples and promote social action to amplify marginalized voices in order to effect policy change (Matthies, Närhi, & Ward, 2001). Eco-social scholarship also foreshadows the development of eco-spiritual social work approaches in their critique of modernity and embrace of 'alternative' eco-feminist and Indigenous value systems (Hoff & Polack, 1993).

At first glance, given that Indigenous peoples have borne the brunt of the massive ecological degradation, poverty, and health and social impacts of unfettered hydroelectric, gas and oil, and extractive forms of development located in their territories—with Enbridge’s decision to re-route its pipeline near the Standing Rock Sioux reservation and away from the water supply of a nearby white settler community standing as but one startlingly clear example—eco-social work frameworks seem very pertinent to Indigenous realities and struggles. What stands out in reading key eco-social texts, however, is their limited engagement with Indigenous peoples’ land defense struggles. For example, a recent work by prominent eco-social scholars Matthies and Närhi, (2016) draws heavily from research in settler nations like Canada, the US, Finland, and Australia, but includes no Indigenous authors. These texts give little to no space to the specific struggles or perspectives of the Indigenous peoples, and no attention whatsoever to the particular processes of colonization that are unfolding in these contexts. Thus, borrowing from Lawrence and Dua’s (2005) analysis of the inattention of many forms of anti-racist activism to underlying dynamics of settler colonialism, eco-social frameworks also “fail to make Indigenous presence and ongoing colonization, particularly in the Americas, foundational to their analysis.” When Indigenous peoples do appear in these texts, they figure primarily as victims of environmental injustice—and thus as recipients of environmental social work interventions—or, as purveyors of cultural and spiritual knowledges that are framed as resources for dominant social workers. In sharp contrast to Indigenous cultures, knowledges, and philosophies, these approaches also remain solidly anthropocentric, with little focus on life systems apart from humans.

### *Eco-spiritual Approaches*

By contrast, eco-spiritual approaches to social work practice arise in relation to mounting ecological crises as well as the growing sense of human disconnection from ‘nature’ and ‘place’ that results from rampant consumerism (Jeffery, 2014, p. 492; see also Besthorn, 2004). These forms of practice draw upon Western ecological thought, critiques of modernity, ecofeminism, and spiritual discourses to once again reconfigure social work’s foundational notions of ‘person-in-environment,’ this time building practice foundations that “assume an interdependence and relatedness of all life, connectedness to nature, and the importance of place” (Coates, Gray, & Hetherington, 2003, p. 389; Besthorn & Canda, 2002; Zapf, 2012). Coates, Gray, and Hetherington (2003) suggest that it is this convergence of spiritual, ecological, and social work discourses that challenges individualism and Eurocentrism in social work and promotes holistic understandings of place that are “akin to that of traditional and indigenous societies and cultures” (p. 388). In this way, eco-spiritual social

work imagines itself as opening up a “welcoming space” within mainstream social work literature and discourse: one “where Indigenous peoples are finally being given a voice” (p. 388), and where “the important contribution made by traditional indigenous beliefs and values” (p. 390)—in particular, their spirit-informed, holistic relationships to land and place—can be recognized and given credibility.<sup>4</sup>

In moving beyond conceptualizing ‘land’ solely in terms of space and resources, these frameworks do create room for acknowledging Indigenous understandings of land as spiritual, cultural, and ontological; they also take seriously the call of Indigenous social workers to engage concertedly with Indigenous epistemologies, knowledges, and worldviews as a means of decolonizing both the profession and the broader society (Baskin, 2011). At the same time, notions of non-Indigenous social work scholars ‘lending credibility’ and ‘giving voice’ to Indigenous traditional knowledge holders smack of paternalism; they also sideline the decades-long efforts on the part of Indigenous scholars to challenge the colonizing politics of knowledge production in the academy (Battiste, 2000; Battiste & Henderson, 2000; Simpson, 2014). Further, efforts to demonstrate a compatibility between, or perhaps to integrate, Western (ostensibly ‘modern’) and Indigenous (ostensibly ‘traditional’) ecological thought risk erasing the specificity and incommensurability of Indigenous knowledges (Tuck & Yang, 2012), and reflect an arrogance on the part of non-Indigenous people to presume to ‘know’ Indigenous knowledges enough to be able to judge such an affinity.

While eco-spiritual approaches do address colonialism, they do so most often through critiques of “professional imperialism,” (Midgely, 1981) which posit as a solution practices of ‘indigenization’ conceived in relation to international social work: that is, as processes of adapting western social work to local cultures or contexts. This framing of indigenization collapses Indigeneity with ‘the local,’ pitting both as forms of resistance against an encroaching globalization of capital and culture. This conceptualization differs markedly from that offered by Indigenous scholars like Yellow Bird (2010), who defines Indigenization as “the personal and collective process of decolonizing Indigenous life and restoring true self-determination based on traditional Indigenous values” (pp. 286-7). While later work by eco-spiritual scholars moves away from the language of indigenization, perhaps in recognition of this tension (Gray & Hetherington, 2013), little effort continues to be made to differentiate colonialisms occurring in Africa or Asia from *settler* colonialism, with the result that colonialism itself is often conjured as *in the past*.

We echo Jeffery’s (2014, 2015) concern about the depoliticizing effects of eco-spiritual approaches that challenge the separation of (generic) humans from the earth while failing to address the power relations that subordinate Indigenous identities, denigrate or disappear

Indigenous cultures, and render Indigenous lands open to extraction, pillage, and devastating forms of development.<sup>5</sup> We particularly align with her critique of the ways in which eco-spiritual approaches circulate in social work classrooms, inviting students to imaginatively align themselves with the mythical ‘Ecological Indian’<sup>6</sup> while “critical considerations of ongoing colonialism, and the racist, harmful environmental practices that affect the *real* Indigenous subject, are sidestepped” (Jeffery, 2015, p. 74). For settlers, these identifications involve extracting aspects of Indigeneity that allow us to reconnect emotionally and spiritually to the land while leaving unchallenged the power relations and practices that secure our own privileged claims to the land. Thus, eco-spiritual approaches risk feeding into broader settler desires for an ‘innocent’ belonging to the land, effecting what Tuck and Yang (2012) refer to as “settler moves to innocence” (p. 9).

### *Environmental Justice Approaches*

By contrast, environmental justice frameworks in social work directly challenge this depoliticizing tendency. Hetherington and Boddy note that these approaches, drawing upon explicit human rights frameworks and building on and extending analyses of environmental racism (Bullard, 1993), analyze how “the devastation, trauma, and negative impacts [of industrial development and climate change] disproportionately affect the marginalized and oppressed populations that social workers serve—people in poverty, people of colour, women, Indigenous people, low-income urban neighbourhoods, rural communities, and older populations” (as cited in Melekis & Woodhouse, 2015, p. 574). Lena Dominelli (2012), one of the most prominent scholars in this field, adopts an explicitly anti-capitalist framework, attending to the ways in which neoliberal economics and the industrial forms of development that they precipitate lead to the destruction of ‘non-Industrial’ lifestyles and the Earth itself.

Dominelli’s (2012) foundational text, *Green social work*, traces the ways that environmental crises intersect with socioeconomic disparities, global interdependencies, and limited natural resources (Jeffery, 2014). It is also exemplary for the way that it attends to *current* colonial state practices, adopting an explicit Indigenous rights framework to consider the state agenda to collude with “those seeking the industrialization of wilderness lands, in the name of the greater good” (p. 333). In a refreshing turn, Dominelli highlights case studies of land defense movements led by Indigenous communities against mega-development projects on their territories. Thus, she positions Indigenous peoples not solely as victims but as leaders at the forefront of struggles to protect the land. Dominelli’s (2012) work also recognizes Indigenous relationships to their lands as simultaneously spiritual *and* political, specifying how spiritual connections to the land have sustained Indigenous peoples’ collective resistance to



“attacks on their ways of life and physical environment” (p. 313). What’s more, she considers “how Indigenous beliefs, particularly those of the First Nations in Canada and Maori in Aotearoa/New Zealand, have reframed social work practice as they sought to overcome colonialism, racism and genocide” (p. 314), offering lessons for practitioners. Her text situates social workers in a long line of activists and allies supporting Indigenous struggles, at the same time raising questions about Indigenous jurisdiction, the reiteration of colonial relations, and the critical importance of consultation to working with Indigenous communities.

And yet even Dominelli’s groundbreaking work reiterates settler colonial assumptions. At times, her text presents Indigenous knowledges reductively within a Western lens of sustainability, in ways that presuppose an unproblematic alignment with settler environmental efforts and aspirations. It also tends to frame Indigenous knowledges as ‘resources’ that non-Indigenous social workers can draw upon to “ensure that their practice is culturally aware and appropriate for use with particular diversities” (Dominelli, 2012, pp. 315-316).<sup>7</sup> While Dominelli advocates for social work practice to include a macro-level analysis of its history, this assertion lacks context and development. There is only cursory reference made, for example, to specific histories of dispossession, to histories of ‘settlement,’ or to the Treaties; there is also relatively little attention paid to Indigenous sovereignty, and what that might mean for environmental justice practice at every level. Further, there is little analysis of how settler colonialism works as an ongoing structure and set of practices that privileges settler governments as well as settler *peoples*—including social workers—in the present.

Jeffery (2014, 2015) offers a critique of environmental social work that perhaps best aligns with our own, taking up an explicitly anti-racist and anti-colonial analysis in calling for attention to “scholarship on Indigenous struggles around land-based politics, particularly within neoliberal contexts, scholarship that concerns itself with the points of intersection of Indigenous identity, the environment, and neoliberalism” (Jeffery, 2015, p. 87). While we appreciate Jeffery’s (2015) ‘cautionary tale’ about the appropriations of Indigenous subjectivities and knowledges that can happen when non-Indigenous social work students engage with Indigenous ecological knowledges, we are mindful too of calls on the part of Indigenous social work scholars for social work as a whole to be informed and transformed by Indigenous epistemologies, knowledges, worldviews, and pedagogies (Baskin, 2011); thus, we worry that Jeffery’s critique leaves little room for non-Indigenous social workers to engage with such knowledges as transformative frameworks for disrupting settler colonialism and its concomitant environmental destruction. Similarly, while Jeffery rightly calls for environmental social work to attend more closely to power relations tied to race, space, and Indigeneity as they play out in concrete conflicts over Indigenous lands, even this nuanced



analysis leaves unchallenged the legitimacy of Canada's assumptions of sovereignty and the benefits that social workers derive as settlers from ongoing colonization of Indigenous lands and peoples. Jeffery's analysis also gives little attention to the profound leadership of Indigenous peoples in protecting their territories and the planet as a whole.

Indeed, what remains missing within all of the environmentally-oriented social work frameworks we reviewed here is critical and sustained attention to two foundational realities: the pervasive imperative of settler colonialism to clear, claim, settle, and assert jurisdiction, control, and sovereignty over Indigenous lands, and Indigenous peoples' enduring and multifaceted resistance to that imperative. And so what might it look like to place analyses of settler colonialism, Indigenous land dispossession, and Indigenous resistance, resurgence, and sovereignty at the *centre* of environmental social work theory and practice? It is to this pivotal question that we now turn.

### **Centring Indigenous Sovereignty and Settler Colonialism within Environmental Social Work**

First, we must begin by recognizing that all efforts to address environmental injustice on lands occupied by the Canadian state occur on "territory that is Indigenous and which has been and continues to be subject to the forces of land-based settlement" (Tuck et al., 2014, p. 1). Recognizing Indigenous territory as an underlying principle implies challenging assumptions of 'terra nullius'<sup>8</sup> within environmental social work practice: in other words, it means asserting that in contexts of settler colonialism, there was no empty land prior to its 'discovery' and settlement, and hence there is no 'environment' that exists outside of the histories of colonization and Indigenous resistance and resurgence. All environmental social work practice must be viewed, then, as either disrupting or *reifying* dispossession.

Further, beyond simply expanding the environmental social work agenda to make more room for the perspectives and struggles of Indigenous peoples, centring Indigenous sovereignty calls for the centering of Indigenous cosmologies and their related concepts of land and land relationships in environmental practice (Tuck et al., 2014). It also demands a thorough soul-searching regarding social work's implication in colonial practices (Baskin, 2011; Blackstock, 2009; Carlson, 2016a; Hart, 2003; Sinclair, 2007; Weaver, 2010; Yellow Bird & Gray, 2010), with special attention to rooting out social work discourses and practices that "justify settler occupation of stolen land, or encourage the replacement of Indigenous peoples and relations to land with settlers and relations of property" (Tuck et al., 2014, p. 8; see also Weaver, 2000, p. 8). Further, centring Indigenous sovereignty requires challenging colonial assumptions about who is in charge, who sets the terms and agenda, and who defines the discourse, narratives, and meanings around environmental work

(Davis & Shpuniarsky, 2010; Kitossa, 2000; La Paperson, 2014; Simpson, 2004; Smith & Sterritt, 2010; Weaver, 2000), and recognizing that settler and Indigenous aspirations and solidarities in land defence must always “be approached as incommensurable but not incompatible” (Snelgrove, Kaur Dhamoon, & Cornthassel, 2014, p. 30). Thus, just as ecological social work models call for a reworking of social work’s foundational ‘person-in-environment’ framework to offset an over-emphasis upon the social with a fuller recognition of ecology and place, so too a centring of Indigenous sovereignty and relations to land within environmental social work requires a fundamental rethinking of our practice foundations. Beyond ‘person-in-environment’ or even ‘person-in-place,’ we are invited to consider what it might mean to imagine our practice as centred on ‘person-in-place-on-Indigenous-land-and-in-Indigenous-sovereignty.’

As a radical shifting of our accountabilities (Alfred, 2014, 40:30-41:08), centring Indigenous sovereignty also asks that we as social work scholars, educators, and practitioners reconsider the existential frameworks we hold for our lives and work, beginning by asking ourselves critical questions: “What are the colonial pathways that bring [us as settler] people into this land? ...What is our relationship to settler colonialism, to Indigenous survivance and tribal sovereignty?” (La Paperson, 2014, p. 128). We are challenged to come to understand ourselves as living on Indigenous lands and within spaces of Indigenous sovereignty, and learn to behave in accordance with these beliefs (Carlson, 2016b; Hiller, 2013; see also Klein, 2016). As Mills (2016) contends, living this understanding entails “not merely making space for indigenous voices but acting, choosing, thinking, and feeling as if what those voices say about this land and how to live on it really matters” (para. 27). It involves a willingness to learn, engage with, and beholden ourselves to the calls we hear from Indigenous scholars and Knowledge Keepers to live in accordance with the law of the peoples on whose land we abide (Borrows, 2005; Johnson, 2007). McAdam (2015) emphasizes the necessity of non-Indigenous peoples following these laws, which include those instructing humans to avoid causing pain or suffering to animals, wasting animal products, over-harvesting trees, or polluting the environment.

To centre Indigenous sovereignty within environmental social work also entails recognizing that we live and work in *treaty* territories. Envisioned in light of Indigenous oral tradition,<sup>9</sup> treaty relationships also entail responsibilities to learn to know and care for the land: “The treaties that gave your family the right to occupy this territory were also an opportunity for you to learn how to live in this territory” (Johnson, 2007, p. 21). Anishinaabe scholar Niigaan Sinclair (2014) elucidates these relations further, noting that when Anishinaabe peoples signed treaties, they often did so with their clan symbols, demonstrating that the newcomers were signing into responsibilities to those clan animals, and thereby to the natural world where they live. Thus, treaties reflect

obligations on the part of non-Indigenous people to also care for and relate to the waters, the land, and the animals. Further, reconfiguring environmental social work to disrupt settler colonialism and uphold Indigenous sovereignty entails foregrounding the incredible survivance and profound leadership of Indigenous peoples in the face of centuries of encroachment and environmental devastation. Coulthard and Simpson (2016) describe the “fierce and loving mobilization” of Indigenous peoples since the time of first contact:

Indigenous resistance and resurgence in response to the dispossessive forces of settler colonization, in both historical and current manifestations, employ measures and tactics designed to protect Indigenous territories and to reconnect Indigenous bodies to land through the practices and forms of knowledge that these practices continuously regenerate. (p. 254)

Not only does following and seeking to support this Indigenous leadership in land defense disrupt colonial dynamics and respect Indigenous sovereignty, but it may actually be our best hope for the planet’s survival. Indigenous rights—those recognized domestically through successive Supreme Court decisions and internationally through the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, as the result of decades of hard-fought battles in the courts and on the ground—remain some of the most significant legal mechanisms available for putting a brake on environmentally-damaging forms of resource development. In particular, the requirement under the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* that states gain the free, prior, and informed consent of Indigenous nations before moving forward with major resource development projects has been successfully drawn upon by Indigenous peoples to forestall or halt such developments (Jones, 2016). Currently, 85 First Nations in Canada have come together to form their own treaty, committing to standing together to oppose new oil pipeline projects through their collective territories.

Lukacs (2013) notes that while Indigenous peoples attempting to retain control over resource extraction on their lands have long had the law on their side, it is Indigenous-led social movements like *Idle No More* that have forced a reluctant Canadian government to respect their territories and self-determination.<sup>10</sup> Reflecting on the increasing range and efficacy of Indigenous resistance, Lukacs quotes Arthur Manuel: “The people on the land, the grassroots people fighting pipelines and industrial projects ... will determine what governments can or cannot do on the land” (para. 10). Thus, Lukacs (2013) concludes, “First Nations people—and the decision of Canadians to stand alongside them—will determine the fate of the planet” (para. 14):

Implementing Indigenous rights on the ground, starting with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, could tilt the balance of stewardship over a vast geography: giving Indigenous peoples much more control, and paying off Canada's enormous legal debt to First Nations: it is also our best chance to save entire territories from endless extraction and destruction. (para. 14)

Suzuki (2015) echoes Lukacs's conclusion, but draws on a different line of reasoning. He argues that while settler environmentalism is informed by Western knowledges that exhort us to "work hard, fish, log, farm, mine, use the land to make money" (para. 7), exploit lands, and then move to new lands, Indigenous peoples' efforts are most often grounded in Indigenous knowledges and cultures that allowed them to live within their means on their traditional lands for millennia. Given this grounding, Suzuki concludes, Indigenous peoples have what it takes to lead efforts to protect the planet.

## Conclusion

Yellow Bird and Gray (2010) pointedly challenge social workers to move beyond forms of practice that tinker with—or worse, promote adaptation to—the settler colonial status quo; they call instead for forms of practice that unsettle settler privilege, address the fraudulence and injustice at the root of the settler state and its claims to land and sovereignty, and work concretely for the recognition of Indigenous sovereignty, self-determination, and return of Indigenous lands (Yellow Bird and Gray, 2010). Yellow Bird (2013) offers a stark choice to social workers which is particularly applicable to those who attend to the environment in their work and discourse:

Indigenous peoples have and will continue to survive and resist further incursions into their territories, natural resources, sacred sites, languages, beliefs, values, networks and systems of governance, intellectual property rights and sovereignty. Social workers have the opportunity either to support Indigenous rights or to continue with practices that further erode them. (p. xxii)

Inspired and challenged by Yellow Bird and Gray, we conclude that settler colonialism and Indigenous sovereignty must be foregrounded and attended to as primary contexts for Canadian environmental social work. As social workers living and working in Indigenous territories, we cannot ethically engage with environmentalism without also understanding and resisting settler colonialism, how it contributes to ecological destruction, and our implication in upholding its structure and practices; nor can we work to address environmental issues unfolding on Indigenous lands—that is, *all* of the land currently occupied by the Canadian state—without

also engaging with and respecting Indigenous sovereignty and Indigenous relationships with their land. To do otherwise is to replicate and reproduce colonial relations in our very quest to engage with and protect the environment.

## END NOTES

- 1 Alfred (2006), for one, worries about the colonizing effects of articulating Indigenous realities and aspirations using what he deems “an exclusionary concept rooted in an adversarial and coercive Western notion of power” (p. 325).
- 2 We refer here to “exploitation colonialism” or “external colonization,” which is characterized by “small numbers of colonizers go to a new place in order to dominate a local labor force to harvest resources to send back to the metropole” (Tuck et al., 2014, p. 6).
- 3 For a more extensive discussion of the ways that power relations constitutive of settler colonialism “include settler/Indigenous, but also the hegemony of [white] settlers over [racialized] non-Indigenous workers,” see Tuck et al., 2014, p. 7; Lawrence & Dua, 2005).
- 4 This imagined affinity between Indigenous thought and eco-spiritual social work is seen as opening up cross-cultural encounters that ultimately help social work respond differently to diversity (Coates et. al., 2003).
- 5 The effect of this depoliticization is evident in cursory comparison of the tables of content and indexes of two books produced by prominent scholars in the field of eco-spiritual social work. The first text (Gray, Coates, Yellow Bird, Hetherington, 2013) focusing on how the intersection of ecology and spirituality can inform the decolonization of social work practice, features many chapters by Indigenous authors; apart from a powerful preface offered by Yellow Bird (2013) and a few references to land rights cases, concrete and material land relations are largely omitted by this book. In a second text by these authors (Gray, Coates, & Hetherington, 2013) that aims to map the terrain of concrete practices under the rubric of ‘environmental social work,’ Indigenous people do not appear at all as authors; instead, they figure primarily either as victims of environmental injustice and as thus, recipients of environmental social work interventions, or as purveyors of cultural and spiritual knowledges that ultimately serve as resources to inform the practice of dominant social worker researchers and activists—those insidiously positioned as the real actors for environmental justice.
- 6 Jeffery (2014) draws upon the work of anthropologist and Native Studies professor Paul Nadasdy, who highlights the ways that non-Indigenous environmentalists across a wide political spectrum make use of notions of the “ecologically noble savage”—whether as “original conservationist” or as “subversive figure, one who holds the philosophical keys to environmental revolution”—in order to constitute and short up their own identities: “From whatever point on the environmental spectrum they hail, it seems, environmentalists invoking the image of ecological nobility seek to locate indigenous peoples beside themselves on the environmentalist spectrum” (Nadasdy, 2005; cited p. 495).

- 7 This commodification of knowledge is particularly problematic when it becomes detached from settler colonial frameworks, inadvertently supporting an uncritical “re-inhabitation” (Gruenewald, 2003) of Indigenous lands by non-Indigenous people who find themselves alienated from land and place in the wake of global capitalism:  
[Indigenous peoples’] knowledge and insights can yield insights that might help social workers working in densely populated urban areas to: assist city dwellers in reconnecting to the physical world; enable people inhabiting rural settings to promote endeavours that modernize or industrialize agriculture in sustainable ways; and prevent the mass migration of young people from rural villages to the urban centres of large cities to earn their livelihoods. (Dominelli, 2012, p. 314).
- 8 According to Miller (Shawnee) (2016), “This Latin phrase means a land or earth that is vacant or empty. Under the *Doctrine* [of Discovery], if lands were not occupied by any person or nation, or even if they were occupied but they were not being used in a manner that European legal systems approved of, then the lands were vacant and available for discovery claims. Europeans often considered lands that were actually owned, occupied, and being used by Indigenous nations to be vacant and empty” (p. 24).
- 9 Here, in opposition to constructions of Treaties as land surrender documents, we adhere to Indigenous treaty perspectives informed by oral traditions, in which Elders indicate, “The land was to be shared with the newcomers but that did not mean a loss of ownership” (Office of the Treaty Commissioner, 2007, p. 18).
- 10 *Idle No More*, as one critical example, mounted the only large scale resistance to a suite of federal legislation that threatened to delimit Indigenous rights and dismantle environmental protections for hundreds of at-risk lakes and waterways nationwide and inspiring similar actions of solidarity around the globe (The Kino-Nda-Niimi Collective, 2014).

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