

Peace and Friendship on the Sipekne'katik: Treaty as a Transformational Practice in the Resistance against Alton Gas

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Abstract

Drawing on the successes of the Mi'kmaq-led struggle against the Alton Gas natural gas storage project from 2014-21, this paper proposes the Peace and Friendship Treaties as the



relational framework best equipped to address the worsening climate crisis and build liveable futures in Mi'kma'ki. We argue that existing government and social movement approaches have been unable to adequately arrest climate pollution, and often work to reinscribe the settler-colonial land relations at the heart of intersecting socio-ecological crises. The Treaty Truckhouse movement, which emerged from the successful resistance to Alton Gas, however, builds a resurgent geography capable of addressing both climate change and settler-colonialism in the way that it holds Mi'kmaw and settlers together in evolving relations of care that embrace relational responsibilities to the lands, waters, and climate. The paper draws on both research interviews with people involved in climate action in Mi'kma'ki and on the authors' own involvement with the movement.

Keywords

climate change, decarbonization, Indigenous sovereignty, just transition, Mi'kma'ki, treaty implementation

Introduction

As the climate and environmental crises worsen, intellectuals and movements have looked to Indigenous rights and settler-Indigenous alliances as promising avenues for stopping fossil fuel infrastructure and to protect land and water. In her influential book *This Changes Everything*, Klein emphasizes the strategic importance of Indigenous rights to "blockadia" - movements of everyday people blocking extractive projects that threaten livelihoods and the environment. Writing about the 2013 anti-fracking protests led by the Elsipogtog First Nation, she observed that "... many in the province had come to understand that the Mi'kmaq's [sic] rights to use their traditional lands and waters to hunt and fish . . . represented the best hope for the majority of New Brunswickers who opposed fracking" since Indigenous rights "are not dependent on the whims of politicians" (Klein 2014, 374). Similarly, Grossman points to the political and economic power inherent in Indigenous sovereignty and treaty rights claiming that "[l]ocal-scale environmental campaigns can be "supersized" into larger-scale campaigns when and if tribal nations get involved" (2019, 50). In such accounts, Indigenous rights are presented in a somewhat instrumental fashion, as tools in the last line of defense against environmental and climate collapse, capable of rescuing settler civilization as we know it.

We begin this paper on the banks of the Sipekne'katik River (in so-called Canada), where one such alliance between settlers and Mi'kmaq successfully stopped Alton Gas' proposed natural gas storage project, which threatened the river and the climate alike. Shaped by Indigenous sovereignty and reverence for the water, it was on these fertile banks that the "Treaty Truckhouse Resistance" was born. And while the movement certainly strategically mobilized Indigenous rights, it also advanced an emancipatory framework for living well rooted in the Peace and Friendship Treaties. These sacred agreements did not cede territory to settler governments but instead delineated respectful relations between Mi'kmaq, settlers, and Mi'kma'ki's lands and waters. In 2016, Mi'kmaq (or L'nuk) people built a Treaty Truckhouse here - a small structure outlined in the treaty as a protected place for Mi'kmaq people to meet with settlers and engage in trade. The Truckhouse became a key

representation and enactment of a transformational mode of struggle allying settlers and Mi'kmaq people around the relational framework of Peace and Friendship. Faced with this treaty-based resistance, Alton Gas eventually abandoned their project and the movement claimed an important win in 2021.



Figure 1. Credit: Treaty Education in Nova Scotia (2024). Designed and illustrated by Googoo Design. The dotted lines do not denote exact locations but suggest general proximity.

This paper is energized by the transformational resistance movement anchored at the Treaty Truckhouse, a resurgent geography (Estes 2019a, 253) that envisions a bold transition away from fossil fuels. Through the Treaty Truckhouse struggle, this paper shows how Indigenous sovereignty and the Peace and Friendship Treaties are so much more than tools to be wielded in the service of climate mitigation. In fact, the Treaty Truckhouse Movement compels us to imagine and demand “otherwise,” not just away from fossil fuels, but beyond a doomed way of relating to the lands, waters and one another (Danewid 2023; Sharpe 2016).

Engaging with the Treaty Truckhouse movement, imbued with the Indigenous politics of water protection, we argue that deep settler engagement with the relational practices laid out in the Peace and Friendship Treaties will be necessary to enact the collective practices of care that can lead us through and beyond the climate crisis together (Bernard 2018; Yazzie and Baldy 2018). Treaty here is understood not as a transactional document, but as a set of emancipatory relational practices that refuse ongoing settler-colonial violence through shared respect for our more-than-human relations and the enactment of reciprocal responsibilities for mutual flourishing (Bernard 2018; Starblanket 2020; Snelgrove 2022).

This paper proceeds by locating our scholarship in the tradition of two bodies of literature – the first explains the climate crisis as a product of colonialism and the second posits treaty implementation as a way of addressing broken relations between humans and the land. Next we explain the emancipatory project enacted through the Treaty Truckhouse Resistance that stopped Alton Gas. We then reflect on the failures of governments and mainstream climate approaches to offer solutions to the relational climate crises we face and conclude with a reflection on how Indigenous-led movements are showing and enacting a liveable future for all.

Locating ourselves and our scholarship

Our analysis is rooted in two bodies of literature and Indigenous-led thought. First, our paper contributes to a growing acknowledgement of climate change as a relational crisis best understood as part of a manifestation of what Powys Whyte calls “intensified colonialism” (2017, 154; see also Sultana 2022). Against the grain of mainstream climate scholarship, Davis and Todd have shown that “the ecocidal logics that now govern our world are not inevitable or ‘human nature’, but are the result of a series of decisions that have their origins and reverberations in colonisation” (2017, 763). Here in so-called Canada, the climate crisis is produced through colonial land relations which attempt to displace Indigenous economies, lifeways and Peoples in favour of settler economies premised on growth for growth’s sake. While environmental movements focus on ecological tipping points, Powys Whyte has underlined that colonialism, industrialization and capitalism have also pushed us beyond relational tipping points that prevent coordination of swift, justice-oriented responses to intersecting crises (2020).

Escalating social-ecological crises are rooted in patriarchal, colonial patterns of relationship that seek to dispossess Indigenous peoples of both their lands and their self-determination, a violent, ongoing process that includes the imposition of a singular, dominant way of knowing and being (Coulthard 2014; Davis and Todd 2017). Western knowledge systems are shaped by and continue to promote white supremacist logics as part of the ongoing colonial/ imperial/ modernist project (Smith 2012). Derived from a particular European context, these knowledge systems undergird the structures of power that betray the reciprocal relations set out in the treaties, attempting to replace a diversity of Indigenous lifeways emerging from particular land-based contexts with the illusion of a singular, neutral “view from nowhere” (Liboiron 2021; Smith 2012). Our research practices attend to L’nuk Elders/Doctors Albert and Murdena Marshall’s relational teachings of Etuaptmumk, or Two-Eyed Seeing, which emphasize that “with respect to [knowledge], no one person ever has more than one small piece” (in Bartlett et al. 2012, 336). Etuaptmumk contextualizes and limits the authoritarian Western gaze by ensuring that one eye is “never subsumed or dominated by the other” and that each “represents a way to see the world that is always partial” (Martin 2012, 24).

If the climate crisis is produced through colonial knowledge systems and land relations, addressing the climate crisis must involve dismantling these frameworks. As Métis scientist Liboiron describes, “to change colonial land relations and enact other types of Land relations requires specificity” (2021, 13). Like Walia, we understand decolonization as “more than a struggle against power and control; it is also the imagining and generating of alternative institutions and relations” (2013, 249). Rather than managerial, technical fixes focused on

emissions reductions within a capitalist framework, we argue that social movements must imagine and demand “otherwise” (Danewid 2023; Powys Whyte 2020). The ongoing presence of Indigenous peoples practicing their responsibilities is a powerful reminder that Indigenous nations have not been subsumed or reconciled within the colonial state (LeBillon 2021 after Simpson 2020). Continued assertions of Mi'kmaq sovereignty and responsibility point us towards the path otherwise offered by the Peace and Friendship Treaties.

While treaties across so-called Canada differ, the second body of literature to which our work contributes is focused on Treaty implementation. Here treaties are understood as relational frameworks for recognizing inherent rights and supporting multiple sovereignties and land uses in shared space (see Starblanket 2020, Craft 2013). Indigenous knowledge keepers across many territories continue to challenge Canada's colonial interpretations of these foundational frameworks, keeping the spirit and intent of treaty agreements alive. In Mi'kma'ki, the traditional territory of the L'nuk (Sable and Francis 2012), the covenant chain of Peace and Friendship Treaties signed in the 1700s have never been respectfully implemented by settler partners. Instead, as Wysote and Morton describe, Mi'kma'ki has been a “space of multiple and overlapping colonial violences since 1604” (2019, 480). Implementation of these sacred legal agreements, which never ceded title to the British crown nor the Canadian state, would redress colonial violence and safeguard the Mi'kmaq lifeways that reinforce the important roles that women and two-spirit people hold in land and water protection and ensure the lands and waters are cared for as relatives.

The Peace and Friendship Treaties guarantee L'nuk the liberty to hunt, fish, and trade as they had always done. As relational blueprints, they allowed for settlement to occur, and were meant to bring settlers into a wider web of existing treaty relationships and responsibilities. Although settler frameworks privilege written documents, Mi'kmaq scholars insist that the significance of these agreements is not found in the static text, but in foundational L'nuk principles, including M'sit No'kmaq and Netukulimk (Battiste 2018; Paul 2022). M'sit No'kmaq, which translates to “all my relations,” expresses a kin-relationship with the lands and waters, underlining the interconnection of all living and non-living beings (Bernard 2018; *M'sit No'kmaq* et al. 2021; Prosper et al. 2011). Netukulimk is a related ethics of care and sustainable provision that “guide[s] individual and collective beliefs and behaviours in resource protection, procurement, and management to ensure and honour sustainability and prosperity for the ancestors, and present and future generations” (Prosper et al. 2011, 1). Embedded in the treaties, these principles express an ever-evolving way of knowing, co-created by an extensive web of human and more-than-human relationships that includes the lands and waters, along with ancestors and future generations (Stiegman and Pictou 2023; Young 2016). As Mi'kmaw Kiju Kukuwes Wowkwis has explained, “We made treaties for you [settlers] to live off the land and for all of us to live together in harmony and peace, as long as you don't mess with the environment, plain and simple” (in Beaton 2018).

While we affirm that Peace and Friendship is key to liveable futures here, we want to underline that the path to this relational transition is not one of ‘braiding,’ ‘weaving,’ ‘co-creating ethical spaces,’ or otherwise aligning around shared norms (Snelgrove 2022). As Métis scholar Todd contends, “unless we confront and dismantle ‘white possession’ and the ‘settler politics of recognition,’ there is no ‘neutral space’ to be found, or ‘collaboration’ to be enacted, with imperialist colonial regimes founded on white possession” (2024, n.p.). As such we reject “reconciliatory” pathways that ignore ongoing colonial power relations by simply

combining dominant settler-colonial and relational Mi'kmaw ways of knowing and being (Stein et al. 2024). While we agree that 'we are all treaty people,' we do not mean to paper over our different positionalities, but rather to emphasize the radical potential for treaty relationships to transform and liberate our world and care for the climate.

The Peace and Friendship treaties are clear that settlers have no role in governing Mi'kmaq lives, but instead an obligation to ensure that Mi'kmaw partners are unhindered from their own caretaking responsibilities (Stiegman and Pictou 2023). Consenting to the relations of responsibility required by Mi'kma'ki's overlapping jurisdictions demands that settlers engage in mundane and uncomfortable work to undo both the material and discursive foundations of settler-colonialism (Snelgrove et al. 2014, 6). As primarily settler authors, we understand that while we are obliged to stay out of the way of Mi'kmaq governance, we do carry a responsibility to put ourselves *in* the way of colonial violence (Simpson 2017).

Sadie Beaton is a white settler carrying many generations of colonial history in Mi'kma'ki whose understandings of environmental stewardship were unraveled and transformed at the Treaty Truckhouse. Emily Eaton is a white settler living in treaty four territory, doing research on energy transition that considers treaty relationships as foundational to a just energy future. Michelle Paul is a Mi'kmaw mother, Water Protector and treaty scholar, who teaches settler-Indigenous relations at Saint Mary's University. Robin Tress is a settler climate activist and campaigner that has studied and enacted social movement learning in settler-colonial contexts.

This paper is based on both interviews conducted as part of a larger SSHRC-funded research project about energy transition in Atlantic Canada, and on the first-hand experiences of three of the authors who participated in the treaty-based struggle against Alton Gas. Interviews focused on the opposition to Alton Gas were part of a larger set of interviews conducted between 2020 and 2024. When interviewees were asked whether they wanted to be identified in the research findings, the majority elected to be named, including everyone appearing in this paper. Interviewees are credited for their thoughts and wisdom in what follows. While first-hand experience informed the writing of this paper, the three authors with this experience were first interviewed as part of the larger project.

The Treaty Truckhouse Resistance

The genesis of the Treaty Truckhouse itself was pretty organic. I was near the Alton Gas pumphouse site on Facebook Live, and it just so happened that I had the 1752 Treaty rolled up in my bag, when the security guards were threatening to call the police. Something moved me to pull it out to try and educate them. And in reading out loud, 'If the Indian shall decide a truck house should be built on the river, Shubenacadie', word by word, I think it became organic common sense.

- Mi'kmaw Water Protector Michelle Paul in an interview with the authors

The Treaty Truckhouse, a small building perched on the bank of the Sipekne'katik River, stands at the heart of a resistance movement that formed to oppose the Alton Gas project. L'nu treaty scholar Christmas describes the river as ". . . a superhighway back before settlement occurred. It was the principal means by which our people provided for themselves. It was the centre of our livelihood. It was the centre of our identity and our way of life" (in

Beaton 2017, n.p.). Mi'kmaq have been enacting their sovereignty on this river since time immemorial.



Figure 2. Credit: Sadie Beaton (2022). The Treaty Truckhouse was built along the Sipekne'katik River in 2016.

Today, little evidence is left of Alton Gas' imposition on Mi'kma'ki, where the Alberta-based company had proposed to hollow out a series of large salt caverns to store natural gas underground and to dump the mining waste into the Sipekne'katik river. But the Treaty Truckhouse once overlooked an active and well-guarded construction site that included a "mixing channel" dredged into the side of the tidal river and a series of fenced off pump houses. Built in 2016, this hand-hewn building served the clever purpose of ensuring treaty-protected access to the river for everyone, while both fomenting and demonstrating resistance to the now-defeated Alton Gas project. The resistance movement anchored itself specifically in the 1752 Peace and Friendship Treaty, which was signed along the Sipekne'katik, emphasizing coexistence and relationship-building along with protecting Mi'kmaq hunting and fishing rights. Crucially, as Paul described above, this treaty also made provisions for the building of a truckhouse as a part of a trade mechanism ensuring a protected place for Mi'kmaq and settlers to meet and trade fish or other goods (Pictou et al. 2021).

When water protectors learned that Alton Gas was proposing to engage in the trade of stored natural gas, they built the Treaty Truckhouse to activate their legal trade mechanism. As Paul stressed in an interview with us, L'nuk treaty scholars understand the Truckhouse

clause in the 1752 Treaty as ensuring that “when a trade takes place, the Mi'kmaw party needs to be satisfied with what's in their back pocket.” This clause allows Mi'kmaq to decide if a particular trade on offer meets the threshold of “best satisfaction,” which as Paul described, “in the case of Alton Gas, what they were asking us to trade away was clean water, and to be satisfied that unborn future generations would not be ensured that their water and their happiness was protected.”

Over time, the Treaty Truckhouse site became what Lakota historian Estes calls a “resurgent geography,” a power-shifting place of reconnection that “capaciously welcomed the excluded, while also centering the core of an Indigenous lifeworld – relationality” (2019a, 253, drawing on Wilson Gilmore). Water Protector Kiju Bernard describes the Treaty Truckhouse as “a sacred place, when we do our ceremonies at the water to call our ancestors to help us and to protect the land and waters, and to guide us and walk with us. When we're doing ceremonies and praying, we're praying for everybody – all living beings, the human family, four-legged, swimmers, flyers, crawling, trees, plants, rocks, all creation; we are all connected” (in Martin 2022, 126). The truckhouse remains at the heart of a movement grounded in Mi'kmaq governance principles, prophesy, and ceremony: in particular, reverence for water.

The Alton Gas struggle mobilized Indigenous rights as resistance tactics, in ways that are consistent with how Klein, Grossman and others have described. Tactics ranged from educational events, rallies and marches, to strategic direct actions, including a nearly two-year blockade and associated legal battle fought on the grounds of Indigenous rights. Ceremonies were also crucial, often satisfying spiritual and strategic goals simultaneously. For example, L'nuk women from all seven districts asserted treaty in ceremony near the truckhouse, setting eel traps into a diverted section of the river that Alton Gas had created as a crude “mixing channel” for their brine waste. As Mi'kmaq legal thinker Cheryl Maloney recalled in an interview with us,

to use Canadian law and Indigenous laws, to get people to the river site and then to see the beautiful tidal bore coming in . . . we're gonna take over our river and we're gonna drop those traps today. When we turn from the grassy knoll and then all of a sudden the river just opens up, it takes my breath away . . . I remember saying, this is what we're fighting for.

This ceremony built on a proven political strategy, reflecting Supreme Court affirmations of Mi'kmaq treaty rights, including in 1999 when Donald Marshall Junior was exonerated after his arrest for catching and selling eels (R v. Marshall 1999).

But the Treaty Truckhouse movement also put forward a transformational emancipatory project that tapped into wider movements of being otherwise, especially in relation to water. It grew in parallel with the #NoDAPL mobilization against the Dakota Access Pipeline at Standing Rock, adapting their “Mni Wiconi/ Water is Life” slogan with the Mi'kmaq language “Samqan Mimijuaqn”. Like #NoDAPL, the Treaty Truckhouse movement was grounded in relational Indigenous ethics – M'sit No'kmaq corresponding in many ways with the Lakota and Dakota concept “Mitakuye Oyasin,” both underlining how “we are all related” (Estes 2019a, 15). Both struggles were also linked to the Water Walk movement spearheaded by Anishinaabekwe Elder Josephine Mandamin, also known as Grandmother Water Walker, who enacted an obligation to pass on sacred water teachings by walking over 10,000

kilometres of waterways while sharing her teachings with countless others along the way, including Mi'kmaw Kiju and Water Protector Dorene Bernard (Jewett and Garavan 2019; Martin 2022). As Bernard explains, "the life, culture, and strength of the Mi'kmaq cannot be separated from the sacredness of water. We embrace our connection to Mother Earth and her lifeblood and our people, and we encourage all to remember that water is precious and that all life depends on it to survive" (2018, 298).

After nearly a decade of struggle, in 2021 the Treaty Truckhouse resistance successfully defeated Alton Gas, a project that threatened Mi'kmaw sovereignty, the climate, and the health of the Sipekne'katik. Learning from this resistance movement is important because it successfully stopped Alton Gas from building new fossil fuel infrastructure in Mi'kma'ki, not only by appealing to settler governments, but through a strategic treaty-based alliance between Mi'kmaq water protectors, settler activists, the lands and waters, and even ancestors (Bernard 2018). As with the #NoDAPL movement, water-related prophesy underlies the movement's revolutionary theory, weaved into Mi'kmaq governance, resistance histories, ceremonial protocols and treaty teachings (Estes 2019a, 14; see also Jewett and Garavan 2019). Our interviewees emphasized that Water Protectors also followed wise counsel teachings that ensured that strategic decisions related to treaty interpretation and sovereignty happened "as between the Indians for themselves" (see also Christmas 2009, 65).

The Treaty Truckhouse resistance must be understood as much more than a protest against fossil fuels. Just as Estes describes #NoDAPL, "the protestors called themselves Water Protectors because they weren't simply against a pipeline; they also stood for something greater: the continuation of life on a planet ravaged by capitalism" (2019a, 15). Like other Indigenous-led struggles, this ongoing movement is part of a shared Indigenous fight to be responsible (Monture-Angus 1999; Jewett and Garavan 2019). As Kanien'kehá:ka activist-scholar Monture-Angus described, "Sovereignty, when defined as my right to be responsible, requires a relationship with territory (and not a relationship based on control of that territory) ... I do not know of anywhere else in history where a group of people have had to fight so hard just to be responsible" (1999, 36).

The site remains the spiritual home of the Treaty Truckhouse resistance, building on generations of L'nuk resistance to colonial incursion, demanding that settlers and their governments restore respect for Mi'kmaq sovereignty (Tress 2021). The movement not only continues to challenge the legacies and ongoing violence of state-driven settler colonialism, it also models liveable futures rooted in an Indigenous sovereignty that protects human and nonhuman life, including the climate, as part of an emergent web of relations.

Government failures

Echoing climate movements, settler governments have begun using language that acknowledges respect for Indigenous governance as a viable environmental strategy to protect biodiversity and climate (Artelle et al. 2019; Garnett et al. 2018). But when it comes to action, this stated impetus remains a mismatch for the capitalist logics of federal and provincial governments (Pasternak et al. 2019). Instead of heeding clear demands for "#LandBack," settler governments have continued to redirect towards what Mi'kmaw legal scholar Pictou has called a politics of recognition by dispossession or assimilation (2015, 464), a deflection that Kanien'kehá:ka scholar Alfred also refers to as "reconciliation without land" (2023, 149).

When the Liberals formed government in October of 2015, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau signaled two priorities that he hoped would set his administration apart from the outgoing Conservatives. On December 5, 2015, at the Conference of the Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change in Paris, Trudeau announced that on climate policy, "Canada is back, my friends. Canada is back, and here to help" (in Fitz-Morris 2015). Only three days later, while speaking to the Assembly of First Nations Special Chiefs Assembly, he promised that "There is no relationship more important to me – and to Canada – than the one with First Nations, the Métis Nation, and Inuit" (Trudeau 2015). Climate change and 'reconciliation' had become areas of strategic federal legislation and policy, yet the Liberal Party's first nine years of policy making smuggled in a significant amount of business-as-usual and did not significantly challenge settler-colonialism or arrest Canada's greenhouse gas emissions. Indeed, the federal government's approach to climate change uses market-based mechanisms and is guided by neoliberal policy, while its approach to 'reconciliation' continues to claim a supremacist sovereignty, denying Indigenous jurisdiction over the full extent of Indigenous territories.

With Mark Carney elected as the new Prime Minister, in 2025, the Liberal government turned its back on key parts of its modest legislative agenda on climate and Indigenous peoples. Carney's first act as new leader was to remove the government's signature climate policy, the consumer carbon tax. Moreover, within the first six months, Carney's government pushed through a new bill to fast-track the approval of large projects of "national significance" without Indigenous consultation (Sanders, 2025). While rhetorical commitment to a "net-zero economy" remains, one of Carney's first five projects of 'national significance' is a liquified natural gas facility, which would be the second largest of its kind in the world, and is framed first and foremost as an economic opportunity for "private-sector capital" (Government of Canada, 2025). Here the theft of land and resources from Indigenous peoples upon which the 'Canadian' economy is premised goes unchallenged and critical mineral and natural gas projects are deemed consistent with a net-zero future using "dubious accounting schemes" (Lee 2021) that do not significantly reduce absolute emissions.

We see the same settler-colonial approach playing out in other climate policies at all levels of governance. For example, Nova Scotia enshrined Netukulimk as a guiding principle for Nova Scotia's lauded 2012 Environmental Goals and Climate Change Reduction Act (EGCCRA). The Act defines Netukulimk as "the use of the natural bounty provided by the Creator for the self-support and well-being of the individual and the community by achieving adequate standards of community, nutrition, and economic well-being without jeopardizing the integrity, diversity, or productivity of the environment" (Government of Nova Scotia 2021). Despite this recognition of Mi'kmaw caretaking practices however, successive provincial governments have not changed their approaches, failing to slow the rate of clear-cutting across Mi'kmaq lands, to protect vital fisheries and hunting habitat for Mi'kmaw use, or to secure access to safe drinking water in long-neglected African Nova Scotian and Mi'kmaq communities. Neither has including Netukulimk in the Act prevented the province from supporting the Alton Gas project or even promoting new fossil fuel developments.

Across Mi'kma'ki, provincial governments continue to bring forward legislation committed to mitigating climate change and achieving greenhouse gas (GHG) reduction goals. But these Acts have not been transformative, recommitting governments to prioritizing private sector-led economic growth. This growth mindset continues a long trajectory of

colonial governance, predicated on the ongoing theft of lands and resources from Indigenous peoples and territories.

Climate Activism Missing the Mark

Climate movements in so-called Canada have mostly trained their sights on settler governments, pressuring local, provincial and federal administrations to make legislative, regulatory or other policy changes. In Mi'kma'ki, strong movements emerged in the early 2000s against fracking, resulting in moratoriums or bans in Prince Edward Island, Nova Scotia and New Brunswick (Brooks et al. 2023). Working at both municipal and provincial levels, environmental movements have also pushed for climate plans that commit cities and provinces to greenhouse gas reductions and net-zero economies. In fact, some of Canada's most ambitious decarbonization targets were the result of this good work – the city of Halifax, for example, has committed to reducing community-wide GHG emissions 75% below 2016 levels by 2030 and becoming net zero by 2050 (HaliFACT 2020, 10), and the province of Prince Edward Island has committed to net-zero emissions from electricity by 2030 and becoming fully net zero by 2040 (Government of Prince Edward Island 2024). Effective as this social movement pressure has been in winning certain concessions, settler-based environmental campaigns have often taken colonial land relations for granted, side-stepping Indigenous jurisdiction as they advocate for changes through existing governance structures. Many of these movements have focused so narrowly on the reduction of GHGs that they have reproduced colonial patterns, neglecting broader possibilities for good relations between humans and wider creation (Debert and LeBillon 2024; Powys Whyte 2017). Even campaigns invoking Indigenous treaties have tended to do so in ways that prevent the emergence of truly transformational political formations. Moreover, we are seeing many wins from the 2000s reversed by conservative politicians who are removing fracking and uranium mining bans and re-opening the possibility of projects that were once thought dead (Government of Nova Scotia, 2025). Most recently the CEO of Rockpoint Natural Gas Storage Inc. even mused about gaining 'social licence' for a natural gas storage project where Alton Gas failed (Bird 2025).

Mainstream climate movements, as Temin observes, "are built out of – and have never fully been divorced from – histories of colonialism, white supremacy, and empire" (2025,180). Their visions continue to obscure the colonial violence of the climate crisis, glossing over the fact that climate disasters are "catastrophic and deadly situations in which... Indigenous cultures had no part" (Wildcat 2009, 8). Even justice-centred transition movements tend to paint Mi'kmaq communities, like other marginalized populations, as passively vulnerable to climate change impacts, in need of white settler state intervention (Powys Whyte 2018).

Nowhere is the elision of Indigenous rights in climate movements more apparent than in the adoption of "clean" energy projects. In 2020, an 824-megawatt hydro-electric project called Muskrat Falls was completed on Inuit territory in Labrador. The Innu and Inuit whose land the large dam threatens have resisted the project since its inception, concerned about methylmercury exposure, the destruction of local habitat and ecosystems and the lack of recognition by the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador of their jurisdiction and right to reject the development (Johnson-Castle and Penny 2021). Nevertheless, the generation of this hydro-electric power, and its export to the Province of Nova Scotia, has been celebrated by environmental movements in both provinces for its contribution to decarbonization (Devet 2019).

Decarbonization here clearly interferes with Indigenous caretaking responsibilities to the lands and waters. Byrd's wry characterization of mainstream environmentalism is apt: a set of ideas to "propagate and maintain the dispossession of Indigenous peoples for the common good of the world" (2011, xix). Drawing on Englert's description of labour movements as engaged primarily in a fight over the distribution of wealth or "loot" appropriated from Indigenous lands, some environmental movements are engaged in a fight over how and where to reduce emissions from the continued looting of Indigenous lands (2020).

The Mi'kmaq community of Lennox Island is navigating similar obstacles as it pursues energy sovereignty. Located on Prince Edward Island's North Shore, the community faces escalating climate impacts, including aggressive shoreline erosion and sea level rise, along with the multifaceted and cumulative impacts of living as a Mi'kmaq community under colonial occupation. As Drew Bernard, interviewed for this research articulated: "We're not just [pursuing energy sovereignty] to save our people, we're doing it to try to save those animals, to be doing everything that we can to really help preserve the nature that we have here, even down to one of our four sacred medicines . . . And sweetgrass is really at significant risk right now due to rising sea levels." Lennox Island is transitioning to green energy while also considering its responsibilities to care for a broader swath of non-human relations, including the diverse bird species that inhabit the large barrier beach ecosystem that makes up part of the community's lands and waters.

Considering these responsibilities, Lennox Island has decided against developing large wind and solar projects on their reserve, instead negotiating leases with private landholders, even though all of Prince Edward Island is Mi'kmaq land. In many ways, the community's pursuit of energy sovereignty pushes against the grain of settler land relations and associated policies, which provide only the narrowest of opportunities and no regard for M'sit No'kmaq. Ironically, Lennox Island's transition vision is bolstering the Prince Edward Island government's own net-zero commitments, producing surplus power for the Island while the government lags on its own energy transition.

Water is Liveable Futures

The strength of treaty-based Mi'kmaq-led struggles against fossil fuel infrastructure and for the protection of water continues to garner more and more settler support. This is often based on a perceived common goal of protecting the stability of global climate systems (Barker 2015; Tress 2021). But our own experiences suggest that there is always more than the climate at stake—Indigenous fights to protect water, land and climate are inseparable from other manifestations of colonial violence, from the intergenerational impacts of residential schools to the epidemic of missing and murdered Indigenous women, girls and two-spirit people (Bernard 2018). As in other Indigenous struggles, the resurgent geography built at the Treaty Truckhouse challenges settler assumptions about what it might take for Mi'kma'ki to really transition away from a fossil fuel economy.

Engagement with the Mi'kmaq-led resistance to Alton Gas was transformative for many movement participants, including some authors of this paper. However, as Yazzie and Baldy (2018) have described, this change should be understood not merely as an individual shift in consciousness but instead as "a project of inter-reflexivity, a struggle for decolonization premised on the accountabilities we form in lively relation to each other" (3). The relational

re-framings offered by treaty defenders at the Truckhouse call into question the morality and efficacy of narrower climate transition strategies, which not only fail to address underlying colonial violence, but often reproduce it.

Our research suggests that liveable futures in Mi'kma'ki will not stem from Canadian climate policy or through legislative or regulatory changes. Three centuries later, the Peace and Friendship Treaties continue to offer a robust relational framework for safeguarding healthy lands, waters and L'nuk sovereignty. That is to say, the Peace and Friendship Treaties are climate policy and blueprints for liveable futures. The grassroots Mi'kmaq leadership at the heart of the Treaty Truckhouse Resistance not only have the power of treaty on their side, but also decades – indeed generations – of experience defending their responsibilities using court-affirmed treaty rights. Some of these battles were hard won in the Supreme Court, as with the Simon case in 1985 and Donald Marshall's landmark fishing rights case in 1999, while others happened on the land against fracking companies like SWN Resources Canada in Elsipogtog (in Sikniktuk/New Brunswick) and Petroworth in Lake Ainsley (in Unama'ki/Cape Breton).

In the case of the Treaty Truckhouse Resistance, Mi'kmaq Water Protectors inspired various settler groups into solidarity against Alton Gas through providing a nourishing vision of treaty relations that prevents extractive fossil fuel projects and ecological destruction while honouring and protecting the sanctity of water (Beaton 2018; Bernard 2018; Pictou et al. 2021). As Michelle Paul related to us in an interview, "We believe that water is life, and we have a high reverence and respect for water, so of course, we're going to pour that into defending one of the most historically significant rivers in our territory" (see also Bernard 2018). Métis scientist Todd similarly argues that when groups of people understand water as a relative, they become responsible to prevent or amend any breach (2017).

Movements from #NoDAPL to the Truckhouse Resistance "reflect how Indigenous people are (re)activating water as an agent of decolonization" (Yazzie and Baldy 2018, 1). "Samqan Mimijuaqn/ Water is Life" seems to have been a particularly invigorating slogan in Mi'kma'ki, where a peninsular/ island existence has historically and culturally underlined a respect for water, and where Mi'kmaq and African Nova Scotian communities continue to lack reliable access to safe drinking water (Waldron 2018). Mi'kmaq participants in the Treaty Truckhouse Resistance recognized this link – both with their Lakota relatives at Standing Rock and their treaty partners closer to home in Mi'kma'ki – when building their allied movement against Alton Gas. In an interview, Paul explained:

We knew early on that this was a fight that we could win in what they call the court of public opinion, because everybody needs water. It's not exclusive to Indigenous people . . . We changed the narrative . . . particularly in regards to sovereignty, because water is a unifying force in itself. It's about the water, but underlying the whole concept of water protection is also our treaty rights that say that it's in our rights and responsibilities to protect and defend our waters.

Galvanized by a shared relationship with water and the proven power of the Peace and Friendship Treaties to challenge the jurisdiction and extractive practices of fossil fuel companies, the Treaty Truckhouse movement was able to link burgeoning environmental concerns to a shared struggle against colonial violence.

The Treaty Truckhouse Resistance movement used several strategies, often simultaneously. For example, in the fall of 2016, Kiju Dorene Bernard invited Grandmother/Elder Josephine Mandamin to Mi'kmaq territory for a Water Symposium. Co-planned with settler allies, the event brought together a powerful line-up of knowledge holders, including historians, Water Protectors, political strategists, and healers (Beaton 2016). As Sadie Beaton, who co-organized the event with Bernard described in an interview,

In one realm, a cross-section of experts had gathered to share tactical resources and strategies, that included but were not limited by, engagements with colonial structures. But the gathering was also functioning in another realm that hinged on Elder Josephine Mandamin's presence in L'nuk territory and was all about sharing prophecies, ceremonies, and other spiritual teachings that protect the water.

By building enduring relationships across and between Mi'kmaq and settler realms, along with both political and spiritual ones, the Treaty Truckhouse Resistance was able to protect Mi'kma'ki from Alton Gas, a company headquartered in Calgary, backed by the Canadian state, and with no relationship to the Sipekne'katik river or its people. In the fall of 2021, after eight years of steadfast resistance, Alton Gas' parent company AltaGas Ltd. announced the end of their investment in their proposed project and committed to decommissioning the riverside site.

Conclusion: Getting into the "Treaty Canoe"

There is growing awareness among activists and academics that liveable futures in occupied territories will require framing solutions beyond the colonial state and towards new ways of living together (Islam et al. 2024). Mi'kmaw legal expert Young describes this transition as a "radical and daunting" transformative shift for the dominant culture, calling for "deep changes in how knowledge and reality are constructed and experienced" (2016, 82). Across the continent, Indigenous activists have hashtagged these deep changes as urgent demands to respect treaties and restore respect for Indigenous sovereignties: #LandBack (Pasternak et al. 2019). But as Mi'kmaw legal scholar and activist Palmater clarifies, "it's also 'resources back.' It's 'waters back.' It's about respecting sovereignty, our right to be self-determining, and our laws and jurisdiction over all of those lands that were wrongly taken from us" (2022, n.p.). This ultimatum builds on hundreds of years of Indigenous resistance to colonial incursions on Indigenous lands and governance systems.

At the centre of this transition should be an ethics of care and responsibility (Battistoni, 2022, Walia 2015). Temin (2025) proposes reparations to Indigenous peoples for their undervalued climate change mitigation efforts as part of a wider anticolonial transition strategy, and Alook et al. highlight relevant nehiyaw (Cree) laws that could be at the centre of "building care economies for all" based on miyo-pimatisiwin - "living a good life with balance between family and work" (2023, 115). As Estes reminds us, the caretaking labor of ecological stewardship and habitat restoration are "green jobs" that Indigenous Water Protectors have been doing since time immemorial (2019b, n.p.).

As Michelle Paul made clear in an interview, Mi'kmaq Water Protectors at the heart of the Truckhouse resistance have insisted that "treaty is a verb". Pictou (2019) points this action away from government negotiation tables, towards the potential for informal "small-t treaty

partnerships" between Mi'kmaq, settlers and the lands and waters as a pathway to shift relational understandings and further Mi'kmaq resurgence. Discussing the #LandBack imperative, Pasternak et al. similarly acknowledge that "solutions might have to be realized outside of state processes. In fact, they may be more conducive to asserting alternative futures for life on this planet" (2019, 12).

In Mi'kma'ki, treaty relationships are not static but regenerate and flow like the mighty Sipekne'katik River, echoing Nishnaabeg scholar and activist Simpson's conception of water as a relative that embodies political lessons by generating relational possibilities for making new worlds (2025). As Paul described to us,

The Treaty Truckhouse Resistance movement is a bottom-up approach – a perfect example of the power and the sheer force of community coming together...The motion of the water is unstoppable, and that's how this Alton gas resistance was: unstoppable. Because once you have that sheer force of the water moving like that, it's unpredictable and unstoppable. Because we were unapologetic and we were unwavering in our conviction that our sovereign rights as Mi'kmaq will no longer be ignored, that we are still here, and we're going to keep looking at what we can do when we work together.

In this article we have argued that just, liveable futures in Mi'kma'ki won't be prescribed from a universal podium or carried out through incremental, neoliberal frameworks, but through relational paths that flow "otherwise," in alignment with the relational blueprint of peace and friendship (Young 2016). More than a strategic settler-Indigenous alliance to stave off fossil fuel development, the Treaty Truckhouse Resistance movement offers an example of what Farhana Sultana has called "resplendent care-full climate revolutions" where "care and ethics of care can be the revolutionary vehicle" (2022, 2). Such a geography evokes M'sit No'kmaq, where, as Mi'kmaw treaty scholar Fred Metallic describes, "politically and spiritually, we have to get along and we are all obliged to respect each other's gifts and responsibilities" (51, in Battiste 2018).

For those willing to look beyond mainstream climate politics, the transition is already happening. Like #NoDAPL, the Treaty Truckhouse resistance "didn't just imagine a future without settler colonialism and the oppressive institution of the state, but created that future in the here and now" (Estes 2019a, 253). Simpson describes supporting Indigenous resurgence and being responsible to treaty as a way of "working together toward a radical alternative present" (2017, 17). The Treaty Truckhouse Resistance movement is enacting a radical alternative too, inviting settlers and Mi'kmaq alike into what Michelle Paul, in an interview, called the "treaty canoe." As she explains,

In the treaty canoe, treaty is a verb, so we are living treaty. But in the Canadian canoe, treaty is only a metaphor . . . Treaties can be pretty useful tools for changing our realities, not just Indigenous realities, but the realities of anybody living on these lands, because the canoe that we're operating from right now is taking us on a destructive path . . . so we have to shift our mentalities, to shift canoes and paddle fast.

Place-based and bottom-up, enacting Indigenous sovereignty as a climate adaptation and mitigation strategy beyond green capitalism will necessarily look different in different places. We agree with Mackey that transforming relations "will likely require creativity, respect, alert

vulnerability, restraint and learning from each other about how to 'treaty as a verb'" (2016, 191). But when it comes to a just, liveable transition in Mi'kma'ki, the embodiment of M'sit No'kmaq and Netukulimk affirmed by the treaties and exemplified by the Treaty Truckhouse Resistance Movement holds crucial lessons. The resurgent geography of the Truckhouse continues to hold Mi'kmaq and settlers together in evolving treaty relations that highlight caretaking as part of an embrace of relational responsibilities to the lands, waters, and climate, not as a practice of mastery but of immersion, where "water is life: and we are part of water" (Danewid 2023, 105; see also Bernard 2018).

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