Racialised and Colonial Constructions of Climate Disaster: News Media Framing of Indigenous Wildfire Evacuations in Western Canada

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Abstract

Environmental disasters disproportionately impact Indigenous peoples worldwide. In Canada, wildfires and flooding increasingly threaten First Nations communities, prompting frequent evacuations to urban areas. Housed for months and sometimes even years in marginal inner-city hotels and temporary housing, evacuees face a range of negative health and social outcomes and are subject to heightened securitization and stereotyping by authorities and local media. This article presents the findings of a qualitative and comparative analysis of media framing of wildfire evacuations in Jasper, Alberta and in Manitoba First Nations communities. Compared to the non-Indigenous community, Indigenous evacuees were framed negatively as a threat to the safety and prosperity of the city. News framing amplified colonial and racialized stereotypes while ignoring the root causes of frequent evacuations. Media framing works in tandem with government policies to perpetuate the slow violence of colonialism and environmental disaster while positioning Indigenous peoples outside the imagined Canadian community.

Keywords: Green criminology; First Nations; climate change; media framing.

Introduction

Environmental disasters disproportionately impact Indigenous peoples worldwide (Baird et al., 2021; Gilio-Whitaker, 2019). In Canada, overland flooding (Ballard, 2012, 2017; Khalafzai et al., 2020; Thompson, 2015) and wildfires (Asfaw et al. 2019; McGee et al., 2019; Montesanti et al., 2021; Mottershead et al., 2020) frequently endanger Indigenous First Nations communities, prompting regular evacuations. Displaced from their ancestral territories, Indigenous people ironically feel like climate refuges in their own lands (Thompson et al., 2014). The southern Manitoba cities of Winnipeg and Brandon are major destinations for displaced Indigenous peoples from northern reserve communities. Housed for months and sometimes even years (Thompson, 2018) in marginal inner-city hotels and temporary housing, displaced First Nations people face a host of negative outcomes including "suicides, ill-health, severe stress and marital breakdowns" (Ahmed et al., 2019, p. 172; see also Dodd et al., 2018; Montesanti et al., 2021; generally see also Duran & Duran 1995). Indigenous evacuees in urban centres also face crime, violence and insecurity. For example, Scharbach and Waldram (2016) reported that some young Indigenous evacuees in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan were recruited by local street gangs, while others were subject to heightened racism and stereotyping by hotel staff, private security, and local media.

This article reports the findings of a qualitative content analysis of Indigenous climate evacuees in news media. Focusing on evacuations during the 2024 wildfires in western Canada, I argue that Indigenous evacuees are framed negatively by media

compared to non-Indigenous communities displaced by fires. Indigenous evacuees are framed as a threat to the safety and economic prosperity of host communities, while non-Indigenous evacuees are framed as kin and neighbours within an imagined Canadian community. Moreover, media representations largely ignore the root causes of frequent evacuations of First Nations including colonialism and climate change. I argue that media framing works in tandem with government policies to perpetuate the slow violence (e.g., Nixon, 2013) of colonialism, forced movement, and human-induced environmental disaster in Indigenous communities.

This article unfolds in six parts. In the first section, I review recent literature on the representation of climate disasters in news media, including the conceptual framework of green cultural criminology (Lam et al., 2024). Next, I outline key insights from "mobile green criminology" (Lundberg, 2022) that provide further conceptual grounding. I then describe the scope and prevalence of wildfire evacuations in Canada, before outlining the study design and methods. Next, I present findings from my thematic and comparative analysis of media coverage of wildfire evacuations in Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadian communities during the summer of 2024. I conclude with a discussion of conceptual and theoretical implications of this work.

Representing Environmental Harm

Green criminologists have broadened their conceptual frameworks to include "the *representation* and *meaning* of environmental crime and harm" (Brisman, 2014, p. 25, original emphasis, see also Lam et al., 2024). Brisman and South (2013, 2014) inaugurated a research focus on "green cultural criminology" drawing on "cultural criminology's concern with the interrelationship of culture and crime in late modernity" (Brisman, 2014, p. 25). In the ensuing decade, green cultural criminologists have undertaken a range of analyses of popular cultural and news media representations of environmental crime and justice (Brisman et al., 2014), including documentary and fictional film (McClanahan et al., 2017), photographic representations (Natali & McClanahan, 2017), and art (Brisman, 2018).

News media, a distinct type of representation of the social world, has garnered considerable attention by scholars of environmental harm. Twyman-Ghoshal, Patten, and Ciaramella (2022) found a paucity of coverage of the criminal causes and effects of climate change in U.S. news sources, coinciding with a decline in the number and diversity of news outlets and increased media concentration (see also Brisman, 2012)[1]. McNatt, Goodman, and Boykoff (2019) found that between 2010 and 2019, news stories about climate change declined relative to online and social media discussions. Nevertheless, alongside official reports and commissions (e.g., Walters, 2023), mainstream news coverage of climate change still performs an agenda setting function, influencing public perceptions and fostering dialogue with policy makers and political actors (Crow et al., 2017). Anderson, Chubb and Djerf-Pierre (2018) further argue, "Media analysis can throw into sharp relief the ways a calamity can be given context, content, emotion and meaning—all of which figure significantly in understanding the cultural and political response to environmental disasters and crisis" (p. 938). Thus, studying the representation of environmental harms in the news media is worthy of attention by critical and green cultural criminologists interested in the intersection of representation, meaning and green crime.

Houston, Pfefferbaum, and Rozenholtz (2012) point out that media coverage of large scale natural disasters focuses mainly on current impacts and what they call "disaster economics" (p. 606). Crow et al. (2017) argue that disaster coverage tends to be framed episodically rather than thematically, with the latter attributing "broader blame or causality" (p. 857). If a disaster is anticipated, coverage may focus on the approaching event, speculating about its potential for destruction, and detailing efforts of people to escape from harm's way. Once a disaster unfolds, coverage focuses on heart-rending images and stories of destruction and survival. For example, Figueiredo, Ribeiro, and Fernandes's (2024) analysis of news coverage of wildfires in Portugal found "negative and shocking narratives … turning wildfires into a media spectacle by focusing on drama and exacerbating narratives about deaths, injuries, and material damages" (p. 3). Following a disaster's immediate impact, coverage quickly wanes, with stories shifting to recovery efforts and calls to mitigate future disasters. At this stage, claims-making about causes and blame may also ensue. However, because environmental violence is a slow moving process, generally only the most catastrophic climatic events capture sustained news media interest (Nixon, 2013). Regular seasonal evacuations of First Nations in Canada due to human-induced flooding and wildfires are rarely framed as crises and are seldom subject to major national news reporting. Also, because most First Nations are remote communities suffering various forms of social, economic and other marginalization, coverage of First Nations evacuations is more likely to focus on impacts for host communities, including perceptions of safety, and crime and disorder in areas surrounding hotels and reception centres where evacuees are housed (e.g., CBC, 2011).

Mobile Green Criminology and Flow

In addition to a green cultural criminological framework focused on meaning and representation, I also draw on Kajsa Lundberg's (2022) "mobile green criminology" to understand the forced movement of Indigenous peoples during evacuations. She writes: "In this paradigm, events can be conceptualised as taking place in unstable and mobile spaces made up of complex arrangements of culture, meaning, politics, bodies and movements" (p. 3). This captures something of the dynamics involved in the regular, seasonal evacuations of First Nations communities in Manitoba due to wildfires and overland flooding. I conceive of this movement from periphery to centre, north to south, rural to urban, and sacrifice zone to protected zone as constituting a flow—a particular type of movement associated with bodies of water.[2] In Manitoba, the metaphor of flow is particularly salient. During seasonal flood events, water is directed north via massive flood control infrastructure designed to disrupt and divert the natural flow of rivers and lakes to protect urban, agricultural and industrial development in the south at the expense of Indigenous territories in the north. This induced flow overrides natural hydrological pathways and precipitates the forced movement of climate evacuees who flow away from environmental danger in their home territories, and into a different environment of potential danger in the cities of the south—one comprised of precarious housing, devalued and decimated urban environments, proximity to the violence of drugs and gang activity, and subject to securitization by private and public agents. Thus flow, as a specific type of movement or forced mobility, is an apt way to conceptualize the displacement of Indigenous communities due to routine climate emergencies.

Focusing on the inequities bound up in movement and mobility, this paradigm allows us to think critically about who is compelled to move while others are afforded opportunities to stay in place during natural disasters, including wildfires. Writing about Australia's bushfires, Lundberg (2022) points out:

> … an out of control fire threatens the freedom and wellbeing of many people and other species. Examining such fires through a mobile lens is to scrutinise the way fire travels (or does not), is contained (or not) and takes account of the complexity of fighting fires on multiple sites as well as the concomitant problems of evacuation during fire. (p.7)

The forced mobility of evacuations during wildfires and other climate emergencies compounds colonial injustices for Canada's Indigenous peoples who were forcibly (re)moved from traditional territories and resettled on lands prone to regular environmental disasters (see Gowriluk, 2022). A green cultural and mobile criminology is attuned to the ways forced movement is represented during and after environmental disasters, as well as efforts of evacuees to return to communities after wildfires and remain in place in a period of increasing uncertainty exacerbated by climate change.

The remainder of this article focuses on the meaning attributed to the forced movement of Indigenous communities due to wildfire evacuations in Manitoba, Canada. To better situate this mediated framing, a comparative analysis is undertaken with the recent evacuation of a well-known non-Indigenous community in the summer of 2024 due to a devastating wildfire in Jasper National Park, in Alberta, Canada.

Contextualizing Wildfires in Canada

Canada is a large, sparsely populated nation with most major cities concentrated along on the southern border. There are vast regions, particularly in the north, where wildfires occur frequently and largely out of sight and mind for most Canadians, burning on average, "2 million ha each year in Canada … an area more than twice the size of Yellowstone National Park" (Beverly & Bothwell, 2011, p. 572). Evacuations due to wildfires have occurred in every year since 1980, the earliest that data has been compiled by the Canadian Forest Service in its Canadian Wildland Fire Evacuation Database (CWFED) (Christianson et al., 2024, p. 2). Despite challenges collecting complete and accurate data during evacuations due to considerable undercounting, the CWFED shows that evacuations have become more frequent over the last decade due in large part to human induced climate change (Christianson et al., 2024):

> This trend in evacuation numbers may be influenced by a number of factors, including climate change effects on fire activity (e.g., more large fires, increased area burned, lengthened fire season …, increased fuel hazard around communities from fire exclusion in many parts of the country …, changes in land use and the number of people living at risk of fire … and changes to fire management or evacuation policies, preferences, or risk tolerances. (p. 14)

Indeed, the summer of 2023 saw unprecedented wildfires and evacuations in Canada, with smoke shrouding most major Canadian cities, and even some U.S. cities, including New York and Washington DC. While media reports fixated on the poor air quality of southern urban centres, a record number of Canadians were evacuated due to threats from fires and smoke. In

2023, 232,000 people were evacuated from 12 out of 13 provinces and territories during "282 events, the most evacuees of any fire season since records began in 1980" (Jain et al., 2024, p. 8).

While wildfire evacuations sometimes include urban areas or larger towns, Indigenous peoples, particularly those on remote First Nations Reserves were "the most common type of community to experience wildland fire evacuation between 1980 and 2021, representing 34.6% (482) of evacuation events" (Christianson et al., 2024, p. 8-10) despite comprising only 5% of Canada's overall population (Statistics Canada, 2023). When including non-Reserve communities where more than 50% of the population is Indigenous, the proportion jumps to 41.9% of wildfire evacuations (Christianson et al., 2024). First Nations communities also comprise nearly all of the most frequently evacuated locations in Canada and 90% of all evacuations due solely to smoke (Christianson et al., 2024). Finally, it is important to note that "many of these [frequently evacuated First Nations] communities also face frequent impacts from other natural hazards (e.g., floods) resulting in even more evacuations" (Christianson et al. 2024, p. 15).

Jones et al. (2024, p. 3604) point out that the impact of wildfires is much more significant for Indigenous communities, leading to "climate justice issues". This results from Indigenous peoples':

> … proximity to the land and resources from which their cultures, livelihoods, and often food and medicines derive. Once landscapes are degraded through fire, the access and abundance of various resources can be shifted. At the same time, these communities are often less supported by the state due to … political and economic marginalisation, linked to systemic socioeconomic disadvantages. (Jones et al., 2024, p. 3665)

The marginalization of Indigenous First Nations communities also extends to coverage by news media, which devotes considerably more attention to non-First Nations evacuations, while constructing events in starkly different terms, as I demonstrate below.

The present analysis is part of a larger project analyzing evacuations of Indigenous communities in Manitoba due to environmental disasters over the past 25 years. This article focuses on a considerably shorter time period, comparing news media representations of wildfire evacuations in Manitoba First Nations Indigenous communities with a non-Indigenous community during the summer fire season in 2024. According to provincial government figures, there were 305 wildfires in Manitoba during the 2024 season. Thousands of First Nation's residents were evacuated, including 2,500 people from the Bunibonibee Cree Nation alone. Additional First Nations impacted by fires reported in news media in 2024 included: Mathias Colomb Cree Nation (Pukatawagan); Manto Sipi Cree Nation; Garden Hill First Nation; God's Lake Narrows First Nation; St. Theresa Point First Nation; Red Sucker Lake First Nation; Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation (Nelson House), Tataskweyak Cree Nation, and York Factory First Nation, among others. Several Manitoba towns and municipalities with a majority Indigenous population, such as Cranberry Portage, were also evacuated in 2024. Although exact numbers are scarce, based on figures quoted in the news media and government fire bulletins, over 3000 First Nations people were evacuated at some point in 2024 in Manitoba alone. Large numbers of these evacuees were housed in hotels and temporary reception centres in larger towns and cities in the south, mainly Brandon and Winnipeg, Manitoba's two largest cities.

During the same time period, the picturesque rocky mountain resort town of Jasper, Alberta was also evacuated due to a massive wildfire that destroyed approximately 30% of the town's structures. While the Jasper evacuation was very large (in the thousands), figures were heavily distorted by a large number of visitors and temporary residents. According to census figures, approximately 5000 people permanently reside in Jasper. Given the similar population size and temporal proximity of evacuations in Manitoba First Nations and in Jasper, these sites were selected for a comparative analysis of news media framing.

Method

Keyword searches were undertaken in the ProQuest Canadian Newsstream Collection database, targeting the three largest local newspapers in Manitoba (*Winnipeg Free Press*, *Winnipeg Sun*, and *Brandon Sun*), as well as Canada's two national newspapers (*Globe and Mail* and *National Post*). This approach yielded 50 individual news items about the 2024 Jasper evacuation and 27 individual news items about all First Nations wildfire evacuations in Manitoba during the 2024 fire season (see Table 1).

Table 1

Evacuation News Items by Newspaper, 2024

	Evacuation event	
	Jasper, Alberta	All First Nations, Manitoba
The Globe and Mail	24	3
The National Post	9	-
The Winnipeg Free Press	3	12
The Winnipeg Sun	13	3
The Brandon Sun	1	9
Total:	**50**	**27**

News items were analyzed qualitatively and thematically (Braun & Clarke, 2006) in order to assess how the media framed environmental disasters and evacuations in Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities. This included the impact of the event (framed in economic, cultural, or other terms), causes of the event (who or what is to blame?), and finally, the way evacuees themselves were constructed in media reports, as groups in danger, or constituting a form of danger in themselves.

Findings

Overview

There was a small amount of anticipatory news coverage prior to the Jasper fire reaching the townsite and none prior to any of the Manitoba First Nations wildfire evacuations. For both locations, most news coverage was episodic, and the largest focus was on the immediate impact of the fires, focusing on damage to natural and built environments, the displacement of residents, and firefighting efforts. However, more than a fifth (22%) of the Jasper coverage focused on recovery efforts and the return of evacuees, and 18% of Jasper articles debated causes and attempted to allocate blame. In contrast, considerable coverage of Manitoba First Nations focused on the negative impacts to host communities (18.5%), and broader issues of justice (11.1%) for Indigenous climate evacuees (see Table 2).

Table 2

Focus of Wildfire News Coverage by Location, 2024

	Location	
	Jasper, Alberta	All First Nations, Manitoba
Warning	6% (3)	-
Impact	43% (23)	59.3% (16)
Return and recovery	22% (11)	7.4% (2)
Blame and causes	18% (9)	3.7% (1)
Justice	4% (2)	11.1% (3)
Host communities	4% (2)	18.5% (5)
Total:	**50**	**27**

Below, I describe key findings from the qualitative, thematic and comparative analysis touching on the immediate impact of the wildfires; the specific nature of the loss and destruction; the divergent media framing of evacuees; allocation of blame; and broader issues of environmental justice.

A Tale of Two Disasters

A front page feature in the *Globe and Mail* on the Jasper wildfire began as follows:

> Nails are scattered on the ground where a wooden fence once stood, charred by fire and relieved of their binding duties. A bucket of dog toys and a faded hockey stick are on the ground, under a tree, next to a stone path leading to a pit that was

once a building. Red Adirondack chairs, melted at the tips, sit in front of what was once a café in Jasper, Alta., the Rocky Mountain town devastated by wildfires last week. (Tait & Durrani, 2024, p. A1)

Media coverage was replete with heart wrenching and almost lyrical depictions of the destruction of Jasper, Alberta. One *Globe and Mail* report described the scene as "utter devastation"(Smith et al., 2024, p. A1). Jasper's Mayor was quoted in another report stating, "The destruction … defies description and is almost beyond comprehension" (Black, 2024, p. A4). Federal cabinet minister Randy Boissonnault stated that the destruction is, "on a scale that is hard to imagine. It is heartbreaking" (Durrani, 2024, p. A7). A Parks Canada official said the fire was beyond their capacity to fight with flames, "reaching more than 100 metres [300 feet] above the treetops … It's just a monster at that point. There is no tool we have in our toolbox to deal with that" (Black, 2024, p. A4). A hiker described the scene upon returning to Jasper, "I felt like I was in a movie about the apocalypse" (Kaufmann, 2024, p. A4).

A feature in the *National Post* included detailed accounts and photos of the destruction by longtime resident and retired journalist David Harrap, one of the last people to leave the town. According to Harrap, the ruined town, "almost looks like how it looked in World War One, the mud in the Somme and all that, [with] these skeleton trees on the skyline" (Dawson, 2024, para. 24). Media reports described public officials becoming emotional during press conferences. Alberta Premier Danielle Smith was reportedly, "overcome with emotion as she spoke about the disaster" (Smith et al., 2024, p. A1). When Jasper Mayor Richard Ireland described the loss of entire neighbourhoods, one news report claimed that, "the words caught in his throat" (Delaney, 2024, para. 4).

Conversely, despite impacting thousands of people, there was almost no coverage of First Nations fires in Manitoba by national news media. Most local reports relied on government issued fire bulletins and news releases, with few stories containing firsthand accounts, and fewer containing compelling images. A few reports ran with social media images posted by evacuated residents, while others only included a map to locate the remote First Nations communities for unfamiliar readers. Most news reports were brief and included a description of the total burned area, numbers of evacuees, and something about firefighting efforts and priorities. For example, a few stories noted that critical infrastructure like cellular towers and electrical transmission lines were being prioritized by firefighters. However, there were no lyrical descriptions of charred hockey sticks and burned buildings, no emotional reactions by politicians, and no angry op-eds allocating blame for the disaster, like common media reactions to the Jasper wildfire (e.g. Tait & Durrani, 2024; Smith et al., 2024; McParland, 2024).

Framing the Destruction of Jasper

The media represented the impact of the Jasper wildfire through three predominant frames: economic, cultural and community. While some news items focused exclusively on one frame—particularly for stories emphasizing economic issues—stories sometimes invoked more than one frame in the same article.

The **economic frame** emphasized monetary losses for business and industry. More than a third (35.2%) of Jasper impact stories were framed in economic terms. For example, two *Globe and Mail* stories described the disruption of the main Canadian National (CN) Railway's rail line through Jasper and speculated about the "economic impact of the interruption in freight and commodity shipments" (Jones & Graney, 2024a, p. B1; Jones, 2024, p. B2). Another story described the impact to the multi-billion dollar Canadian tourism industry, citing reputational damage and lost visitors (Jones & Graney, 2024b, p. B1). A column in the *National Post* business pages called for a reduction in "red tape" regulating development in the National Park, to speed rebuilding (Varcoe, 2024, p. FP2), while a *Globe and Mail* columnist provided tips for business owners recovering from the disaster (Ren, 2024, p. B2). Several stories also noted that critical infrastructure, including the nearby Trans-Mountain pipeline which carries 890,000 barrels of oil a day through the Rockies, was undamaged by the fire and remained operational (Sinclair, 2024, p. A2). This was particularly ironic, given the connection between fossil fuels and climate change—cited in several articles as a potential cause of the Jasper fire.

Analysis revealed a second **cultural frame** that was prominent in news items about the destruction in Jasper. This frame emphasized the mythic and iconic nature of Jasper, tapping into nostalgia and other emotions. Stories framed in cultural terms suggested the value of Jasper must be understood in ways that transcend the economic use value of the town as a location of business or tourism. Alberta Premier Smith was quoted in several news items ascribing a special "magic" to Jasper: "To those in Alberta and around the world who have experienced the magic of Jasper, the magic is not lost and never will be," she declared (Smith et al., 2024, p. A1). This cultural frame was perhaps best articulated in a *Globe and Mail* op-ed that claimed the destruction of Jasper was more significant than other wildfires because the national park occupies a special place in the Canadian cultural imaginary, in contrast to other remote and largely unknown locations: "The world pays special attention when an icon is ravaged. Watching Jasper National Park and its townsite burn is like seeing an exquisite childhood home go

up in flames. It's not just a vast, unknown forest burning" (Cryderman, 2024, p. A5). Finally, King Charles III and Queen Camilla issued a statement on the Jasper fire echoing this cultural framing, quoted at length in the *Globe and Mail*: "We are immensely saddened to see the significant damage that has occurred in Jasper – a truly magical place, whose rugged and romantic beauty has captivated Canadians and travellers from around the world" (Woo, 2024, p. A15).

A third **community frame** emphasized the destruction of community, describing Jasper as a place of exceptional neighbourliness with a tight-knit population. More than this, articles adopting a community frame situated displaced Jasper residents within a larger imagined Canadian community, and as worthy of empathy and accommodation during the climate disaster. A *Globe and Mail* report exemplified this frame, citing the outlook of one displaced Jasper resident:

> … the loss of the houses isn't as devastating as the thought that the people in Jasper may have to be scattered across the country. The community can't be replaced, she says "I've travelled the world and there is nothing like Jasper anywhere. (MacDonald, 2024a, p. A1)

An op-ed published across Postmedia newspapers and appearing in the *Winnipeg Sun* penned by the head of Parks Canada resonated within this community frame. Headlined, "Jasper, your community is our community", the op-ed was partly a defense of the Park service's response to the fire, as well a restatement of the special cultural place of the park as "an icon of Alberta and Canada, cherished by Canadians and the world" (Hallman, 2024, para. 13). In keeping with the frame of community, the op-ed reassured residents that Parks Canada "grieve[s] the terrible losses with all Jasperites" (Hallman, 2024, para. 2).

In contrast, the impact of wildfires in Manitoba First Nations communities was not constructed through economic, cultural or community frames, given the marginal status of Indigenous lands and people in the province and lack of firsthand accounts in media coverage. Instead, coverage focused to a greater extent on First Nations evacuees, who were framed very differently than Jasper's displaced residents—not as community members, but outsiders forced upon host communities by disaster.

Kin and Community: Framing the Jasper Evacuees

Evacuees from Jasper were described in media reports as embodying a great sense of community, and stories invited readers to celebrate their resilience. A *Globe and Mail* feature noted that, "Despite their displacement, despite news that fire had scorched swaths of their once-picturesque mountain town, a sense of resolve is spreading among Jasper evacuees" (MacDonald 2024a: p. A1). Reports also highlighted efforts of the nearby town of Valemont, British Columbia to welcome evacuees displaced by the Jasper fire as family. The Mayor declared, "We're a kin community to Jasper. We'll do whatever we can for our neighbours" (Macdonald, 2024a, p. A1). In turn, evacuees were described as choking up when reflecting on their welcome to Valemont: "The love and support we have felt from this tiny community is amazing … Somehow, they've managed to host half of Jasper" (MacDonald, 2024b, p. A3).

In sharp contrast, coverage of Indigenous evacuees was either neutral, or negative, with some media accounts claiming evacuees were financial burdens and a potential source of crime and disorder for host cities in the southern part of the province. Evacuees were constructed as outside of the broader imagined Canadian community, and unable to adjust to life in a modern urban society. News media reports of First Nations evacuees utilized three prominent frames: a colonial frame, a danger frame, and a burden frame, described in detail below.

Culture Shock and Burden: Framing First Nations Evacuees

Adopting what I call a **colonial frame**, First Nations evacuees were depicted in media as out of step with modern society, and subject to culture shock when displaced to urban settings. One official quoted in a news report stated:

> It kind of interrupts with their daily living [Indigenous people]. And then when they go to Winnipeg, they don't know what to do there. They've never been to the city, so they have no clue what they should be doing. (Buffie, 2024, p. A3)

Reports like this affirm racialized stereotypes about Indigenous peoples and suggest a backwardness and lack of civilization in First Nation communities. Similarly, a *Brandon Sun* report cited an unnamed evacuee: "It's hard to watch … community members [Indigenous people] what they're doing … It's not often they see this kind of civilization" (Slark & McDowell, 2024, p. A2). News reports cited intoxication and disorderly conduct of First Nations evacuees, drawing on longstanding racist and colonial tropes of Indigenous people and alcohol. The author of a 2013 Red Cross study of Manitoba First Nation evacuees was quoted by a *Brandon Sun* columnist claiming:

it's a known fact that … when people are faced with these disastrous situations and prolonged time away, it can lead people into despair and different forms of relief. It could be alcohol. It could be any form of things. (Ross, 2024: para 3)

An unsigned editorial in *The Brandon Sun* echoed this sentiment, stating: "Displaced Manitobans [Indigenous people] don't want to be here, and they bring their frustrations as well as some of their own issues of drug and alcohol addictions with them" (*Brandon Sun,* 2024, para. 18). In tandem, these reports framed Indigenous evacuees as suffering from culture shock and unable to conduct themselves in a "civilized" manner in modern urban society.

A second **danger frame** cited violent and criminal conduct of evacuees. A *Brandon Sun* columnist claimed that police news releases contained "multiple reports of violent altercations involving men, women and teenagers … this is a situation that was set up to fail both the evacuees and the urban centres that are asked to host them." (Ross, 2024, para. 9-10). Media reports described an "an emergency meeting … where community leaders requested additional security presence at hotels where evacuees are staying in both Winnipeg and Brandon" (Slark & McDowell, 2024, p. A2). Media reports linked "alcohol, drugs and gangs" to the regular evacuation of First Nations (Ross, 2024, para. 4) and suggested that evacuations will inevitably produce frustration among evacuees leading to police having "their hands full" (*Brandon Sun,* 2024, para. 17).

A third media frame cited the **burden** of hosting First Nations evacuees. This included increased costs from police overtime and strains on emergency medical services (Slark & McDowell, 2024). An editorial claimed that a significant amount of the police overtime expense in 2024 was "racked up over the summer when Brandon was hosting wildfire evacuees" (*Brandon Sun,* 2024, para. 11). Local news reports also claimed that an increase in crime rates in host communities was driven by evacuees. A Brandon Police spokesperson stated that for certain offences, such as domestic assaults, "even one situation can significantly impact the percentages … with so many visitors and evacuees in town, the past several months can alter our city's crime numbers" (Odutola, 2024, p. A1). Overall, host communities were not described in media reports as sharing kinship with the evacuated Indigenous communities, and evacuees were framed as a burden or danger wholly unprepared to reside in civilized society. One columnist even suggested building a facility to house evacuees away from major urban centres in the south:

> Given the inevitability of future floods, forest fires and evacuations, it may make sense to stop relying on urban communities in southern Manitoba to house evacuees [Indigenous people] on a temporary basis, and instead consider creating a large, permanent facility closer to their home community—perhaps in a northern community such as Thompson—that is capable of caring for a large number of evacuees and providing the "wrap-around" services they need (Ross, 2024. p. 17)

Given Canada's dark history with Residential Schools (Woolford & Gacek, 2016) and the current vast overrepresentation of Indigenous peoples in its prisons (Chartrand, 2019), this suggestion to build a large facility to house Indigenous evacuees rather that work to welcome them in our urban communities foregrounds racial and cultural difference, while reverberating with unacknowledged colonial intent.

Blame and Justice

The Jasper wildfire became an opportunity for considerable debate in the news about climate change and the management of national parks by the Federal government, generally becoming polarized along political lines. A *National Post* opinion writer asserted that:

> Jasper evacuees can be forgiven for seeing their nightmare not as retribution by the climate gods but as an epic failure by a climate crusade committed to decades of moralizing, bad ideas and political posturing over practical remedies to predictable needs. (McParland, 2024, para. 4)

An editorial in the *Winnipeg Sun* called for a national firefighting force rather than, "funding more civil servants and more Chardonnay-swilling consultants" (2024, p. A10). Conversely, a column in the left-liberal *Globe and Mail* cited comments by a Federal Member of Parliament who claimed, "this is the world that climate-denying Conservatism will leave our children" (Cryderman, 2024, p. A5).

However, news items related to the Manitoba First Nations wildfires did not prompt similar debate about climate change. Instead, a few stories focused on broader questions of environmental and social justice. For example, one columnist claimed that First Nations communities were devalued by public responses to wildfires in Canada:

> It's good when Canada acts after losses such as the one in Jasper. No doubt something will be done to ensure it doesn't happen again [however] Communities such as Little Red River Cree Nation (Alberta) or — in Manitoba's case — Garden

Hill, Marcel Colomb and Pukatawagan are, perhaps, not viewed or valued in the same way Jasper is. (Sinclair, 2024, p. A2)

An op-ed in the *Globe and Mail* similarly drew attention to the disproportionate impact of wildfires on First Nations communities, calling it an "insidious aspect of wildfire displacement" (Bhagat, 2024, p. A11). Finally, in a report about Canada's crisis of missing and murdered Indigenous women, girls and two-spirit people (MMIWG2S+), part of the blame was attributed to First Nations evacuations: "Indigenous youths are made vulnerable [when] for example … young girls [are] forced to evacuate their homes … because of wildfires. Some have been approached in city hotels by adults who could be predators" (Malak, 2024, p. A6).

Discussion and Conclusion

Evacuations due to environmental disasters are becoming more frequent, and disproportionately impact Indigenous people worldwide. In Canada, First Nations people who are displaced by wildfires face hostility and increased securitization in host communities, and are framed in media accounts as uncivilized, prone to violence and criminality, and as "Other" to the imagined Canadian community. Contrasted with the media framing of non-Indigenous evacuations, like Jasper, Alberta, the colonialism and racism of environmental violence is laid bare. While Canada prides itself as a tolerant and diverse nation, the contrasting cultural framing of wildfire evacuees described in this study disrupts this national cultural myth. Applying a mobile and green cultural criminological framework reveals how this racist media framing works in tandem with other colonial and government resource management policies to compound environmental injustice for Manitoba's Indigenous peoples. For example, disaster mitigation infrastructure and planning prioritizes towns and cities in the south, allowing those residents to remain in place during major floods while sacrificing Indigenous lands in the north (Thompson et al., 2014). This prompts flows of evacuees into southern urban centres—communities who in turn reject First Nations' claims to community belonging while subjecting displaced persons to heightened social control and media stereotyping.

In conclusion, the foregoing analysis adds to green cultural criminological literature on the meaning attributed to environmental disasters, particularly events where colonial and environmental harm converge in slow violence. While fires impacting iconic Canadian places can become opportunities to raise awareness of climate change or engage in debate about forest management practices, this study has demonstrated that First Nations wildfire evacuations appear to be opportunities to reinforce racist and colonial prejudices and stereotypes that position Indigenous people as both dangerously uncivilized and outside the imagined Canadian community.

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[1] See also Salmansperger and Turbina (2025, p. 13) on "the structural explanations behind integrative media propaganda" in the case of anti-mining struggles in Germany, drawing on Herman and Chomsky's (2002) propaganda model.

[2] In Manitoba, flowing bodies of water are also associated with the slow violence of colonialism and human induced environmental degradation. For example, the flowing waters of the Red River regularly bring pollution and the danger of flooding to communities in the Red River valley, while also carrying the bodies of missing and murdered Indigenous women, girls and two-spirit people (MMIWG2S+), rendering the river a mass gravesite as well as an ongoing crime scene (Lam & Kohm, 2025).

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