

Book Club Kit Discussion Guide

Life in the City of Dirty Water by Clayton Thomas-Müller

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Biography

Clayton Thomas-Müller is a member of the Treaty #6 based Mathias Colomb Cree Nation also known as Pukatawagan located in Northern Manitoba, Canada. He is a campaigner for 350.org, a global movement that is responding to the climate crisis. He has campaigned on behalf of Indigenous peoples around the world for more than 20 years, working with the Indigenous Environmental Network, Black Mesa Water Coalition, Global Justice Ecology Project, and Bioneers, among others. Clayton has led Indigenous delegations to lobby United Nations bodies, including the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, UN Earth Summit (Johannesburg, 2002 and Rio+20, 2012) and the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues. He has coordinated and led delegations of Indigenous peoples to lobby government in Washington, DC, Ottawa, and the European Union (Strasbourg and Brussels).

Source: **Publisher's website**

<https://www.penguinrandomhouse.ca/authors/2210713/clayton-thomas-muller>



Feature Story by Shawn Connor

In new memoir, activist Thomas-Muller traces impact of extraction industries on First Nations, and his own life

Sept 01, 2021

In his recently published memoir, Clayton Thomas-Muller relates a childhood of abuse and dislocation. Uprooted from his ancestral home in northern Manitoba, he and his mother struggle to make a new life in Winnipeg.

“One of my goals is to share my experience as a First Nations Cree man growing up in an inner-city in Canada,” Thomas-Muller said. “Being a child of parents who both went to residential school is a shared experience. Growing up in the ‘90s and being impacted by gang culture is very much a shared experience that continues to echo even now in the Native community. A lot of us share the intergenerational impact that came with Canada’s 150 years of genocidal residential school policy.”

The memoir, *Life in the City of Dirty Water*, also charts his journey from community work to international activism with climate organization 350.org.

“I started out doing gang intervention work as a teenager in Winnipeg,” he said. “Every young Native person I talked to living in the inner-city all had similar questions to the ones I had: ‘Why is it so darn hard for Indigenous Peoples in Canada economically, socially, spiritually? Why are we represented in all the most negative statistics, whether it be adolescent pregnancy rates or suicide or incarceration and high school dropout rates?’ ”

These questions led him back to the land, and to consider his own story.

“Every family story leads to some kind of event, usually a collaborative effort between the private sector, maybe the extracting industries that tend to be adjacent to Indigenous communities in Canada, colluding with the federal and provincial government. This leads to people losing their ability to live off the land.”

His activism led him to California, then Vancouver, followed by Ottawa and eventually back to Winnipeg, where he now lives with his partner and two sons. His focus is now on the fossil fuel industry “and how that industry has duped and delayed action on climate change for decades.”

Much of his work takes him into isolated Indigenous communities, such as the North Slope Borough in Alaska and Fort Chipewyan in northern Alberta. The North Slope encompasses the National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska, as well as the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, and is home to the Indigenous group Iñupiat. Fort Chipewyan, predominantly made up of Cree and Chipewyan (Dene) First Nations and Métis people, is north of Fort McMurray and the Alberta oilsands.

Thomas-Muller finds hope in the growing movement of climate change activism, especially by children.

“Just over a year ago, Greta Thunberg came to Canada. Over one million children hit the streets and marched demanding a stop to the Trans Mountain Pipeline and that the Canadian government respond to the climate emergency. I was marching with my sons that day. It reminded me of what I’ve read about the civil rights movement in the United States. There was a shift in what was possible.”

There are still battles to be fought, and Thomas-Muller points to recent incidents “of oppression and violence by police” at the Fairy Creek blockade on Vancouver Island, where the RCMP has made more than 700 arrests, and legal challenges to Trans Mountain Pipeline protesters at Blue River.

He also notes that “residential school has never really ended in the Native community. There are more Native kids living in non-Native homes, or in facilities run by non-Native social workers, than there were in 150 years of residential schools. Indigenous people continue to live in terror under the settler-colonial state of Canada and its policies and its lack of meeting its side of the deal, particularly in treaty territories where I live, Treaty 1, and where my First Nation is, in Treaty 6.”

But Thomas-Muller’s life has turned out better than one might have expected from the traumatic upbringing detailed in his memoir.

“I wanted to share some of the things that I’ve gone through in my life, yet I’m still here. I get to be a dad. I work for a global organization fighting the good fight for climate justice. I live in one of the greatest cities on Mother Earth. Even with all the things that have happened, I want to normalize discussions about intergenerational impacts of residential school so that we can talk about these things. It doesn’t always have to be tears and trauma, it can also be funny, and about taking time to take in the beauty of the life that we’ve been blessed with and these lands that we share.”

Source: **Vancouver Sun**

In new memoir, activist Thomas-Muller traces impact of extraction industries on First Nations, and his own life

Conner, S. (2021, September 1). In new memoir, activist Thomas-Muller traces impact of extraction industries on First Nations, and his own life. *Vancouver Sun*.

<https://vancouversun.com/entertainment/local-arts/in-new-memoir-activist-thomas-muller-traces-impact-of-extraction-industries-on-first-nations-and-his-own-life>



Review by Matt Henderson

Warrior mentality: Thomas-Müller chronicles turmoil and triumphs in brave new memoir

October 16, 2021

According to Free Press columnist Niigaan Sinclair, there is a stark difference between settler and First Nation understandings of what it means to be a warrior. For white settlers, we tend to associate the notion with power, violence and fame; for the Anishinaabe, specifically, warrior is associated with terms like honour, protection, love, gift and heart.

Hearing and seeing Clayton Thomas-Müller for the first time in 2015, I was astounded by his courage, audacity and intellect. At a rally in Winnipeg, he took then-NDP leader Tom Mulcair to task, pulling the rug out from under his inability to take a stand on climate change. Mulcair was on the verge of potentially winning the first ever federal election for the NDP, but at the packed rally, Thomas-Müller stopped him in his tracks, revealing the leader's superficiality and lack of social democratic roots. Mulcair was unable to articulate in any real way a plan for ensuring environmental justice for Canadians.

Standing up for Indigenous rights, the biosphere and justice has been the heart of Thomas-Müller's work for decades. In his latest memoir, *Life in the City of Dirty Water*, he painfully and bravely reveals his journey through catastrophic pain, unbelievable odds and a reconnection to land, language and culture through his work defending Mother Earth.

Written in almost two parts — one consisting of childhood recollections, written in the voice of a child, and the other as he begins to engage in resistance to colonial and neoliberal forces — the memoir begins with his account of how his family was systematically ripped from the land. (Thomas-Müller grew up a member of the Treaty #6 based Mathias Colomb Cree Nation, also known as Pukatawagan, located in Northern Manitoba, and now lives in Winnipeg.)

Every step of his journey seemed to be coated with a certain degree of violence, isolation and anger. The genocidal policies of the Canadian state fundamentally changed his life forever and, as Thomas-Müller states, "My culture was slipping through my fingers."

But after bouncing from home to home, prairie city to prairie city, and escaping a life within the Manitoba Warriors, Thomas-Müller begins connecting with various social justice organizations, including the Aboriginal Council of Winnipeg, where he begins to learn to be an activist and an organizer, is mentored by elders and where his eyes begin to open up to a larger world. For Thomas-Müller, "You can't be an Indian and not be political."

And so following his escape from the streets of Winnipeg and youth correction centers, Thomas-Müller begins to work for Indigenous and youth organizations throughout Turtle Island and beyond, learning to support community action while fiercely engaging with the hegemonic and corporate forces which collude to govern and extract jointly. Not deterred by the constant struggle of being outgunned,

Thomas-Müller develops a keen and focused path: “...a warrior is defined by the struggle... It is his purpose.”

As he recounts his entry into his life as a land and water defender, Thomas-Müller connects more and more with the land, his Cree culture and his own healing. His honesty about his mistakes and the pain he has caused others is a beautiful cautionary tale for all of us — that life is not a binary transition from bad to good, or vice versa. The human condition is complex, in a state of flux.

Throughout the memoir Thomas-Müller admits to and confronts his rage: “I was angry. I was hard.” His anger manifested itself from a tough childhood marshalled from a loss of connection with his land, language and people coupled with generations of trauma.

And the anger was, and is, inevitable. “I saw violence and broken lives when I looked around downtown Winnipeg,” Thomas-Müller writes. “I saw communities systematically robbed all over Turtle Island. I saw the land itself raped and plundered. Who wouldn’t be angry?”

But as he grew and has grown, elders, his partner and now his two sons have helped focus his tremendous work with 350.org and communities all over the world. As he explains, “anger is not enough if what you want is justice.”

His memoir is an artefact of transformation — a transformation of a hardened youth who endured more tragedy and danger than most of us can imagine into a defender of people, land and the notion that all species and systems are connected.

For Thomas-Müller, this transformation is still ongoing, one in which, he writes, “I convert my anger into love.”

And it is this love that situates him back on the land, back dancing and connecting back to what it means to be Cree. Despite the anger, violence and isolation, Thomas-Müller continues to embody what it means to be a warrior: “Warriors are not defined by fighting. They are defined by fighting for.”

Source: **Winnipeg Free Press**

Warrior Mentality: Thomas-Müller chronicles turmoil and triumphs in brave new memoir

Henderson, M. (2021, October 16). Warrior mentality: Thomas-Müller chronicles turmoil and triumphs in brave new memoir. *Winnipeg Free Press*. <https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/arts-and-life/entertainment/books/2021/10/16/warrior-mentality>



Interview with Matteo Cimellaro

'Healing Is a Constant Thing': In Conversation with Clayton Thomas-Müller: Activist, writer and filmmaker discusses his new memoir and lifelong journey of healing

January 07 2022

Indigenous climate activist, writer, and filmmaker Clayton Thomas-Müller was raised in Winnipeg, a city named after the Cree word meaning “muddy waters.” His memoir, *Life in the City of Dirty Water*, published in August 2021, recounts his early years of dislocation growing up in the core of the Manitoba capital—from the domestic and sexual abuse he endured to the drugs he sold to survive (his first job was managing a drug house for the largest Indigenous gang in the country).

Clayton’s early struggles are only the beginning of his remarkable story, however. Years later, his immersion in Cree spirituality and reconnection with the land and his home territory of Pukatawagan led him on a personal healing journey that saw him become a leading organizer on the frontlines of environmental resistance, opening new pathways against the extractive forces perpetuating climate breakdown.

Indigenous rights, worldviews, and self-determination are medicines for the climate crisis, what Clayton might refer to as a “bush pharmacy.” These medicines were threatened by European colonial and economic systems like capitalism and residential schools. Since contact, Indigenous peoples have resisted—from the fur trade centuries ago to clear-cut logging and the tar sands today—and they continue to do so despite surviving a genocide that sought to eradicate their languages, ceremonies, traditional knowledge and philosophy.

Life in the City of Dirty Water chronicles both Clayton’s past and current work as a campaigner for the international climate justice organization 350.org, as well as his two-decade-long work as a campaigner for Indigenous peoples struggling against resource extraction projects. And the memoir is personal: it reads as if you’re at a coffee shop with Clayton discussing strategies about how to heal yourself and Mother Earth.

In this interview, which has been edited for clarity and length, *Canadian Dimension* sat down with Clayton to talk about his work as an activist, his journey of healing, and the importance of invoking the sacred.

Matteo Cimellaro: Can you explain your own process of healing and how that has informed your work as an activist?

Clayton Thomas-Müller: That’s been an arduous journey over the years. I’ve relapsed with alcoholism and drug abuse and self-destructive behaviours, usually in time of burn-out. Right out of working for the Manitoba Warriors, I went straight into the frontline doing gang intervention and decolonization work with young people in the inner city and on reserves. This crew I was part of was the Native Youth Movement; we would go into communities just with our bundles and pipes and open up with a pipe

ceremony and have conversations about decolonialism and about prophecy. We talked about the seven-generation prophecy, where Indigenous youth and allies will come together to enact a new age of healing and rebirth for Native people and Turtle Island.

Matteo Cimellaro: In the book, you constantly invoke love, care, and joy as essential parts of your healing process. Do you think it is necessary to have that love, care, and joy in your activist work? To transform the anger and resentment in the work into a project, an ethic, of care?

Clayton Thomas-Müller: Anger makes sense; it's a reality. Anger and fear and shame are words that pop into mind that our people carry disproportionately. And there's also under-resourcing. What feeds into that anger is all of the stereotypes that come from a very well-funded campaign from the colonial state, from corporations, from the private sector, and white supremacist social movement vehicles. They're all focused on one thing: to keep the Canadian economic engine going. And even though that engine's success is rooted in the dispossession of our people from our homelands, and the disenfranchisement from our collective right enshrined in section 35 of the Canadian constitution and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. These are inalienable rights that corporations, provincial governments, and federal governments aren't supposed to interfere with—they are Creator-given rights. And our people would refer to them as responsibilities as stewards to the land, air, water, and climate.

Anger is self-destructive. I write about this in the memoir. I used that little ball of condensed anger—it's like having a black hole inside of your belly—and I used the energy of that to strike out against our enemies, those people that would sacrifice our communities at the altar of irresponsible policy. Most of the time it would be our own Native people: *Indian Act* chiefs and councils who would be sitting across the table from government liaisons. Now that I'm a bit older and had a few battles, and have a few battle scars, I recognize how working from a place of anger and resentment and hatred and fear and shame, leads to you beginning to cannibalize yourself, and falling into negative patterns with yourself and others.

Matteo Cimellaro: Canadians might see a lot of Indigenous activism, especially blockades and pipeline protests as radical, perhaps even dangerous. Do you think there will be a time where the majority of Canadians will follow Indigenous leaders on issues like climate and self-determination?

Clayton Thomas-Müller: First off, I'm not interested in trying to appeal to the conservative voter who lives in the 3,500-square-foot house with a three-door garage, the pool in the back, and a cottage wherever. Because for the most part, when they hear about change, decolonization, human rights, white privilege, and dismantling white supremacy, they get scared. All they hear is you're trying to make my life less prosperous for me and my family.

The reality is Canadians are card-carrying, law-abiding citizens; if we change the system, if we change the law, Canadians will follow it, and will see how a lot of the problems that exist in society dissipate when we prioritize the most marginalized segments of society—when we prioritize First Nations, immigrants, migrants, and brown and black people in this country. Problems exist because 80 percent of Canada's population is white presenting; until white supremacy and colonization becomes a white

problem, problems will continue to exist, because these are the people that are benefiting from systems of oppression.

When a segment of society has control of the military, the police apparatus, economic things like mortgages and tax write-offs, and all the capital you've inherited, it's easy to not see what everybody else is going through. That's why you have labels on First Nations, but in reality, Natives have been subsidizing wealth in this country since its inception.

Matteo Cimellaro: That's putting it lightly.

Clayton Thomas-Müller: Yeah, and I think Native peoples are sick and tired of that. And white people are starting to fall through the cracks of the social safety net, and young people are woke nowadays, and even elementary kids have an analysis. One of the things I get optimistic about now is that 70 percent of the Native population is under the age of 30, so what we're going to witness over the next decade is this entrance into Canada's labour economy of workers that are Indigenous.

Matteo Cimellaro: Indigenous people prioritize their own form of reconciliation: reclaiming their lands, returning to ceremony, returning to forms of being on the land that honours the Creator. Can you speak to the journey from oppressive colonization to a healing predicated on the reclamation of Indigenous spirituality?

Clayton Thomas-Müller: Colonialism is the cause of our existential threat of climate change. We have CEOs in black suits coming into our communities promising quick-fixes and changing our relationship to the sacredness of the Earth through mass extractivism. Instead of Catholicism being the religion of the day, now it's capitalism.

But for me healing is a constant thing, like education, it's something you revisit; it's a well you draw from not just when you are in crisis, but also in celebration. When somebody is born, married, it's important to invoke the sacred. And that's something I still struggle with to this day: learning to be in balance and having an ongoing conversation with the Creator because that's something everybody should do and can do.

Source: **Nature Canada**

'Healing Is a Constant Thing': In Conversation with Clayton Thomas-Müller

Cimarello, M. (2021, January 7). 'Healing is a constant thing': In conversation with Clayton Thomas-Müller. *Nature Canada*. <https://naturecanada.ca/news/blog/healing-is-a-constant-thing-in-conversation-with-clayton-thomas-muller/>



CBC Story by Philip Drost (based on Radio Interview with Matt Galloway)

Lack of control over land leaves Indigenous communities exposed to pollution, says activist

Nov 03 2021

Environmental activist Clayton Thomas-Müller says Indigenous communities are too often left exposed to toxic pollution, particularly when they don't have power over the land they live on.

"Take a map of all of the most toxic, destructive polluting industries, the biggest climate changing industries, the most toxic industries," said Thomas-Müller, who is a senior campaign specialist with the advocacy group 350.org, and a member of the Mathias Colomb Cree Nation in Manitoba.

"If you lay that map out and you [overlay] a map of all the Métis hamlets, all in Inuit settlements, all the 600 plus First Nations, you see that every one of those facilities is, for the most part, directly adjacent to one of our communities," he told *The Current's* Matt Galloway.

Thomas-Müller gave the example of Aamjiwnaang First Nation, which is just south of Sarnia, Ont.

The community borders on the largest concentration of petrochemical plants and refineries in the country known as "Chemical Valley." For years, pollutants released into the air and chemical leaks from there have had significant impacts on air quality, waterways and soil in Aamjiwnaang.

The community believes poor air quality has contributed to asthma and cancer among its residents. That's backed up by a 2019 visit from a United Nations special rapporteur, which found that Aamjiwnaang First Nation, as well as other Indigenous and racialized communities in Canada, are disproportionately affected by toxic waste.

"There exists a pattern in Canada where marginalized groups, and Indigenous peoples in particular, find themselves on the wrong side of a toxic divide, subject to conditions that would not be acceptable elsewhere in Canada," wrote UN Special Rapporteur Baskut Tuncak.

Environmental justice is a theme of Thomas-Müller's new memoir, *Life in the City of Dirty Water: A Memoir of Healing*, which is also a short documentary. It details his experiences growing up in Winnipeg — surviving abuse, discrimination, juvenile detention and gangs, and turning that into a lifelong pursuit to protect the environment and Indigenous rights.

Material gains over symbolic gestures

Thomas-Müller said the solution is to give power back to Indigenous communities. He said that means concrete action, not just apologies or symbolic gestures like the National Day of Truth and Reconciliation.

"We have to talk about reconciliation and to Native people, that means land back," he said, adding that Indigenous peoples in Canada have a very small percentage of the country's landmass under their control.

"If Indigenous peoples had access to the land, water and resources, then there would be no poverty and things would be very different in this country."

Land Back is an Indigenous-led movement that aims to reclaim stewardship over traditional lands, something Riley Yesno supports. She's a writer and Indigenous rights advocate.

"The Land Back movement holds so much potential to see a different, sort of more equitable future for Indigenous people in this country," she told *The Current* in a recent interview.

"It's become this really robust policy stance, actually, which ... prioritises those material gains as opposed to symbolic gestures."

She explained that some aspects of reclaiming land might involve Indigenous communities receiving rent from people or organizations who use it. It might also mean having a say in things like hunting or harvesting wildlife, and ensuring that's conducted "in accordance with their values, as opposed to the federal government or provincial government standards."

"It's basically about Indigenous people asserting their sovereignty and jurisdiction," she said.

Thomas-Müller said more control would allow Indigenous communities to decide what industries operate on the land, and limit pollution accordingly.

Some communities may want industries nearby, for the jobs and prosperity they offer, but the choice would be up to the community, he said.

Thomas-Müller has spent a lot of time fighting for his people as an activist. He said that as an Indigenous person, he doesn't have a choice but to be political.

"If you're native, life is political no matter what ... Indigenous peoples, we face a lot of systemic challenges that other people benefit from who are not Indigenous," said Thomas-Müller.

"We've got a long way to go to try and break that polarity and create some equity."

Source: **CBC Radio – The Current**

Lack of control over land leaves Indigenous communities exposed to pollution, says activist

CBC Radio The Current Interview Transcript

Drost, P. (2021, November 3). Lack of control over land leaves Indigenous communities exposed to pollution, says activist. *CBC Radio*. <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/thecurrent/the-current-for-nov-3-2021-1.6235180/lack-of-control-over-land-leaves-indigenous-communities-exposed-to-pollution-says-activist-1.6218178>



CBC Radio Story



CBC Radio Interview

Video Interview with Lindsey Deluce

Memoir shares moving story of survival, healing and highlights urgent Indigenous issues

August 23, 2021

View and listen to this interview on CTV Your Morning on ctv.ca: <https://www.ctv.ca/shows/your-morning/memoir-shares-moving-story-of-survival-healing-and-highlights-urgent-indigenous-issues-s6e1>

Source: **CTV Your Morning**

CTV Your Morning. (2021, August 23). *Memoir shares moving story of survival, healing and highlights urgent Indigenous issues* [Video]. CTV. <https://www.ctv.ca/shows/your-morning/memoir-shares-moving-story-of-survival-healing-and-highlights-urgent-indigenous-issues-s6e1>



Discussion Questions

1. Throughout the book, Thomas-Müller connects his experiences and the experiences of his family to the relationship between First Nation people and the government. What ideas about this relationship did you have before reading this book? Did the book offer you new information or change your preconceived notions?
2. Thomas-Müller made a distinction between Native people who lived off the land, but may not know the ceremonies, and those who lived in the city, but knew how to pray in a sweat lodge. What do you think are the unique challenges that urban Indigenous youth face?
3. The author speaks unflinchingly of how he expressed and processed his anger and other negative feelings such as shame and resentment. Did the emotional thread of the memoir resonate with you? Do you think you can use your anger for good?
4. One review called this memoir, “an artefact of transformation” while the subtitle is “a memoir of healing.” Through all the good and bad events in Thomas-Müller’s life, which events and people contributed most to his healing?
5. How does Thomas-Müller approach decolonization as a parent and as an activist?
6. How deep is your understanding of the extractivism that Thomas-Müller mentions underlining the relationship of governments to the land?
7. On page 100, Thomas- Müller writes: “Activism is not easy to define. You do it for yourself, and you do it for others. Sometimes it requires you to follow the rules, and sometimes the right path is to break the rules. Sometimes you appeal to others’ sense of what is right, and sometimes you know that will be a waste of time. Sometimes it means collaboration and compromise, and sometimes it is raw confrontation.” What can we learn and put to use from his example and experiences?
8. In the last segment of the book, called “fire,” Thomas-Müller shows us a vision of what he is fighting for and relates the lessons he has learned so far. How would you respond to this vision? If you were to write your own version of this, what would be your vision of your community?

Discussion Themes

Family relationships and domestic violence | Addiction | Trauma and healing | Sexual assault | Environmental activism