

After Oil School 3 | 21-22 October 2022 | Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity
Reflections from Sarah Marie Wiebe, Assistant Professor, University of Victoria
www.sarahmariewiebe.com

After Oil:
Resisting Extraction While Centering Care and Cultivating Community

Our current climate emergency as a vital matter of care

The multilayered crises we face—a global pandemic, the climate emergency and an international war—provoke a much deeper existential crisis. In British Columbia, my home province, Canada’s most western, the year my son Forest was born, we experienced unprecedented extreme weather events. First, a heat dome that ballooned over the province in June 2021, then wildfires that led to the city of Lytton burning to the ground. [Sealife suffered](#) all along the coast. Just a few months later, in November 2021, flooding washed away homes, highways, major arterial routes for people and goods across the province. What a mess. These events give expression to the colloquial expression: “hot mess.”

As a new mother amidst this chaos, the state of emergency felt intensely personal as I found myself dehydrated and in the emergency room, seeking reprieve. The term “hot mess” became palpable to me, a visceral reality as I struggled as a nursing mother during a code red climate emergency. Collectively, we are living as climate disaster survivors—to borrow a term from my colleagues of the [Climate Disaster Project](#)—our lives, ecologies, homes and futures are at stake. I’m not alone in this experience.

Around the world, communities living along oceanic edges of democratic societies brace for the impacts of an intensely changing climate. In the hot summer of 2021, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) declared climate change to be a [code red for humanity](#). The 2022 follow-up report states: “Climate change has caused substantial damages, and increasingly irreversible losses, in terrestrial, freshwater and coastal and open ocean marine ecosystems.” Such dramatic shifts have political, ecological and socioeconomic consequences, felt uniquely and unevenly across coastal communities whose archipelagic existence is intimately tied to the flourishing of marine life along the shoreline.

Intense effects of warming and acidifying oceans, loss of marine ecosystems including kelp forests, rising seas, flash floods, volcanoes and hurricanes comprise some of the effects due to extreme ecosystem events that shape the wellbeing and subsistence livelihoods of those entwined with coastlines who must prepare for alternative ecological futures. Uneven circumstances drive some to live with the aftermath of climate displacement, forced to leave their homes. Some communities find themselves better prepared than others, prompting the need for further policy and research approaches that incorporate [equity and intersectionality frameworks](#). Despite these disastrous events, as [Rebecca Solnit](#) reminds us, during these troubling times, many communities come together, survive and thrive. The 2022 IPCC Report draws attention to the current climate emergency, noting adaptation, management and response gaps. The cascading effects of ecosystems loss present long-term impacts, manifest in hotspots of vulnerability.

Alternative realities

What comes next? What will the next decades feel like?

Now more than ever before, I feel a sense of urgency to enact and envision alternative realities beyond the unbearable status quo, and to think intergenerationally about the climate fight. At the core of my concern is a need to shift consciousness away from atomistic, individualistic, self-maximizing ways of thinking and being in the world to more collective-oriented, caring relations. Care for our kin, for our environments, for the future generations. One of the ways in which I am compelled to contribute to the movement to address the current climate emergency we all face—humans and more-than-humans alike—is through interactive storytelling. By centering the voices of climate emergency survivors, as researchers we carry the capacity to cultivate conversations and serve as a bridge between diverse members of society: citizens, community advocates, educators and policymakers.

What are the seeds of the next? What are the primary threats to their flourishing?

Considering life after oil, we are encouraged to reflect on and “Embrace the challenge of putting some flesh on the bones of the transformations we want and need alongside a wholesale shift in the energy system we currently have.” This prompt necessitates a move beyond extraction to recalibrate and centre regenerative, mutually life-giving relationships. This way of thinking is political, transformative, and personal. It involves moving away from a politics of taking from, and instead centres caring, sharing, listening and transformation. Transformative change is needed in our high-level laws and policies in equal measure to how we relate interpersonally to one another and the more-than-human lives that animate our livelihoods.

The time is ripe for a shift in consciousness. This entails a recognition that we are humans embedded in much wider, animate ecosystems. Not simply living as selfish individuals seeking to maximize profits without environmental constraints. Centering connections, between humans and wider ecologies, is vital to this re-orientation and shift away from extractivist modes of thinking and being. To shift consciousness, we need to reframe relationships. We need new stories. Celebrations of community life. Honouring alternative solutions for life beyond extraction. There are many, many examples of this around the world. Whether sustainable infrastructure development in coastal Indigenous communities like the [Heiltsuk Nation](#) in Bella Bella or [T’sou-ke](#) along the edge of the Capital Regional District, we have a lot to learn from those whose lifeworlds and worldviews are interwoven with their coastal environments.

The climate emergency is a problem for democracy

The edges of democracy

As democratic theorists, critical policy scholars and poets emphasize, state of emergency declarations and crises are multilayered; they serve as a barometer for the health of democratic life and planetary health—and they present a pivotal moment for a paradigm shift ([Boin et al. 2020](#); [Fishel 2017](#); [Heintz et al. 2021](#); [Honig 2009](#); [Mouffe 2005](#); [Stacey 2022](#); [Vuong 2014](#); [Wiebe 2020](#)). Enriched civic participation is one pathway to address these democratic concerns. A move towards more involved, meaningful and sustained inclusion of the voices of those most

directly affected by the current climate emergency events is one avenue towards a solution to enhance more equitable outcomes. Academics play a role here-- as writer-activists, as community-engaged scholars—to learn with and from communities to influence and inform more participatory policymaking outcomes. As I've argued elsewhere, this more sensory, relational approach to environmental justice public engagement and policymaking requires listening and respect for lived-experiences, and creating space for diverse, situated bodies of knowledges ([Wiebe 2016](#); [Levac & Wiebe 2020](#)). Communities carry and convey diverse forms of expertise. Academics and public officials need to share the mic; listen, learn, transform.

Listening beyond the academy

Listening to the voices and lived-experiences of those at the frontlines of the climate emergency is a starting point for a revitalized democratic society and enriched policy justice. This requires careful consideration of who is framed as vulnerable, why and how, and an attentiveness to thinking beyond vulnerability to agency for alternative realities. Such listening involves humility, acknowledging that advocates, community leaders, Elders, and other knowledge holders are experts; academics, scientists and public officials have a lot to learn from those with lived-experience of intensely changing climates.

Learn from the past

Communities carry stories of strength, culture, meaning, resilience, and alternative ways of being, thinking and feeling through the world. For instance, certain communities become framed as vulnerable to the exposure of climate-related hazards. Vulnerabilities in these sites are linked to continued practices of colonialism, apparent in historical policy decisions and current conditions ([Corntassel & Bryce 2012](#); [Hilton 2020](#); [Sultana 2022](#)). Climate vulnerabilities persist when governments cannot provide essential services and infrastructures—and this is in large part due to the living legacy of colonialism. At the same time, communities are sites of strength, resilience, imagination and enactment of alternative ecological futures, beyond oil, beyond extractivism.

Transform for alternative futures

Transformation of our democratic institutions, discourses and practices for ecological futures after and beyond oil translates into how decision-makers treat community expertise to envision and co-create alternative realities. According to the 2022 IPCC report: “A wide range of top-down, bottom-up and coproduced processes and sources can deepen climate knowledge and sharing, including capacity building at all scales, educational and information programmes, using the arts, participatory modelling and climate services, Indigenous knowledge and local knowledge and citizen science” ([IPCC 2022](#), SPM 29). An imaginative, interdisciplinary, multifaceted, mixed methods, community-engaged approach is necessary for this intersectional, equity-informed, justice-oriented research ([Hammond 2021](#); [Hankivsky & Jordan-Zachery 2019](#)). Meaningful community engaged research can achieve tangible, transformative policy outcomes ([Cattapan et al., 2022](#); [Levac et al., 2022](#)). For instance, “Inclusive governance that prioritises equity and justice in adaptation planning and implementation leads to more effective and sustainable adaptation outcomes” and “multi-stakeholder co-learning platforms, transboundary collaborations, community-based adaptation and participatory scenario planning, focus on capacity-building, and meaningful participation of the most vulnerable and marginalised groups, and their access to key resources to adapt” (IPCC 2022, SPM 30).

Meaningful engagement of communities with direct experience and firsthand knowledge of the climate emergency must impact, inform and ultimately transform policy outcomes for our generation, and the generations to follow.