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Authority and Power and Dominion, Oh My!

> "When all the trees have been cut down, when all the animals have been hunted, when all the waters are polluted, when all the air is unsafe to breathe, only then will you discover you cannot eat money."
>
> --Cree Prophecy

The lives of the Cree peoples are at stake, and there are three sources to blame: the Canadian government, Hydro-Quebec, a public utility that manages the generation, transmission, and distribution of electricity in Quebec, and the James Bay Energy Corporation, a company in charge of building the hydroelectric development known as the James Bay Project. The James Bay Project was announced in 1971, and the Cree people's environmental and social conditions have consistently declined ever since ("The James Bay Project"). The construction of the dams in the La Grande estuary puts the lives of thousands of Cree peoples at risk, whether that be through the loss of wildlife, the loss of their traditional way of life, or the racial discrimination and inequality they experience. As the Cree lose everything they love, the government, Hydro-Quebec, and the James Bay Energy Corporation not only ruthlessly continue their actions, but abuse their status, money, and power to dictate the lives of other human beings.

The James Bay Hydropower Plant consists of eight dams in the La Grande estuary. The floods for the construction of the reservoirs reached the Cree that lived upstream and affected the Inuit living downstream. While they claimed to ensure environmental and ecological safety and social and cultural consideration, neither Hydro-Quebec's company nor the James Bay Energy Corporation executed *any* formal or proper assessments to truly evaluate their impact on the land or living beings (De Queiroz et al.). "There unfortunately has been no comprehensive effort to

evaluate the social and cultural impacts of the La Grande Complex… a proposal was made… but the idea was not pursued by the James Bay Energy Corporation… there was no social and cultural impact assessment…" ("Social Impact on the Crees"). Prior to the beginning of the project in the seventies, no environmental data had been collected about the conditions. Apparently, the dam-builders' attitudes towards the impacts was this: if problems occurred during the construction of the dam, they could be modified with "corrective" measures. When problems finally arose, the government, alongside Hydro-Quebec and the James Bay Energy Corporation, worked tenaciously to evade their responsibilities, so the Cree had no choice but to fight for assessments to be enforced. Finally, the Cree were included in the decision-making about the environmental impacts.

According to another article, by 2010, the James Bay Energy Corporation and Hydro-Quebec *had* executed a formal environmental impact assessment. Participants noted the environmental devastation and the health impacts that occurred, and there were many criticisms and ubiquitous discontent of the Grand Council's process. Many also felt that there was a lack of consideration for the health effects on the people, but ultimately, many environmental activists begrudgingly agreed that the project should be continued, despite the resulting environmental and social damage (Koutouki 25). At that point, what else could they do but comply? So, to make up for it, the government recompensed $225 million to the Chisasibi Cree for the project. At the time, the Cree believed it to be a great deal, but now, many believe the opposite. Cree Grand Chief Matthew Coon-Come says, "…To make matters worse, the governments…lagged very badly in living up to their end of the bargain" ("Social Impact on the Crees"). Unfortunately, this issue of government marginalization is not singular or unique to the Cree peoples, and is another example

of how the government uses their power and money to escape blame or punishment from actions that negatively affect not only the planet, but also the lives of living beings.

The Cree people were subjected to assimilate into the dominant culture that in no way embodies their beliefs or their natural way of life – they simply were not *made* to live this way. According to research, the results of a hydroelectric dam depend upon four variables: the size and flow of the river and where the river is located, the climactic and habitat conditions that exist, the type, size, and operation of the project, and whether the project is located downstream or upstream of other projects. Overall, though, changes are commonly seen in the surface temperature of the water affecting wildlife water species and photosynthetic organisms), supersaturation (which rises nitrogen levels in the waters making it unsafe for water species), and inundation. Sedimentation can occur – which leads to the decline of downstream habitat conditions – since the sediments become trapped and cannot provide vital inorganic and organic nutrients, oxygen levels deplete because organisms begin populating the areas *with* nutrients, predation can be seen amongst water species, as well as erosion and the loss of habitats and wildlife. ("How a Hydroelectric Project"). The Cree depend heavily on the natural regime of their environment – the forests, rivers, trees, animals, fish, etcetera. Because of this, it is very difficult to separate the environmental impacts from the social ones – what happens to the environment inadvertently affects plant life, animal life, *and* human life.

While this project affects *all* Cree peoples because of their reliance on the land, hunters are prime testifiers of the effects from this project. The Grand Council of the Crees interviewed several hunters, and unsurprisingly, they all had very negative comments regarding the project. "…The future doesn't look good for the people… The traditional way of life will be destroyed…

The Cree way of life is totally lost. That's what I have seen since the beginning of the project" ("Social Impact on the Crees"). A Chisasibi elder expresses it perfectly:

> "The Creator gave me a beautiful garden to watch and maintain. I was told to take from it only what I needed to survive. The Creator has also given the white man his own garden to watch and maintain. The white man came and destroyed the garden I was told to care for. How would the white man feel if we had gone and destroyed his garden? What would happen to us? We'd be put into jail and called criminals…" ("Social Impact on the Crees").

This elder's recount epitomizes the racial discrimination and inequality that many American Indian peoples experience today.

And if that is not enough, if they need some other concrete proof, Hydro-Quebec, the government, and James Bay Energy Corporation need not look farther than California to witness what can be the result of the failure to properly maintain a dam. In 2017, the concrete used to build the Oroville Dam had grown extremely eroded and damaged due to poor maintenance and improper management. Concerned about the reliability of the main spillway, officials decided to use the emergency spillway for the first time since they completed the dam nearly fifty years ago. Emergency spillways are rarely utilized, so they are not built with the same specifications as a main dam or spillway, and damage can be expected. In 2005, environmental groups at Oroville asked that the emergency spillway be lined with concrete on the downstream side to prevent erosion. Officials denied their request. So, in 2017 when officials realized they were out of options to lower the level of the reservoir and reduce the potential for further damage or a collapse, they resorted to evacuating over 180,000 residents of California downstream of the dam (Fountain et al.). California was experiencing a drought at the time, so the soil became hydrophobic, or unable to absorb the dam water as it normally would.

Jon O'Riordan, MD and strategic water policy advisor, and Robert William Sandford, EPCOR Chair for Water and Climate Security, discuss the aforementioned in their co-written book, *The Climate Nexus: Water, Food, Energy, and Biodiversity in a Changing World*: "We all need to pay more attention to what is happening in places like California…deep and persistent droughts are followed by severe storms and flooding" (O'Riordan and Sandford 55). They published this book in 2015 – two years before the Oroville Dam spillway disaster. So, events like this *can* be predicted, and even if they cannot be completely avoided, steps can be taken so individuals are prepared. Who is to say this will not happen with any of the eight dams in the La Grande estuary? And without proper analyses, the effects could be equally as bad or maybe even worse.

The effects on the land and on the First Nation peoples are undoubtedly detrimental and life-threatening, but what about the CEO of Hydro-Quebec, for example? What about the head of the James Bay Energy Corporation? The government officials? No research has been conducted on how these individuals are affected, but does anyone really care? Maybe they are not affected at all. But it is easy to imagine that five-o'clock rolls around, they hop in their limos and go home to their multi-million dollar homes in gated communities that throw biweekly block parties every summer. That they sit in their home library and laugh evilly, rubbing their hands together, plotting what can be done next to destroy the environment and the lives of other living beings, and most importantly, how to get away with it. But, in fact, it quite possibly could be the exact opposite.

While there is no evidence to prove this, Thomas King depicts what this *might* look like in his novel, *The Back of the Turtle,* with Dorian Asher, the CEO of Domidion. He makes millions, works for a company that uses strategic PR to hide their mistakes (sound familiar?), takes his

limo home every night after work, and regularly buys however-many-thousand-dollar Rolexes. His sliver of 'happiness' is strictly material – the watches and suits and condos and vacations. But, he should be on top of the world, right? He has everything he wants. Actually, though, he is sick – really sick. "He was exhausted, raw and bruised, as thought he had been in a fight. He put his hand to his forehead and discovered that he was sweating again" (King 177). Dorian's actions slowly eat away at him and break him down; he becomes *diseased* from his work. His life is unhealthy. The money does not cure his exhaustion, does not buy his wife back, does not help fight his seemingly interminable loneliness. So maybe the CEO of Hydro-Quebec is not *physically* ill, and maybe he is happily married and comfortable, but maybe he is not. This insatiable greed could certainly drive someone insane – money is an empty wealth.

In this case, proper studies regarding the project could have been executed – there is *evidence* to support the negative effects. The government's (and large corporations') failure to respect the natural regime of the environment, the planet, and those who inhabit it is deeply saddening and inexcusable; their unquenchable thirst for power and money and status is unsettling. What will it take for them to finally understand? To realize? Will it take the deterioration of their own communities, of their local environments? Something so abysmal – something that money cannot fix? The government apologizes and offers money, but the Cree Nation has already begun to lose their cherished and traditional way of life. They have lost things that money cannot repair or buy back. The fight for recognition and equality is treacherous, and at times, feels hopeless. If this continues, the Cree's quality of life will continue to diminish – even more than it already has.

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