

Rivers to reconcile:

[thank introducer] I am going to talk a bit about our complex relationship with rivers and how that has brought us to where we are on the Cndn Plains—and all over the continent really—how our orientation to Indigenous people has worked hand in glove with our orientation to the land and water. I will describe the issues we face, how we got to where we are and then try to point the direction we need to head—the cultural transformation required if we hope to find a home here and do a better job of caring for our rivers and the lands they drain. Ok?

Before I get started I would like to say that I borrowed some of the ideas for this talk from an essay written by Derek Rasmussen, who lived for 12 years with the Inuit in Iqaliut.

1.1. Title image--North branch

- In late sept two nites in a row I dreamt about being in a river--
- First—horse dream: kayak lessons, horses waiting, large and powerful just below surface, instructor tells us to go slow get to know then—holding one around the neck, scared but trying to relax and put it at ease—“but there are no saddles”; but the beauty of the river as we flew, and the power of the horse
- The next night I dreamt about a warm river in the mountains, a hot springs river (the Boiling River—daughter (now at University) was a toddler; swimming with water wings, big waves, currents; I stayed near but tried to give her a sense of independence—she was riding the waves, so content, no fear or anxiety; completely at ease in the arms of the river. A dream abt letting her go—trusting the river.
- This is what rivers are to us—they inform our dreams, our songs, our poetry, and our spiritual lives.
- A river is a living metaphor of movement, change, the power of nature, the course of society, of life itself.

1.2. click through FIVE images of the south sask from our trip

- No doubt one of the reasons I was dreaming of rivers was that I had just finished a three day paddle—s sk river. Four friends, golden eagles, prairie and peregrine falcons, kingfishers everywhere, hoodoos, buttes, big coulees, eroded bedrock, sandy islands and cottonwoods.
- My favourite paddle, four times at least—recommend it; easy, drift, sail, good camping—lots of birds and animals, tremendous landscapes at every turn.,
- But is a trip on the river real or just an escape from the real—while we are there we feel like we belong, like we are part of the landscape, and we want to make it last longer, but we all have to head back to our lives in the city far away.

1.3. image of big box zone

- To this—I was sitting in the car the other day in the Big Box zone—the one that every north American city has now—my wife was running into one of the stores for a minute and I started thinking about this. What *IS* reality—life in the Big Box zone or life on the river?
- And if they are both real life, how do I square these two ways of living? [pause]
- One of the reasons I like rivers is that my father made a canoe when I was 12. He had No idea what he was doing—his father did the same thing—just improvised boat building with materials at hand. Still makes boats out of scraps.

1.4. image of dad in row boat

- His latest creation—on two saw horses—legally blind, 84....carved the oars out of a couple of 2 by 6s.
- Anyway the canoe he made when I was a kid was wonky but it worked. When it was done we got our Canadian Tire pup tent and camping gear and went on a trip downstream. we launched north of the weir here in the city and paddled to the Borden Bridge if I remember right. Leaky tent; canned bacon for breakfast; terns and gulls flying alongside us. The feeling of moving along the river in the sun and the birds beside us moving at the same speed it seemed.

1.5. deer in Old Man River

- More than ever we need rivers to remind us of the proper pace of life—you surrender to its movement and pace—no navigating required—you just follow what nature has provided: a stream of water running through the land.
- you cant hurry a river but you cant stop it either; its implacable and steady movement reminds us that there is baseline of slow, steady change in the unfolding of the earth and its processes.
- the acceleration we feel in our jobs and home life coming from technologies that move much faster than anything in nature, has set our personal pace of living at odds with the natural rhythms of the land.
- It is often said these days that while technology and science advance rapidly—our cultural and ethical transformation lags behind; our values and institutions of accountability and regulation cant keep up.
- Rivers help us reset to the rhythms in nature against which we can and should measure our technologies and our ethics and institutions.

1.6. image of Karen by the dock

- At some level too we identify with rivers because our bodies are confluent with the moving water—the atoms of carbon, oxygen, hydrogen that make up our flesh and bone and blood once moved through the land in a river and when we are done with them they return to rivers.
- Rivers give us a more fluid and **bioregional** concept of home and belonging. Is home something that belongs to you—a piece of property you own? or is it a place you belong to? Rivers can answer that--a river will never belong to you; so far in Canada at least you cant buy a river. No one can say that a river belongs to them or their corporation, but you can say that the river or the landscape it drains is where you belong.
- bioregionalists often use watershed to talk about the boundaries of home—what river watershed do you belong to, do you care about enough to defend and make some sacrifices?
- Very few people today think that way about home—home is not a geography, a valley or a river--it is the private box on the square lot where you keep your stuff for now, until you move on and find a better home somewhere else.
- On average Canadians move every six years—we are being called “settler people” these days but you have to wonder if we even deserve that insult—we are anything but settled.
- Ask yourself—where do I belong? When you die where will you be buried? Where will your grandchildren be buried? People who are at home—indigenous people for example--can answer those questions right away. They know what home is.

- Here is the way someone who knows his home introduces himself. Take a look at Anthony Blair Dreaver Johnson’s bio in your program.
- He says “I am from and work for Mistawasis. I aspire to be Nêhiyawak.
- I was born on a muddy road during a spring of a preceding historic snowfall. I was born with water.
- I returned to my community with hope of contributing my life, work and educational experience for the benefit of Mistawasis. Perhaps my contribution has been developing and building on partnerships, alliances and friendship with good, true people who care.”
- That is how someone who belongs to the land identifies himself.
- People who have lost their roots to the land--de-indigenized people--have little understanding of what home is or means.
- We have fostered a depot culture on the Canadian plains that persists today—sometimes it seems like our towns and cities are merely supply centres for extractive industries producing fuel, food, and fibre. If these enterprises are not sustainable and hurt our land and rivers it doesn’t matter because *my* property is ok—I ship off the garbage, mow the lawn and keep it looking nice—and anyway I can always pack up and go to BC when I am done here.
- we have been trying very hard to de-indigenize the FN and Metis of the region—by using the same methods that de-indigenized us: remove the people from their lands, enclose and privatize the commons, replace local, embedded in the land economies with market economies based on global trade, and establish education systems that teach young people all of this is normal and even superior, civilized.
- We know the bad news that comes out of this—it is in our media every day: young people dying on reserves and in inner city slums, homelessness, addiction, disease, dependence on government programs and assistance, violence.

- But the beautiful good news is that they have resisted being de-indigenized, resisted assimilation—it hasn't really worked. You can say what you like about Canada's indigenous people, but you have to admit they are tough—Indigenous peoples have survived every attempt to make them disappear. So many today are renewing their traditions, finding ways to connect to the land and be true to their ancestors—whether they are on reserves or in the city. The disadvantages and racism continues but they are re-discovering what it means to be Indigenous, even in a modern world that appears to be falling apart around them.

2.1 fur traders drawing

- The roots of the de-indigenizing, depot culture we have here run back to the fur trade forts which of course were sprinkled along the rivers of the Northwest from the late 1700s onward. This image is by Illingsworth Kerr, a Saskatchewan artist who lived in the mid 20th century—his drawings appear in a book on the Saskatchewan River by Marjorie Campbell, pub'd 1950 part of a series—Rivers of North America.
- The trade was managed by men who, other than a few explorers, seldom left the river valleys or visited the land beyond, as they gathered the wealth of the region and shipped it east, waiting for the next chance to leave and get back to their real homes.
- The fur trade—and what historians have euphemistically called “the opening of the West”—happened along rivers. They quickly became arteries bringing new goods but also new diseases and alcohol to the region.
- Bill Waiser—Saskatchewan's greatest historian—has a new book out that details the effects of the trade on the Northwest's ecology and culture from Henry Kelsey's arrival in the 1690s onward.
- *In A World We Have Lost: Saskatchewan Before 1905*, the rivers of the Northwest are on every page.

- But what was coming into the land along those rivers? Waiser says that by the mid-1790s the Northwest Company on its own was bringing in 9600 gallons of alcohol into the region, each year!!; ten years later with the help of the XY Company, that annual figure was at 21,000 gallons—and that’s just the stuff we have records for!
- Alcohol shipped in on rivers was fundamental to the trade—all companies did it and the practice of course did great damage to generations of indigenous people.
- Another book published this year by a Saskatchewan author, Harold Johnson’s *Firewater*, talks about how alcohol has hurt Indigenous communities, and what that also means for non-indigenous people.

2.2 drawing of bison

- The Opening of the West was as James Daschuk and others have pointed out, *the Clearing of the Plains*—clearing the land of the bison and of the bison hunters to make way for settlement and agriculture has brought on a cascade of ecological effects that have degraded the health of our rivers, wetlands and grasslands
- The clearing happened in the mid-nineteenth century but it started earlier. The fur trade was our first extractive industry but once the traders began coming inland on rivers, the demand for protein in the form of pemmican became a second industry, providing fuel for the fur trade.
- As Waiser says in his book, each paddler moving goods and furs on the northern rivers required several pounds of pemmican each day. So while there were fur trade forts on the northern rivers, we had bison processing forts on southern rivers converting bison into food for paddlers and traders.

2.3 map of Ruperts Land

- A turning point in the fate of our rivers and the lands they drain was the moment the Hudson Bay Company “sold” its Charter of Ruperts land—3.9 M square Kms—to Canada for \$1.5 M.

- That was 1870—a century later, here is how Historian Irene Spry described the Northwest region at that crucial moment of transition:

When in 1870 Rupert's Land and the Indian territories were transferred to Canada, nearly all the inhabitants (apart from the people of Red River Settlement) were wandering bands of Indians and groups of Metis hunters. The few settled communities consisted of fur trade personnel at the scattered Hudson's Bay Company posts; a handful of mission-based settlements, notably White Horse Plain (St. François Xavier) and other communities on the Assiniboine River as far west as Portage la Prairie; Lac Ste. Anne and St. Albert, near Edmonton; Isle-à-la-Crosse; Lac la Biche; White Fish Lake; Victoria (later Pakan); and, lower down the North Saskatchewan, Prince Albert. As well there were two or three semi-permanent clusters of cabins at Tail Creek on the Red Deer River; in the Qu'Appelle Valley; and in the Cypress Hills; and, perhaps, at the forks of the Red Deer River and the South Saskatchewan. Even the inhabitants of such settlements spent much of their lives travelling in pursuit of buffalo or as tripmen and freighters.

- The land that became Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta was inhabited entirely by Indigenous people in 1870—the FN and Metis. Many of them still moved freely from place to place, and all settlements—were beside or near a river or a large lake.
- The rivers were healthy, forests intact, and grasslands and wetlands stretched from the Rockies to the forest edge all the way east to the Red River
- The prairies and forests of the region were a great commons—no one's private property, yet a place that was “home” to thousands of Indigenous people.
- A land purchase deal and decisions made by people who did not live here—by the colonial govt in Canada—changed everything. In one generation the Northwest went from being a deeply Indigenous place to a land dominated by a new rootless civilization.
- After the sale the dominion Land Survey marked the land into squares for privatization of the commons—another essential step in de-indigenizing the way people relate to the land.

- In the next few years three more critical things happened to advance the de-indigenization of the region: 1. The last wild buffalo were reduced to a remnant; 2. FN signed treaties with the Crown; and 3. the Canadian military put down a last attempt by the Metis and Plains Cree to defend their way of living on the land at Duck Lake and Batoche just north of where we are today.

2.4 Paul Kane painting

- What do I mean by that “their way of living on the land”?
- A lot is contained in that—a lot is hidden in that phrase.
- We usually assume that the Indigenous way of living was to live an unsettled nomadic life, hunting and gathering here and there widely over a range of landscape. As though people who don’t stay in one place to grow crops don’t really have a legitimate title—they’re “just nomads.” End of story.
- But which way of living is more rooted--long and evolving patterns of seasonal movement within a bioregion, or farming for a generation or two and then moving on, never to return? An embedded in the land culture based on family and kinship that shifted and evolved over time--or a temporary depot culture that values petrochemicals and the rights of the individual over the wellbeing of community and land?
- And of course by the 1880s everything about land and movement was changing for many First Nations—they were moving onto reserves and trying with limited resources to make the transition to life without the bison—some were learning how to farm and grow vegetables and keep livestock but retaining a strong sense of and connection to their traditional territories.
- Take a look at this painting by Paul Kane—this is a Metis encampment along the Red River before the sale of Ruperts Land--if you look closely you can see cattle.
- But the Metis in particular had from the 1820s onward been growing crops, cutting hay, keeping cattle for beef and milk—and while they still went out to hunt the bison they had settlements along prairie rivers that they always returned to.

2.5 map of Red River

- But their way of living on the land—whether it was as farmers or hunters or both--was so different from modern land use because it was not based on capitalist concepts of private land tenure and governance. An important difference.
- It is fair to say that Metis and FN people lived and made their land use decisions within a more fluid and evolving spectrum of land tenure and governance models, but underpinning it all was a widely respected concept of the great prairie commons that is to be shared and could not be set aside for exclusive private use of an individual.
- What the metis were standing up for at Batoche was not merely their rights to the bits of land they had been living on, but the right to be **part of** the process of figuring out how all of the northwest was to be governed, shared, and used in a world without buffalo, with settlement and agriculture part of the mix.
- And as First Nations historians tell us today, the Indigenous leaders who signed treaties agreed to share their land, only to the depth of the plow, to enable the European newcomers to farm.
- Like the Metis, they were in no way surrendering their right to determine how their traditional lands are to be governed, shared and used.

3.1 treaty 7 painting

- It was land and water—as the basis of an equal, sharing partnership—that was on the minds of the Cree, Saulteaux, Assiniboine and other nations when they met the colonial powers at the treaty table.
- Our settler culture is founded on a lie that denies this fact; that preserves privilege and injustice with the fiction that the great leaders who signed those treaties did so out of a desire to surrender the very rivers, forests, and prairies that had nurtured their ancestors body and soul for thousands of years—in other words to give up their only home.
- 140 years after those treaties were signed, we are now talking abt “reconciliation” between Indigenous and non-indigenous Canadians.

- If we have any remaining doubts about what we need to reconcile—think about this: If you are FN and around my age there is a pretty good chance that the school you went to had a cemetery next to it—schools for white kids never needed cemeteries.
- Federal Indigenous Affairs Minister Carolyn Bennett says that reconciliation is “The unfinished work of Confederation”. An interesting phrase.
- How is that work going?
- Reconciliation is about renewing our engagement with the indigenous cultures of this land, about recognizing past sins where we did our best to *de-indigenize* the continent—and stopping that process, reversing it by indigenizing Canada
- right now there are more Indigenous kids in state care—15,000—than there were in residential schools at their peak. And the rates of abuse and trauma in state sponsored foster homes, we are learning, are not that different than rates in residential schools.
- Ok—but let’s back up a minute. You may still be wondering what has all of this to do with rivers? What has the work of reconciliation to do with our relationship to rivers and watersheds?
- Here is how I connect the two— All over the planet, nature is suffering most where indigenous cultures have been removed; non-indigenous civilization, a relatively new thing on the planet, is ruining our rivers and the lands they water.
- Our inability to see the land and waters where we live as home has fostered a conflicted and disrespectful relationship with the environment—where our economy and food systems extract the gifts of the land and convert it into toxic waste and byproducts.
- I am suggesting that our blindness to the gifts and generosity of our rivers, plains and forests is confluent with our blindness to the value of the cultures and languages of the original peoples, the people who in their long-standing traditions have always seen the rivers and land as home, who talk about respect for the earth and are now speaking out against pipelines and tar sands and other things that threaten our water and land.
- Here is what Derek Rasmussen says about our de-indigenizing civilization:

“What happens” he says, “if you create a test-tube Non-Indigenous civilization, and let it parasitize the land and cultures of all the rooted Indigenous civilizations?”--

- War, climate upheaval, environmental destruction.
- We are passengers on a soaring De-Indigenized jet plane burning up the accumulated linguistic, cultural and biodiversity stores of the planet. The mature cultures look on at us in horror. To them our civilization looks like a lumbering juvenile delinquent on a binge. Arrogant, violent, and ignorant, we've stolen their wallet full of accumulated natural and cultural capital and we're spending like drunken sailors.
- Only now we're beginning to realize: our plane has no landing gear.
- And no parachute.
- This system was only made to go up.”
- Of course nature can survive without us, but if want to be around for a while yet we are going to need to foster and learn from the wisdom of indigenous cultures.

3.2 image of Husky oil spill

- Here's a story about a river:
- On July 21 this summer Husky Oil learned that its sixteen inch pipeline crossing the North Saskatchewan River near the town of Maidstone was leaking. This, the third Husky leak since December 2015, turned out to be the largest, but the company waited until morning before trying to track it down. When they finally reported it to the provincial government, untold gallons of oil and other toxins had been pouring into the river for fourteen hours.
- Deadly substances entering a river is only a problem if the river is your home—as the North Saskatchewan is for the fish, amphibians, snakes, birds, and mammals who live there.
- For Husky (owned by Hong Kong billionaire Li Ka-shing) and many of its employees and customers currently living on the prairie, the river has little to do with home.

- Downstream from the leak, though, there are people who do think of the river as part of their homeland—people who fish and hunt there, pick berries and sometimes go for a swim in its shallows.
- Nineteen days after the Husky oil spill, a group of young people spent the afternoon swimming in the North Saskatchewan River near the town of Maymont 150 kilometres downstream from the spill site. By then much of the oil had passed through and moved farther down river. After their swim, they started to drive home. Reports say they pulled into a local farm yard to seek help with a flat tire. That was when something went terribly wrong.
- One of the young people— Colten Boushie, a twenty-one year old man from Red Pheasant First Nation—died that day of a gunshot wound. The violent death of a young indigenous man scarcely makes the news in Saskatchewan, but this was different: the one in RCMP custody and charged with murder this time was a white farmer.
- That stimulated a flurry of disturbingly racist comments posted on farmer forums, which made the national news.
- A few days later, the people of James Smith First Nation began to see the Husky oil lapping on the shores of their reserve north of the town of Melfort. "This river has taken a beating," said Alvin Moostoos. "We can't let oil spills interfere with what we have here. The river has brought life to the community. We fish out of it. Spend time with family. It's worth protecting."
- Not long after that, settler farmers in West Central Saskatchewan (the same region where Colten Boushie was shot) began to make announcements about what they believe is worth protecting—private property—and how they plan to protect it, by carrying assault rifles and shotguns in their trucks and combines. "We carry guns, and we want the criminals to know it," said one farmer in a news report.
- So in the passage of a few weeks of our summer, we have stories of First Nations people worried because the river has been polluted by an oil company, while farmers in the same area worried about their property take up arms to defend it.

- Things are nowhere near “reconciled” along the Saskatchewan River or any other prairie river for that matter.
- We have lots of settler people thriving in the agriculture and other resource extraction industries encouraged by our governments and land governance systems, while Indigenous people struggle to emerge from generations of having their languages and cultures repressed and being denied full participation in the wealth of the land.
- This is the legacy of colonization and exploitation that began along our rivers centuries ago.
- If we do not take action now, the effects of being alienated from Indigenous peoples and from the land we were meant to share equally, are going to get worse; there will be more summers like 2016, more conflict and misunderstanding, more violence, more environmental damage to our waters and land.
- We are reaching a place where we will need to decide whether our rivers will be channels for all that we are doing wrong or a source of life we honour and protect, a home and a commons we share that can unite rather than divide us.
- Rivers have been the site of battles and conflict dividing us but they have to become places where we come together and find common ground.

4.1 marsh

- So, how do we get there? Two things: **one, “Stay put”** that is the advice from Bioregionalist poet and wise man, Gary Snyder--the most important thing is to “Stay put”—make a lifelong commitment to a place, a river, a watershed; Get to know a river (canoe is common ground for all Cndns and an excellent vehicle for re-indigenizing the nation) and do what you can to protect it.
- **2. Get to know your neighbours, build some social capital** with others who are trying to find a home in their watershed.

- we need one another so we can get to the urgent work of building a better, more integrated humanism, reflected in our politics, ethics, and economics—one that brings ecology together with technology and traditional knowledge in the service of efforts to reconcile and bring justice to our relationships between Indigenous and non-indigenous people and to our relationships to the waters that give life to us all.
- I am sure that many of you are already doing these things—and we will be hearing stories of the good work happening in rivers all across the country.
- I have been talking about home, about the loss of the commons that gives people a sense of a home in the land.
- Our rivers in Canada are the last remnant of the commons that was once articulated from coast to coast to coast by the cultures of the Indigenous peoples of Turtle Island.
- It was rivers that brought Indigenous and newcomers together; it was at the side of rivers where we signed treaties in this part of Canada; on the Saskatchewan and Red Rivers, Metis and First Nations made a stand to defend their way of using and sharing the land; and today, with concerns over tar sands contamination and controversial pipelines, rivers are once again the site of important conflicts between Indigenous people and non-indigenous people.
- For now, rivers remain our last commons in the landscape. If we can do a better job of protecting them, of respecting them as the arteries of the earth, that define at least the potential for home and belonging, our rivers will be there for us when we finally have the wisdom and capacity to go back to the riverside and take another look at the ways we share and use the lands that they drain.
- Rivers run between the past and the future. They remind us of our obligations to those who will come behind us—asking us always, “what kind of rivers will you leave your descendents?”

Close with four page reading from *Towards a Prairie Atonement*