

Indigenous Environmental Justice Project Speaker Series 2016/2017

Summary By: Nasreen Husain

Introduction

With generous support from York's Faculty of Environmental Studies (FES), the Indigenous Environmental Justice (IEJ) project hosted a five-part speaker series during the 2016/2017 academic year. The series, which sought to highlight Indigenous women and youth perspectives on environmental justice, was well attended by community members, local high school students, and York faculty and students. In keeping with place-based objectives of Indigenous protocols, four of the five invited speakers hailed from the Great Lakes region in Southern Ontario.

In the spirit of social justice, four of the five events were live streamed via the IEJ project's social media (Facebook and Twitter) channels to ensure that those who were interested but unable to travel for various reasons could participate. Further, all five presentations were video recorded and accessible to the public through the IEJ project's website.

Isabel Altamirano Jimenez

“The Sea is Our Bread”: Interrupting Green Neoliberalism in Mexico



Dr. Isabel Altamirano-Jimenez is Zapotec from the Tehuantepec Isthmus, Oaxaca, Mexico and an Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Alberta. Her research interrogates the relationship among gender, economy, indigeneity, and analyzes how different systems of oppression are produced and contested. Her current research focuses on the connection among resource extraction, Indigenous women's bodies and consent. On November 30th, 2016, York University was joined by Dr. Altamirano-Jimenez. Her presentation builds her previous research: the effects of large scale climate mitigation schemes and analyzes how the intensification of neoliberal policies and the use of privatization to govern access to the ocean and its resources are producing the conditions for the dispossession of Indigenous fishing customary rights. She discusses the resistance practices that interrupt neoliberal policies in the Tehuantepec Isthmus in the state of Oaxaca, Mexico and highlights the role of actors beyond the state, in producing the specific alliances at which the region and Indigenous peoples inhabiting are changed to become a “centre of sustainable development.”

She also conveyed ways certain developmental initiatives - ones that claim to be sustainable, have challenged Indigenous rights and sovereignty in in Oaxaca, Mexico. As a result, the community has begun to develop their own strategies that are inspired by the Zapotec that challenges the state-supported development. Isabel's research more broadly looks at how environmentalism has been used within the context of neoliberalism in trying to commodify neo-liberal agendas and with implications for Indigenous peoples, particularly in regards to fishing customary rights. One of the things neoliberalism has done, she mentions, is to talk about the recognition of Indigenous rights on one hand, but on the other reconstruct the meanings about Indigenous rights, when in reality it would be better if obligations were discussed. She concluded her presentation by making thoughtful distinctions between the struggles many Indigenous communities face in opposition to their governments and supporting Indigenous communities in their quest for environmental justice in many places worldwide.

Sylvia Plain

“Great Lakes Canoe Journey”



After conducting research on First Nations Water Policy across Turtle Island and learning about other Indigenous canoe cultures, Sylvia Plain returned to her community in Aamjiwnaang First Nation and founded the Great Lakes Canoe Journey in 2014. The project looks to bring together peoples of the Great Lakes Basin on a yearly basis by canoe to celebrate the relationship of the waterways and to experience Anishinaabe canoe culture and canoe building.

On January 25, 2017, Sylvia Plain joined the Faculty of Environmental Studies at York University. During her presentation, she mentioned that she created four new birch bark canoes and has taught nearly 2000 elementary and university students. Her work is based on putting knowledge back into communities. Sylvia believes that by teaching and re-introducing skills, tools and techniques, it is like planting seeds for future generations, who will pass on aspects of what they learn through working together. Her project also aims to get people to start thinking about water from a different perspective. Sylvia mentioned that her first motivation is to work for the water and that her project initiative is to strengthen people’s role toward caring for the water. She hopes that

through her canoe building program, people can begin to understand water from a place of love and understand the integral role it has always had in the continuity of life. Sylvia concluded her presentation by showing how the youth involved in the project have shown keen interest in building skills and becoming more familiar with traditional ways. Sylvia encourages her friends, families and other 'citizens of the Great Lakes' to take on similar projects and be inspired by the work she has done, which can strengthen ties to community, land and water.

Vanessa Gray

“Environmental Racism in Canada's Chemical Valley”



Anishinaabe youth activist, Vanessa Gray from Aamjiwnaang First Nation in Sarnia, Ontario, presented the third instalment to our speaker series on February 15, 2017, to raise awareness about the environmental racism and public health damage the petrochemical industry has been inflicting against her community. Gray discussed the issue of environmental racism to tackle the impact of Canada’s Chemical Valley on Indigenous communities. She has been an activist and campaigner in opposition to Enbridge’s Line 9 and Chemical Valley in Sarnia. The pollution due to these industries has caused health problems among her community members due to land, air and water contamination. Gray also mentioned that government who approves many projects and the construction of the pipelines often overlooks the existence of these negative impacts. On December 21, 2015, Vanessa Grey with the support of her friends shut down Enbridge’s Line 9 on Anishnabek Territory, just outside of Aamjiwnaang in Sarnia. They arrived on the site, called Enbridge Inc. and requested that the pipeline and its flow of oil be turned off. Grey expressed that these industries have no limit to destruction, it is clear that tar sands projects represent an ongoing cultural and

environmental genocide. There are 'Toxic Tours' that take place every summer in Aamjiwnaang, where people from around the country come to Chemical Valley to gain knowledge and experience what it feels to breath and be in a toxic environment.

Native Youth Sexual Health Network

“Violence on the Land, Violence on our Bodies”: Supporting Indigenous Feminist Land/Body Defenders



On March 22nd, 2017 the Faculty of Environmental Studies was fortunate to have two representatives of Native Youth Sexual Health Network (NYSHN), Shane Camasto and Lindsay (Beze) Gray, join the faculty and share information on their recent toolkit '[Violence on The Land, Violence on Our Bodies](#)'. This toolkit looks at the stories and resistance of Indigenous youth and women and the consequences extractive industries have on their health. The negative impacts are deeply felt by Indigenous communities in North America due to mining, pipelines and factories being located on Indigenous territories.

During the presentation, Shane asked the audience to draw connections to how industries harm the land and harm our bodies. This harm can manifest in many forms; from cancer, to reproductive health, alcohol and drug addiction as well as violence and loss of culture and way of life. Beze explained that the overwhelming impacts of industry and the disregard for her community's safety and health has led to many reproductive issues not just in humans but animals too. Toxic exposure and damage to the environment have left water polluted and air laden with chemicals. Beze shared a story

about how growing up in the Chemical Valley, her daycare had to relocate due to the exposure and as a child, she believed clouds were man-made and were produced from smoke stacks due to the heavy industries surrounding her community. NYSHN continues to support industry-impacted communities and work to ensure voices are heard.

Adrienne Lickers

Longhouse to Greenhouse: An Emerging Food System at Six Nations



The final instalment of the Faculty of Environmental Studies Speaker Series was concluded by Adrienne Lickers on April 12, 2017. Adrienne is the founder and coordinator of 'Our Sustenance' program -an organization dedicated to community food sovereignty and sustainability. Her presentation discussed her journey of starting an emerging community supported food system in Six Nations. Lickers mentioned that access to fresh produce had been an issue in her community and did not have an accessible grocery store since the early 90s. Lickers also expressed that when children grow their own food, it inspires them to think differently about what they eat and what they choose to put in their bodies.

Culture, community and friendship are integral to the organization and people from all different ages and backgrounds come together, teaching and sharing knowledge about gardening techniques, food and nutrition. Her organization first began in 2011. The program has grown since then. It now serves as a community garden, farmer's' market and an educational program, teaching children and parents about the

value and connection to growing food that develops skills, knowledge and awareness around growing your own food. Lickers emphasised the importance of educating children about where their food comes and without this knowledge, we risk having access to fresh food in the future.

More information on the 'Our Sustenance' program can be found at sixnationsfarmersmarket.com.