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WGS 102 Big Idea Challenge 1

In February 2020, the Wet'suwet'en people and supporters protested and blocked construction of the Coastal Gaslink pipeline, part of which was being built through unceded territory. In response, settler-colonial law enforcement arrested over 80 people across all the camps (Bracken, 2020). Amber Bracken published a photo essay in *The Narwhal* portraying the Wet'suwet'en protest camp outside of the Unist'ot'en healing centre. It showcases Indigenous resurgence, resistance, and resilience in the form of protest, ceremonies, and singing against settler-colonial violence as Wet'suwet'en matriarchs and protesters are arrested by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) and Coastal Gaslink employees desecrate a memorial for missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls (MMIWG). Bracken's photo essay exemplifies how settler-colonial violence against Indigenous women's bodies is inextricably linked to violence against the land. I explain this by first exploring Indigenous feminisms, which construct the lens through which I undertake this analysis. I then explore how violence against the land and bodies is linked through specific examples from Bracken's photo essay.

According to Joyce Green (2017), Indigenous feminisms are rooted in Indigenous cultures, centering identity, community, and sacred, reciprocal relationships with the land. Like other forms of feminism, Indigenous feminisms are focused on women's rights and experiences under patriarchal power structures, but they consider these topics while foregrounding how settler-colonialism and patriarchy function together to oppress Indigenous women and two-spirit people¹ (Green, 2017; Raphael, 2020a). Settler-colonialism seeks to gain access to the land's resources to accumulate capital for the settler-state and involves colonizers building a new society on the stolen land (Raphael, 2020a). Indigenous feminisms and resistance are

¹ The umbrella term 'two-spirit' has different meanings across different cultures and is an English term to help communicate to settlers the concept of queer Indigenous identities (Raphael, 2020a).

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“fundamentally anti-capitalist and anti-imperial” because of their critical view of settler-colonialism and the role that capitalism and imperialism² play in motivating and supporting it (Women’s Earth Alliance & Native Youth Sexual Health Network, 2014). It is important to note, however, that some people are reluctant to identify as Indigenous feminists, and the term is debated (Green, 2017). Green (2017) argues that this may be because feminism is seen in a negative light in popular culture; others, like Mohawk scholar Patricia Monture-Angus, argue that it is because feminism is a “colonial ideology imported by European women and not necessarily transferable to Indigenous relations” (Raphael, 2020a). However, Indigenous feminisms are increasingly becoming more accepted, as evidenced in University of Alberta scholar Kim Tallbear’s statement that she used to be reluctant to identify as a feminist, but now finds power in feminist critiques and builds her own understanding of feminism (University of Saskatchewan, 2016).

Indigenous women face systematic violence under Canadian settler-colonialism. Settler-colonialism targets women because women are crucial stewards of the land and are integral to Indigenous nation-building; therefore, “if you destroy the women, you destroy the nations,” allowing settler-colonial forces to access the land (WEA & NYSHN, 2014). The oppression of women is seen throughout Canada’s settler-colonial history as European patriarchy was imposed onto Indigenous societies. For example, section 12(1)(b) of the Indian Act stipulates that a woman with “Indian status” who marries a man without “Indian status” loses her status, and she therefore must leave the reserve (Raphael, 2020b). The fact that Indigenous women are three

² Imperialism is “the policy of exerting cultural influence worldwide,” and was practiced by European nations in Canada and around the world (Raphael, 2020a).

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times more likely to be survivors of violence than non-Indigenous women exemplifies how settler-colonial violence is ongoing (WEA & NYSHN, 2014).

Bracken's photo essay takes an Indigenous feminist stance and highlights the ongoing connection between settler-colonial violence against Indigenous women's bodies and violence against the land. The lack of consent from Indigenous peoples to settler-colonial influence over their land and bodies is key to the violence experienced by Indigenous women (WEA & NYSHN, 2014). The pipeline was being built on unceded Wet'suwet'en territory without the consent of the nation's clans (Bracken, 2020). The nonconsensual violence against the land mirrors the nonconsensual violence against Indigenous women's bodies, seen in the cases of missing and murdered Indigenous women, girls, and two-spirit people (MMIWG). There is a memorial of red dresses displayed in their memory at the Unist'ot'en camp (Bracken, 2020). The photos depict the Coastal Gaslink workers, symbols of environmentally destructive settler-colonialism, taking down the memorial. Further highlighting the link between violence against land and bodies is the fact that the presence of these transient workers constructing industrial projects leads to an influx of violence against Indigenous women in nearby communities, as seen in the tar sands in Alberta (WEA & NYSHN, 2014). The photos symbolize this violence – by taking down a memorial meant to honor victims of violence, the workers are displaying attitudes and actions that are complicit in the same violence.

Juxtaposing settler-colonial violence against peaceful resistance, the photos show the RCMP officers' helicopters, helmets, and bulletproof vests as they arrest matriarchs and protestors who are singing, drumming, and preparing for ceremonies (Bracken, 2020). Despite the generations of violence they have endured, Indigenous women are at the forefront of Indigenous resistance, resurgence, and resilience, leading protests against environmental

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destruction and starting movements like Idle No More (Raphael, 2020a). The photo essay captures their strength.

I have examined the links between settler-colonial violence against Indigenous women and the land through Bracken's photo essay on the Wet'suwet'en protests against the Coastal Gaslink pipeline. I outlined Indigenous feminisms and discussed how Bracken's photos capture the links between land and bodies. Importantly, Bracken's photo essay focuses on how Indigenous women are responding to violence from the settler-state by continuing to practice their culture. The photo essay not only captures violence, but resistance. It does not simply depict Indigenous people as passive victims. Projects like these are crucial to communicate to settlers like me – who do not fight on the frontlines – about ongoing settler-colonial violence and the cultural resurgence, resistance, and resilience of Indigenous peoples in Canada.

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