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“Looking out from Anishinaabe territory”: Thoughts on the Important Contributions of *Dammed*

JARVIS BROWNLIE

Looking out from Anishinaabe territory, I did not see isolated resources being extracted for central consumption. Instead, I saw an Anishinaabe centre being disrupted to serve a competing settlement. The history shared within these pages reflects the voices of survivors, people who traversed reserve boundaries to harvest and to feast and who experienced the compound damages of treaty mismanagement and exclusion from decision making. They, like other Indigenous communities, experienced decreased opportunities on reserve while many Canadians prospered. I am writing today because my ancestors – like many other families from Treaty 3 territory – responded creatively to environmental change. I am writing to commemorate their strength.¹

With these perspective-shifting words, Dr. Brittany Luby’s brilliant monograph *Dammed* announces its critique of a Canadian postwar historiography that emphasizes general “postwar affluence,” ignores or marginalizes Indigenous experience, and fails to acknowledge either the racial specificity or the colonial basis of mainstream prosperity. The wealth and opportunity that so many enjoyed after the Second World War not only did not extend to her people, the Anishinabeg of Niisaachewan, but were actually created partly at their expense. In centring Anishinaabe experience and perspectives, the book insists that they be granted space and recognition in our understanding of Canada’s past. This approach operates as a powerful corrective to the standard practice within Canadian historiography and public discourse of treating Anishinaabe communities as “peripheral,” as the “remote,” “isolated” places where resources could be found and extracted to enrich the “centre.” Moreover, it effectively reasserts the meaningfulness and continuing reality of Anishinaabe identities and territorial boundaries: “Postwar development is said to have occurred in ‘peripheral’ spaces or spaces without social and economic systems valued by settler-colonists. This definition of space has assumed a shared citi-

zenship across these two zones (centre and periphery), normalizing colonial conceptions of space that overwrote Indigenous homelands.”²

Dammed is the kind of history book I was hoping to read years ago, when I set out to learn about the history of Indigenous peoples and colonization in Canada. Deeply anchored in Luby’s community and family history, informed and guided by the knowledge of community Elders, this book expresses an Anishinaabe perspective on both Anishinaabe history and Canadian and colonial history. It also turns Canadian historiography on its head, showing how one of the most pervasive narratives about the second half of the twentieth century not only elides her community’s experience but also fails to acknowledge the extent to which the dispossession of Anishinaabe people and appropriation of their resources — an experience they shared with many other Indigenous peoples — created the very conditions for that postwar prosperity. The book “demonstrates how federal and provincial actors removed resources from Indigenous communities and reduced the income-generating potential of Indigenous families specifically to benefit Anglo-settlers generally. Postwar Canada was not an affluent society; it was (and it remains) a colonial one.”³

Reading Luby’s words in Winnipeg, Treaty 1 territory, I am located only a few hours’ drive from Niisaachewan (formerly Indian Reserve Dalles 38C), in Treaty 3 territory. Within my own geographic and research context, I am better placed than many Canadians to appreciate the wide applicability of Luby’s observations about the Niisaachewan Anishinabeg’s experience of colonization. Anishinaabe, Ininiw, Ithine, Dakota, Métis, Oji-Cree, and Dene peoples in Manitoba can all point to similar or parallel experiences by which resources, security, and opportunity were transferred from their own communities to non-Indigenous Canadians. As I write, the electricity powering my computer continues to flow from northern Manitoba, where it is generated at great cost to Ininiw and Ithine peoples’ lifeways, food sources, economies, and health.⁴ My drinking glass holds water that is piped to Winnipeg from Shoal Lake at the expense of the Shoal Lake 40 Anishinaabe community, whose reserve was cut off from the mainland and from clean drinking water by the aqueduct constructed to sustain the big city.⁵ As a researcher working with Ininiw and Ithine people, I have personally heard the stories about the harms to every aspect of life caused by hydro dams and operations in their territories. One element that looms large in both Manitoba hydro-affected communities and Luby’s account of Niisaachewan history is the loss of

food sovereignty: colonialism's drastic erosion of the people's ability to obtain the healthy, nutritious country food that sustained their communities for millennia, and the cascading harms that follow. *Dammed* shows the links between hunger and parents' desperate decision to send their children to residential schools, where they believed the children would at least have enough to eat. It shows how the contamination of rivers due to dams and sewage-dumping made their timeless staple of fish unsafe to eat, and how breastfeeding mothers lost access to the whitefish that helped them produce healthy, abundant milk for their babies: "The collapse of household economies experienced by the Anishinabeg is part of the story of twentieth-century colonization and industrialization in Canada."⁶

Thus, this monograph contributes to historical understanding first and foremost by documenting the great harm caused to an Anishinaabe community by the damming of rivers, initially for industry and later for hydropower. Though scholars have produced some excellent work on the impacts of damming and polluting waterways, which have been extremely common phenomena in Canada, there is much more work to be done.⁷ Indeed, the fact that so much of the extensive environmental damage caused by industrial society has occurred on Indigenous lands, out of sight of the urban and agricultural majority population, undoubtedly slowed the recognition of that harm by those in "the centre." As Luby notes, ecological harm is another element of the unequally distributed costs and benefits of postwar expansion: "The cost of affluence was disproportionately borne in Canada: although status Indians accounted for only 1.2 per cent of population, most environmental damage occurred on their lands."⁸ While the hydro industry has been remarkably successful in presenting its product as clean, green energy, *Dammed* exposes the reality of its extensive damage to lands, forests, waterways, and ecosystems. In the case of the Niisaachewan Anishinaabe Nation, the water contamination and severe water fluctuations brought by the dams wrought havoc, impairing the people's ability to move around their land and waters safely and harming many of the animals and plants on which they depended. Two of their major food staples, fish and *manomin* (wild rice), were both dependent on the river and were severely reduced by the manipulation of water levels. Eventually, the dams' cascading effects caused the collapse of the community and forced the people to move away to survive, despite their reluctance to abandon their ancestral territory. For a time, in fact, no one lived on the Dalles 38C reserve because it was

impossible to survive there. This outcome, of course, fulfilled several of the main goals of Canadian policy toward Indigenous peoples: to remove them from their territories, disperse their communities, and try to absorb them into an imagined homogeneous Euro-Canadian society. The people of Niisaachewan resisted dispersing as long as they could, and they returned as soon as possible to reclaim their land and waters. A reconstituted community living on the reserve is now working to reverse the harms their community suffered and to establish a relationship with surrounding industry, including the electrical utility, to minimize future harm and facilitate the restoration of the *manomin*.⁹

In documenting the multiple effects of dams, water contamination, and water level manipulations, Luby also shows how crucial water and waterways were to Anishinaabe society: “It is by water that my ancestors, the Anishinabeg, inhabited this place.”¹⁰ The book demonstrates the centrality of rights to water in Anishinaabe negotiations with traders and government officials, stemming from the community’s deep sense of entitlement to access, use, and practise stewardship of waters that not only nourished fish and other sources of food and medicine but also facilitated movement and transportation around their territories. In treaty negotiations and subsequent ongoing attempts to uphold Treaty 3, the people asserted their right to harvest the waters and to have a say in resource use connected to the waters. When the Province of Ontario decided to expand the extractive economy in the north, one of its first moves was to use legislation to expropriate the Anishinabeg’s control of waterways running through or around their reserves, declaring a new principle that violated the Anishinabeg’s understanding of rights they had secured through treaty: Waterways “shall not . . . form part of such reserve[s].”¹¹

While the book makes important contributions through its well-developed analysis of the impacts of dams and hydropower on the Niisaachewan Anishinabeg, there is much more to this book. The remainder of this commentary focuses on two main areas: Dr. Luby’s well-aimed critiques of Canadian historiography (some already discussed); and her research methods, including her handling of oral, community-based knowledge.

The book makes important arguments about Indigenous responses to colonialism. Luby takes exception to the common tendency in historical literature to focus mainly or solely on the most visible responses, especially overt acts of resistance to colonial measures or agents (which also, I would add, tend to be the actions most

similar to European-style political contention, such as legal measures, direct action, and lobbying government). To her, these are only one part of a much broader range of responses, many of which were aimed less at altering government policies and more at securing survival and maintaining occupation and stewardship of the homeland. Her analysis recognizes a broad spectrum of measures and actions as responses to colonization, including changes in economic strategies such as selling blueberries and opening bank accounts, or taking wage labour jobs, including with the hydroelectric utility, to earn cash to help maintain families living on the reserve. She notes, “To date, Canadian historians have largely ignored moderate responses to settler-colonialism. Moderate actors worked for change outside the Canadian legal system. They worked within their communities or their families to manage environmental change. A refusal to operate within the Canadian state might have been an Anishinaabe expression of sovereignty: moderate actors sought change from within their ancestral territories.”¹² This persistence and creative adaptation within the ancestral territory, she notes, not only maintained the connection with the land, animals, and water, but preserved a sense of the community’s original territorial boundaries: “Although moderate action was largely ineffective in achieving legislative change in Canada, it operated within and thus reinforced precolonial boundaries (an Anishinaabe homeland).”¹³ Acting as Anishinaabe people inhabiting and protecting their ancient territory, she points out, also functioned to preserve the distinctive character of this particular Anishinaabe community and show community members acting on Anishinaabe principles to maintain themselves and exercise their treaty rights. By contrast, the pan-Indigenous activism of the 1960s and 1970s tended to override cultural distinctiveness and argue on the basis of colonial law and categories: “Ironically, unified resistance in the 1960s required a suspension of unique interests – Anishinaabe activists demanded better treatment as ‘Indians’ under the Indian Act, not as a treaty nation.”¹⁴

Dr. Luby offers a series of crucial correctives to Canadian historiography, especially the overview histories that attempt to provide broad generalizations about the country’s past. In addition to her critique of the “postwar prosperity” narrative and its exclusions, the book takes on the literature’s persistent tendency to naturalize Indigenous poverty or rely on a limited set of explanations based on structural factors such as land allocation. For instance, historians have cited poor soil on reserves, geographic isolation, Indian Affairs policies, or “refusal

to participate in the free-market economy” as causes of Indigenous impoverishment. While such factors did operate in some places, especially in southern locations where hunting and fishing economies were quickly destroyed, Luby notes that many Indigenous hunting and gathering economies remained robust well into the twentieth century. However, she demonstrates that, after 1945, Anishinaabe economies began to show increasing negative effects from government policies that prioritized the well-being of others: “Endemic poverty on reserves resulted from federal and provincial postwar policies undertaken for the ‘common good.’ This narrative was used to justify development on Indigenous lands and overshadowed alternative narratives of Indigenous Peoples who suffered to provide power for settler-colonists who resided in urban centres.”¹⁵ The disruption and contamination of rivers in Anishinaabe territory destroyed access to several of the traditional dietary staples, including wild rice, whitefish, and other fish species, while also making travel hazardous, so that other subsistence and cash-generating activities, such as trapping and hunting, became difficult to maintain. The result was poverty and hunger that resulted directly from the activities of outsiders on Anishinaabe territories.

In terms of methodology, Dr. Luby’s thoughtful approach to community knowledge provides a significant model for other researchers to follow. Her approach was to be guided by Elders in her research methods and understanding of the history but to rely to a large extent on archival and other documentary records to prove her points. Thus, she conversed extensively with knowledgeable community Elders about the community’s history and then followed their direction to unearth evidence as much as possible from documentary sources located in archives and other records repositories. Such documentary sources offered proof of the Elders’ historical knowledge, without quoting extensively from community oral history. The approach was designed to protect the Elders and the community from misunderstanding or misuse of their words: “This decision reflects community fears that Canada and Ontario could appropriate Elders’ knowledge, using it against the Anishinabeg during negotiations about land (mis) use or in court.”¹⁶ Such fears are founded in concrete experiences of the practices of government officials and lawyers, who have sought out oral history interviews with Elders in search of words or phrases or omissions that they can use against the Elders’ own communities in court.¹⁷ It is also true that written documentary evidence is much more readily accepted in many Canadian courts, which still struggle

to overcome the western bias in favour of written records and against oral history, despite the well-known Supreme Court injunction to “place oral history on an equal footing” with written documents.¹⁸ While government lawyers have long sought to discredit Indigenous oral history, written documentary evidence is often treated much less critically.¹⁹ In addition, the Elders told her that they feared outsiders would not have enough knowledge to interpret their words accurately. It is not possible for Elders to foresee all the ways that their words could be misinterpreted or instrumentalized in the future, so a solution was found to protect the Elders’ knowledge while using written records, many produced by Euro-Canadians, that corroborated their accounts of key historical processes and experiences.

The insights and innovations of this book, methodological, empirical, and epistemological, will make it valuable for many years to come. I look forward to the future contributions of this important scholar and to many sessions with my future students discussing the virtues of *Dammed*.

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Endnotes

- 1 Brittany Luby, *Dammed: The Politics of Loss and Survival in Anishinaabe Territory* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2020), 16.
- 2 Luby, *Dammed*, 167.
- 3 Luby, 12–13.
- 4 For information on these costs, see: the information and community stories at hydroimpacted.ca; Thibault Martin and Steven M. Hoffman, eds., *Power Struggles: Hydro Development and First Nations in Manitoba and Quebec* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2009); Martin Loney, “Social Problems, Community Trauma and Hydro Project Impacts,” *Canadian Journal of Native Studies* 15, no. 2 (1995): 231–54; James Waldram, *As Long as the Rivers Run: Hydroelectric Development and Native Communities in Western Canada* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1988); Jean-Luc Chodkiewicz and Jennifer Brown, *First Nations and Hydroelectric Development in Northern Manitoba: The Northern Flood Agreement: Issues and Implications* (Winnipeg: Rupert’s Land Publication Series, 1999).
- 5 See Adele Perry, *Aqueduct: Colonialism, Resources, and the Histories We Remember* (Winnipeg: Arbeiter Ring, 2016).
- 6 Luby, *Dammed*, 6.
- 7 Some important works include: Jennifer Bonnell, *Reclaiming the Don: An Environmental History of Toronto’s Don River Valley* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014); Randy Boswell, “Cholera, the ‘Sawdust Menace,’ and the River Doctor: How Fear of an Epidemic Triggered Canada’s First ‘Pollution’ Controversy,” *Histoire sociale/Social History* 49, no. 100 (November 2016): 503–42; R. Peter Gillis, “Rivers of Sawdust: The Battle over Industrial Pollution in Canada, 1865–1903,” in *Canadian Environmental History*, ed. David F. Duke (Toronto: Canadian Scholars’ Press, 2006); Tina Loo, “Disturbing the Peace: Environmental Change and the Scales of Justice on a Northern River,” *Environmental History* 12, no. 4 (October 2007), 895–919.
- 8 Luby, *Dammed*, 12.
- 9 “Our community is going to start demanding active consultation with the Lake of the Woods Control Board and Ontario Power Generation. We want to negotiate flooding that respects our growing season, our spawning season, and our economy. We want a future that includes rice and sturgeon.” Chief Lorraine Cobiness, foreword to Luby, *Dammed*, xiv.
- 10 Luby, *Dammed*, 3.
- 11 An Act to Confirm the Title of the Government of Canada to Certain Land and Indian Lands, SO 1915, c. 12; Luby, *Dammed*, 18.
- 12 Luby, *Dammed*, 170.
- 13 Luby, 170.

- 14 Luby, 170.
- 15 Luby, 167.
- 16 Luby, 13–14.
- 17 See *Canada v. Benoit*, 2003, FCA 236, particularly paragraphs 27–54, at <https://decisions.fca-caf.gc.ca/fca-caf/decisions/en/item/32346/index.do>. This approach was particularly fruitful for the Canadian and Alberta governments in overturning a lower court decision that ruled Treaty 8 nations had been promised exemption from taxes. Lawyers for the governments argued that many oral histories made no mention of the tax issue and thus obtained an appeal ruling that no tax exemption existed, despite the treaty commissioners' written statement that they had assured the Indigenous parties that the treaty would not lead to their being taxed.
- 18 For the ruling on oral history, see *Delgamuukw v. British Columbia*, 1997, 3 S.C.R., 1010, paragraph 87. On the courts' difficulties with oral history, see, for instance: R.J. Brownlie, "Disciplining Orality: Alexander von Gernet and the Crown's Invalidation of Aboriginal Oral History in Canadian Litigation," *Native Studies Review* 23, no. 1/2 (2016): 1–33; Andie Diane Palmer, "Evidence 'Not in a Form Familiar to Common Law Courts': Assessing Oral Histories in Land Claims Testimony after *Delgamuukw v. B.C.*," *Alberta Law Review* 38, no. 4 (2000); John Borrows, "Listening for a Change: The Courts and Oral Tradition," *Osgoode Hall Law Journal* 39, no. 1 (2001): 1–38.
- 19 See, for instance: David Milward, "Doubting What the Elders Have To Say: A Critical Examination of Canadian Judicial Treatment of Aboriginal Oral History Evidence," *International Journal of Evidence and Proof* 14 (2010): 287–325; Robin Fisher, "Judging History: Reflections on the Reasons for Judgment in *Delgamuukw v. B.C.*," *B.C. Studies* 95 (Autumn 1992): 43–54.