



Welcome to *Voices From the Field*, a podcast series produced by the National Collaborating Centre for Indigenous Health. The NCCIH focuses on innovative research and community-based initiatives promoting the health and well-being of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples in Canada.

Podcast: Voices from the Field 24 – *Our Highway, Our Tears: Indigenous Women’s and Two Spirit People’s Health and Resource Extraction* – a chapter in the NCCIH’s publication, *Introduction to Determinants of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Peoples’ Health in Canada*

Bio



Ryan O’Toole is Gisbuutwada (Killer Whale Clan) of her mother’s lineage from Gitxaala Nation found off the coast of what is colonially referred to as Prince Rupert, British Columbia, and French and Irish descent from her father’s. She is currently majoring in First Nations/Indigenous Planning as part of the Environmental Planning undergraduate program at the University of Northern British Columbia, Prince George, Lheidli T’enneh Territory. Ryan’s studies have brought her to Guatemala, Central America to learn of the impacts the Canadian Mining Industry has had on Mayan peoples, and to Aotearoa, New Zealand to learn of Maōri Planning practices and culture’s role in these processes. Her passion for Indigenous Planning lies in understanding the complexity of

Urban Indigeneity and how Canada’s colonial history has systematically created disparity in Indigenous People’s health and living conditions resulting in disproportionate representation in gender-based violence, houselessness, substance abuse and incarceration.

Transcript

Julie Sutherland: In 2021, Canadian Scholars Press published the National Collaborating Centre for Indigenous Health’s university-led textbook entitled *Introduction to Determinants of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Peoples’ Health in Canada*. This critical volume offers an overview of the determinants of health for Indigenous peoples in Canada, while cultivating an understanding of how the presence of coloniality in health care determines First Nations, Inuit, and Métis people’s health and well-being. Comprising wisdoms from First Nations, Inuit, and Métis leaders, knowledge holders, artists, activists, clinicians, health researchers, students, and youth, this Indigenous-led book offers practical insights and applied knowledge about combating coloniality and transforming healthcare systems in Canada.

I am Dr. Julie Sutherland, one of the books editors. Today I am joined by Ryan O’Toole. Ryan co-authored, with Onyx Sloan Morgan and Laura McNabb Coombs, a chapter entitled “Our Highway, Our Tears.” The chapter traces how resource extraction has created unique health disparities among Indigenous women, and Two Spirit people. The authors honour the creativity and strength of Indigenous

communities that engage in myriad ways to combat gender-based violence through systemic transformation. Ryan, thank you so much for joining me today.

Ryan O'Toole: Hi, Julie. Thanks for having me.

Julie Sutherland: In your chapter, you write about how Indigenous women and Two Spirit people remain community cornerstones despite the violence and systemic discrimination that ensues from extractive relations. Could you provide a couple examples of how Indigenous women and Two Spirit people remain self-determining and stay community cornerstones in spite of everything?

Ryan O'Toole: Sure. Yeah, I'll try to, Thanks for that question. I think the simple answer is that we're still here. We're still alive and we're not going anywhere. Our existence is resistance and that's how we remain self-determining. When we talk about violence ensuing from extractive relations, we're not just talking about contemporary resource extraction projects. The nation state of Canada exists because of abundant natural resources. "Canada..." [laughter]—I might use quotes here and there, but Canada was founded upon being a natural resource exporter for the growth of Imperial Britain. And this is still our role today—an exporter of natural resources for many countries around the world. And this fact has never changed and likely never will, unfortunately. In my mind, all of the violence and systemic discrimination that exists in Canada is because of extractive relations—whether those extractions are related to agriculture, forestry mining, oil and gas, private property, or urban growth and expansion.

So when I think about the question you've asked, what we're really trying to get at is how Indigenous women and Two Spirit people remain in our power despite the violence and systemic discrimination of colonization. And again, we're still here, we're all still here. And we wouldn't be here if not for our women nurturing our future generations for thousands upon thousands of years. And, Two Spirit people remind us of our essence. When we talk about Two Spirit people and the violence and discrimination inflicted upon Two Spirit people, of course, we're talking about people and human beings, and we're also talking about the demonization of fluidity and gender and sexuality throughout our cultures.

The book references Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, who is an amazing Indigenous scholar and author. She talks about her Anishinaabe culture, about how what we understand as queer or Two Spirit was so normal in her culture that there wasn't even a word or label for it. And this is the case in most Indigenous cultures, and I'd even go so far as to say in most non-Euro-Christian cultures. The gender binary imposed on Indigenous cultures all around the world by Euro-Christianity is where exclusionary practices of those who didn't fit within the ideas of what a man or a woman are supposed to be were demonized. So the fact that our women and Two Spirit people are still here today, expressing ourselves as we are is a testament to our self-determination in the face of ongoing colonial violence.

However, if you're looking for more concrete examples, Chief Dolleen Logan of Lheidli T'enneh Territory upon which I am a guest, is the first female elected chief of her Nation in over 50 years. And there's also, of course, Chief Rosanne Casimir of TK'emlúps te Secwépemc and Assembly of First Nations Chief Roseanne Archibald. And I refer to these examples specifically because of the brutal legacy of the *Indian Act*. And these are examples where women have made it to positions of power in spite of the unique brand of sexism and misogyny inflicted on First Nations women because of it.

And if you want me to fan girl, then I want to take a moment to recognize, of course, Cindy Blackstock, who has worked tirelessly to fight for First Nations children in Canada. There's of course, Freda Huson,

Molly and Jen Wickham of Wet'suwet'en Nation, who defend their *yintah* against encroaching oil and gas pipelines.

Freda Huson, of course, she won the Right Livelihood Award in 2021, which is a prominent international advocacy award. And I also, I also want to take a moment just to make a brief mention of a project I was involved in over the summer called the Two Spirit Medicine Bundle Project. This was an Indigenous-led sexual health toolkit designed by and for the Two Spirit community. It included HIV and STI self-test kits and cultural medicines, and I was so, I was so proud to be a part of this project. And I think it reflects really wonderfully how Two Spirit people remain self-determining and cornerstones of our community.

Julie Sutherland: Thanks so much, Ryan. Thank you for being so inspiring, in spite of the bleakness of some of that content. In particular, I'm very interested to learn more about the Two Spirit Medicine Bundle project, so that's something I'll want to look up after this recording. And, of course, the bit that we could emblazon on a t-shirt and, and hopefully in our hearts, is "our existence is resistance." So thank you for reminding, reminding me of that.

You also write about the intimacy of storytelling. How can storytelling make a difference as we discuss ecological health and wellbeing?

Ryan O'Toole: This is an interesting question. As Indigenous peoples, all our stories are born of the land. If we didn't have the land, then we wouldn't have our stories. If we didn't have our stories, then we wouldn't be here. We are our stories and oral tradition is the cornerstone of our identities. They connect us to our ancestors, to each other, our future generations, and our spirit. Stories and storytelling to me represent holism and what I mean by that is a holistic interconnection and relationality to everything.

Our stories are of the land, water, air, spirit, family, animal beings, creature beings, rock beings, spirit beings, sky, moon, sun, stars, wind, Everything. Everything we're related to in our environment. Our identities are our stories. So, the way I interpret this question is, how does stories or how does storytelling reflect ecological health and well-being? And it relates to what we offered in this book, that the health of the land is the health of the people. So, if we as Indigenous people stop telling our stories, this means our cultures are in danger. If our cultures are in danger, then this indicates our relationships to the land are compromised or are failing in some way. If our relationships to the land are compromised, then our health suffers. If our health suffers, then the health of the land suffers. It's a vicious spiral that I don't even know what the ending of something like that would look like. But, what I can say is, that it has never happened because we're still here. If, uh, if we were to know what an ending like that would look like, then we wouldn't be here. And I'm sorry if that's sounding too abstract [laughter]. But, in saying that, I do want to recognize the state of the world we live in today and the climate emergency we're experiencing as a collective on this planet. And I want to point out that in Canada, we're experiencing this emergency because of patriarchy and hundreds of years of European imperialism, colonization, industrialization, and capitalism. And not coincidentally, we as Indigenous peoples began experiencing the climate emergency at the point of European contact.

There's no denying that our health has suffered since this exact point in time and continues to suffer. Our health suffers as the health of the land, waters, and air suffers, and will continue to suffer from the dispossession of our lands caused by the belief that we can sustain exponential growth fed by non-renewable natural resources. And this is the understanding that I tried to convey with the Highway of Tears writing included in the chapter.

Julie Sutherland: Yeah, it's such a beautiful piece, your, your creative piece on the Highway of Tears. So for listeners, please do make a particular point of going back and reading that piece because I think it puts into a singular vision exactly what Ryan's speaking about in terms of the health of the land being the health of the people. It's very, it's a very moving piece. I just reread it very recently and so thank you for that. You're also reminding me of, of how stories remind us of our interconnectedness. And, perhaps, now more than ever, we need to understand the cruciality of that interconnectedness to the future of our species and the species with whom we share this planet.

Finally, how can all people living in Canada and beyond combat violence stemming from resource extraction?

Ryan O'Toole: Thank you for this question because as an Indigenous planner, this question weighs heavily on my mind all the time, and the way I interpret this question, and when we boil it down is: how do we combat systemic racism? Further to that is how do we wean ourselves off oil and gas and all of the technological devices that feature so prominently in our lives like today, like they never have before? The lives we live in the Western world are dependent on resource extraction, and so long as governments continue to push neoliberalist agendas, the rich are going to get richer and buy all the power and make all the decisions that's going to allow them to do business as usual, which includes violence towards Indigenous peoples because we stand in the way of obtaining land for capitalistic purposes. And to bring it back down to a more tangible scale, I feel more inspired by reconciliation in Canada today than I think I ever have. That doesn't mean that I'm necessarily "all-in" optimistic, but I'm no longer "wash my hands of it" cynical either. Unfortunately it took the discovery of the unmarked graves at Kamloops Indian Residential School into Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc for non-Indigenous Canadians to really start hearing what Indigenous peoples have been saying for a long time, which is that something's not right here, and whatever it is, is killing us.

So I think people are trying and I appreciate that. But reconciliation doesn't end because you read about it somewhere. Reconciliation is something that you have to embody and you have to embody it until the day you die if you truly want to reconcile injustice towards Indigenous peoples. Learning about the history of Canada and the role that resource extraction has played and that history is obviously key, but so much of people's livelihoods are invested in resource extraction in this country, and as we're seeing with the climate emergency, people aren't likely to change the way they see things if it means their lives have to change in a profound way. I believe our path to healing as Indigenous peoples is doing what we have always done to sustain ourselves in this world. Our cultures have been here for thousands upon thousands of years, and that's no coincidence. That's the result of thoughtful relationality and being responsive to our lands and waters to ensure our survival.

If people want to combat violence towards Indigenous peoples, then just support us. Hear us when we talk. Show up. Go to community events that support missing and murdered Indigenous women, girls, and Two Spirit peoples. Go to events that are held on the National Day for Truth and Reconciliation and National Indigenous Peoples' Day. You can go to your nearest Friendship Centre and see what kind of events that are happening through there. Self-determination is our path to healing from the impacts of colonization. So I think just learning to support us and that is key.

Julie Sutherland: Those are some really practical ways of seeking reconciliation, reminding us that we can't just read about it, we've got to do something, requires action. So thank you for providing some

very concrete examples of what can be done to combat violence against Indigenous peoples generally, and Indigenous women and Two Spirit people in particular.

And thank you for taking the time to speak to me today. I hear the scepticism. But more than that, I hear the optimism and the hope. So I really appreciate the time you've taken today.

Ryan O'Toole: I am trying to be optimistic. I am optimistic but it's coming out of an undergrad degree and learning about the history of Canada that I never learned before, like, it did take me down a bit of a cynical spiral for a bit, but... [laughter]

Julie Sutherland: Yeah, a lot of history still to be uncovered, for sure.

Ryan O'Toole: Yeah. Yeah.

Julie Sutherland: Well, thank you again, Ryan.

Ryan O'Toole: Yeah. Thank you.

Julie Sutherland: To hear more podcasts in the series, head to [Voices From the Field](#) on the National Collaborating Centre for Indigenous Health's website, nccih.ca. Music on this podcast is by Blue Dot Sessions. It appears under a Creative Commons license. Learn more at <https://www.sessions.blue/>.

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