

*On the Story of the Rise of the Native Rights Based Strategic Framework of Petrocultural Politics*

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The exploitation of the Athabasca tar sands, as one of the world's largest industrial mega-development ever, projects a spatial monumentalism seemingly fated to defy the very speed with which the sand now falls in the hourglass at the climate change endgame of oil. Wood Buffalo Regional Municipality, incorporated in 1995 to provide administrative grip on the development, is one of the world's largest municipality, spanning sixty-eight thousand four hundred and eighty-four square kilometres, a vastness that only magnifies in the mind's eye the distances between settlements in the north. Bitumen mining, whether open pit or steam injection wells, process 3.2 million tons of tar sand in order to produce 1.6 million barrels of oil per day. (Government of Canada, 2011) The net water consumed in production is by volume a staggering two to four times greater than this yield of oil daily. (Mikula et al. 2008) Toxic tailing ponds now cover an area more than one hundred and thirty square kilometres in total, holding more than 760 billion litres of legacy effluent sludge. (Grant 2009) Press reports of occasional visitors to the region invariably depict them upon their return through the portal to quotidian urban distractions as either stunned or awestruck, in any case left speechless, by their glimpse of an infinity whose tracks, roads, dikes, lines and asymptotes appear well nigh alter-planetary; and are

indeed now famously visible from outer space itself. Such Jupiterian imagery then collides with another order of unlimited magnitudes, that of globalization, of the “emerging markets” of China and India, of ceaseless urbanization, transportation and communication density and intensity, in a rare conjunction of the spheres of production and consumption in the order of popular representation. It is at this point that Atlas’ knees suddenly buckle and the ebb and flow of these spatial images abruptly crystallize into a thought of time, urgently calculating the years or decades before one or another finitude, of climate or culture or energy or environment or of them all, overtakes us. “Oil capital seems to represent a stage” notes Imre Szeman (2007, 806) in an essay that queries just such limits to the imagination “that neither capital nor its opponents can think beyond.” Indeed, this latest postmodern gasp of modern Prometheanism, the good old Yankee “can do” optimism with which the Americans set off to do a “Japan” on Iraq, now seems to have trained its formidable ray-guns on just such planetary oblivion. “Drill, baby, drill” as the American electioneering slogan went not so long ago is now realized by the actual frenzy of fracking tight plays from Dakotan shale as well as Athabaskan sand, while from the far reaches of a new subterranean frontier of natural gas swirl nebular hope that North America will become a net petroleum exporter as soon as 2030. (World Economic Forum 2013: 24) The panic of standing over the peak of oil then as abruptly drops into the vertigo of another universe promised of plenitude and prosperity before time and space implode into each other again and the dark seas beneath our feet rise and drown us once more. Through the crackling noise of such fluctuations of desire and fantasy, of such oscillations in media and technocultural imaginaries, there now circulate discourses of Canada’s emergence as an energy superpower, its withering into a petrostate as well as the displacement of its national multiculturalism with some kind of

new petrocultural nationalism. This essay navigates these uncharted currents in our passage between empires and queries this new conjuncture now looming on the horizon. As such, this essay is an exploratory probe that cannot plumb the full depths of this passage, as doing so demands a collective effort. Nor does it claim to sound anywhere near all the main channels between residual, emergent and dominant cultural formations flowing through this passage. Rather, this essay restricts itself to the more limited task of theorizing the emergent modes of popular political contestation at hand, what is being called the “native rights based strategic framework” and, in relation to this, the transcendental-historical conditions of possibility of class politics after the politics of difference and intersectionality.

### **Resource Curses of a Petrostate**

Wood Buffalo along with much of Alberta has been living with what scholars of boom and bust resource economies call the “resource curse” ever since the oil and gas industry displaced agriculture and forestry over the postwar decades as the primary sector of production in terms of investment and growth. The expansion of tar sands exploitation, however, has exacerbated virtually all aspects of this curse. The environmental damage and danger of course is now the most widely known. Tar sands mining accounts for almost 12% of Canada’s greenhouse gas emissions and almost 44% of the increase of emissions since 2006, making it impossible for the government to meet even its own modest target of a 50% reduction from 2005 levels by 2050 (Kyoto and other targets measure from a baseline of 1990). (Grant 2009). Moreover, the scale of the operations are slated to increase threefold to 7.2 million barrels per day by 2020. (Government of Canada, 2012) This expansion (potentially sprawling over an area

as large as the province of New Brunswick) and the spokes and cutlines of roads and pipelines serving the region is resulting in wildlife habitat destruction and forest fragmentation Amazonian in scale. As notorious is the strain the development is placing on Wood Buffalo's water supply from aquifers, glaciers, rivers, and lakes. The seepage of toxins from tailing ponds of sludge that is the byproduct of the extraction process back into the groundwater or the smudge of airborne pollutants now proven to be falling into the lakes and rivers (Gosselin et al. 2010, Kelly & Schindler et al. 2010) is equally calamitous. This toxic pollution, spreading through the food chain along the Athabasca river basin, is suspected by some health professionals to be connected with elevated rates of cholangiocarcinoma and other several rare cancers and diseases, especially among the Mikisew Cree, Métis and Athabasca Chipewyan First Nations of the downstream community of Fort Chipewyan on the shores of Lake Athabasca. (Weinhold 2011)

This form of intoxication has been accompanied by a deepening problem of substance abuse which is only one manifestation of frontier anomie and alienation not only in the boomtown of Fort McMurray, in the eye of the storm, but throughout Alberta. (Alberta Alcohol and Drug Abuse Commission 2011, Parkins and Angell 2011) Indeed, growing income inequality between those inside the high wage zone of the region's division of labour and those outside it, combined with the demands of precarious shift work, work-camp isolation, and transience has been connected with deepening problems of violence against women, homelessness, sexual exploitation, gambling, illness, injury and the degradation of health, abandonment and neglect of children and the elderly. (Gibson 2007, Newhook et al. 2011, Sanford 2005). Moreover, as alarming has been the corruption of public authority itself. While the Alberta government has downplayed the gravity of these problems and denied their connection to tar sands development,

they have moreover systematically deceived the public regarding the energy and effectivity with which it regulates industry (it is essentially self-regulating) and, most egregiously, monitors water quality which critics have demonstrated amounts to no more than bogus public relations (Hodgkins 2011, de Souza 2012, Weinhold 2011). If this were not bad enough, both provincial and federal governments conspired to silence and bury news of the incidences of cancer in Fort Chipewyan by intimidating the town's physician, Dr. John O'Connor after he notified Health Canada of his concerns. In an extraordinary move, Health Canada, Environment Canada and Alberta Health filed a complaint against O'Connor with the Alberta College of Physicians and Surgeons. O'Connor was thus formally investigated (and eventually cleared of the spurious charges). Moreover, Health Canada's initial report dismissing the community's concerns was demonstrated to be misleading by the Alberta Medical Association's own subsequent investigation. (Cormier 2010).

The pathologies of such a resource curse, however, project themselves over a national scale as well. As Jeffrey Simpson (2012) has observed, tar sands oil has relocated core and periphery in the federal distribution of state power from east to west. Ontario and Quebec, the locus of regional power since Confederation, with Quebec's local cultural political concerns influencing federal politics from the Quiet Revolution to the last referendum, have been sidelined by the Harper government. Indeed, Quebec, sending the majority of NDP MPs to the current parliament, is now the regional centre of cultural political opposition to the new formation of hegemony emerging nationally. During the last provincial election in Ontario, Dalton McGuinty blamed (with considerable justification) the expansion of tar sand oil production for further burdening Ontario's manufacturing industry by keeping the Canadian dollar's exchange rate with

the U.S. dollar high. (Stanford 2006, 2012; Howlet and Walton 2012) Such are the ambitions of power in Calgary that even talk of a National Energy Policy, once anathema, have been revived. (Priaro 2012)

For a growing number of commentators on the Canadian left, such developments underway since the Stephen Harper Conservative minority government came to power (in 2006) presage a transformation of society and state into what scholars of resource dependency call a “petro-state”; a polity that is subordinated and restructured according to the needs of either the Big Oil multinationals or the global political economy of oil or both: Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Russia, Venezuela are among the most commonly cited examples. To this list we should now include ourselves: “The rapid development of the tar sands” writes Andrew Nikiforuk, “has not only blackened the country’s environmental reputation, but also dramatically undermined its political and economic character,” (2010a: 10). In Nikiforuk’s influential view, Canada’s “dismal record on climate change, and minimal investments in green energy, simply reflect a growing dependence on oil revenue, oil volatility, and petroleum lobbyists. As a consequence, Canada now shares the same sort of unaccountability and lack of transparency that marks fellow petro-states such as Saudi Arabia”. (2010a: 10) The Canadian Center for Policy Alternatives points to the “revolving door” of personnel between the petroleum industry and the Prime Minister’s Office, while exclusive, high powered lobby agencies such as Tactix Government Consulting, Global Public Affairs, Hill & Knowlton and Earncliffe Strategy Group, have ensured that Syncrude, Suncor, ConocoPhillips (Canada), Chevron (Canada), Petro Canada, Shell, Imperial Oil, Enbridge, Synenco, and Tech Cominco have regular access to government ministers and senior federal government bureaucrats. Between September 1st 2011 and

September 1st 2012, for example, the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers met with government ministers no less than fourteen times, and TransCanada Pipelines and Suncor each met with federal cabinet members thirteen times. (*Bitumen Cliff*, CCPA 2013: 34) As a Polaris Institute report moreover observes “The amount of face time the oil industry gets in Ottawa in personal meetings and other correspondence greatly exceeds the time afforded other major industries in Canada . . . No one doubts the hold the oil industry has on this current government, but it is important Canadians are aware that such a high rate of lobbying to federal ministers has strong policy implications.” (Cayley-Daoust and Girard 2012: 12)

Such assessments of the present state of affairs, however, are only as good as the political responses they enable. This indeed is a cardinal point for cultural studies. In moving from a discussion of petro-states to a discussion of petroculture, we cannot remain content with merely shifting registers from the domain of politics to that of culture, thereby reifying both. Our interrogation of petrocultures must at the same time move back from culture to politics insofar as conjunctural analysis seeks to understand the array of forces constitutive of the terrain of counter-hegemonic struggle. Cultural studies in this way insists on the immanence of politics, that its trajectories and vectors never transcend cultural production and social reproduction, let alone history. Such a stance not only constitutes cultural studies’ materialism but is also the core of its broader intellectual significance. This argument from cultural studies takes us beyond the standard procedures of normal political science and political philosophy, including any mystified wait for miraculous events.

## **The Lock of World Enclosure**

And yet after the debates regarding globalization and the interventions of postcolonial theory, the temporality of conjunctures have turned out to be considerably more complicated than it is still too often assumed. In the present context, we encounter this complication in the contingency that whereas in the dominant theories produced in the world capitals of culture a local decline in manufacturing allegedly gives linear rise to postindustrial knowledge society (Beck 2000, Giddens Lash and Urry 1987, Urry 2007, 2013), to “network society” (Castells 2000) to a world of immaterial labour (Hardt and Negri 2000, 2004, 2009) and postmodern production (Harvey 1989), our conjunctural transition involves instead a return to resource dependency. Mel Watkins (2007) reminds us that the current preponderance of resource industries over manufacturing entails a repetition with a difference of the characteristic features of Canada’s national economic development and its prehistory. Harold Innis (1995) theorized this as the “staples trap”: from the cod fisheries, the fur trade, the wheat boom, pulp and paper to hydroelectricity and now oil, society and culture in this corner of the world economy have been recurrently shaped by the limits the itinerary of our passage between empires keeps imposing on each conjuncture. Social historians call this form of historical over-determination—the limits the past impose on the present—“path dependency”. Innis’ theoretical point of departure is the very materiality of the non-identity of Europe and North America. Against both the a-historicism of the dominant trends in the discipline of economics of his time and the linear “space bias” of modernization theory’s teleology of “the industrial take-off”, Innis intervenes with a historiographical aesthetic that foregrounds the specificity of location and its marginality to

centres of accumulation of power and capital. Innis' concept of staples is consequently a dialectical one in the way it negotiates the oppositions between politics and culture, economy and society, space and time, centre and margin. It thus demystifies the fetish ontology of the commodity by concretizing what contemporary theoretical jargon would call the "assemblage" to which the commodity belongs or what Marx (1975) similarly unmasked as the social relations of which it is comprised. The focus on the social and historical materiality of staples (rather than on the abstraction "commodity", by definition anything and everything sold on any market) brings to the foreground the relationship between the centre of empire and its margin, as staples production and trade is contingent upon the needs of the centre and remains entirely dependent on the centre for its development and growth. Insofar as staples production fulfills such a need, the imperial centre actively maintains the marginality of the margin in an imperial scale social division of labour. But this spatial relation turns out to be a temporal one. A key aspect of what makes a staples economy a trap, Innis argued, is the very high overhead costs they entail. For example, the fur trade required an initial heavy outlay in renting ships, loading them with outbound trade goods, building and maintaining remote trading posts, providing for sailors and traders all in the face of an extensive turnaround time for the capital advanced. Furs could take five years or more to reach markets and realize profits. Innis outlines several consequences from these contingencies. Fur trading was a matter of high finance, excluding small players, but also a matter of political connections as the use of army and navy was necessary for creating and preserving the monopolies on which profits depended. Extensive turn around time for capital invested placed a premium on inventing strategies for controlling time by spatializing it. On the one hand, the governmental apparatus of the fur trade was highly centralized. On the other hand,

the heavy burden of carrying the debt was distributed and downloaded to each factor and trapper, recreating a centre-margin relationship of dependence at another more local scale. Innis (1995: 140-158) argues that the very success of this system becomes the ground for its subsequent failure, a dialectical thesis that runs parallel with Marx's more general account of the crisis tendencies of capitalism. Insofar as the fur trade surmounted its obstacles and accumulated capital effectively, the established assemblage of technical, economic, social, cultural, political solutions turned into "rigidities" and vested interests incapable of further innovation and creativity and was thus left vulnerable to the dynamic transformations taking place at the centre. Briefly, when beaver hats went out of fashion in Europe, fur trade society went into crisis and its ruling elites were institutionally deterred from undertaking innovations, though some scatter shot efforts were made, that would put the colonial society at the cutting edge of industrialization. It is important to note, however, that remaining caught within the staples trap is not a matter of fate. What are called backward, forward and final economic linkages can lead to other transformations, as indeed happened to some extent over the second half of the twentieth century when war time industry spurred further manufacturing while hydroelectricity and lumber were linked forward to aluminum smelting and pulp and paper. But colonial elites searched by and large for a transformation within the framework of the staple assemblage, renewing a marginal relationship to the centre by replacing the fur trade with square timber and the wheat boom. Thus Innis' account of the articulation of New France, British North America, Canada with the world economy in terms of a series of staple traps from the cod fishery to pulp and paper and the subsequent analysis by Canadian political economists working in this tradition and bringing things up to date by including mining, hydroelectricity and oil confirms the world system

analysis thesis regarding the *longue durée* of a world scale division of labour between core, semi-peripheries and peripheries of the system of accumulation. (Wallerstein 2004) The conjunctural features of our petroculture that we are concerned with here includes the “deep time” of the world scale system of accumulation, a quasi-transcendental movement in our form of life, if you will. Moreover, such a quasi-transcendental will have everything to do with the class politics of the conjuncture specifically. For the historical determination of the social division of labour —of who does what and under what conditions— is crucially the stakes of class politics. So our probe of our conjuncture will not only need to examine the features of the staple trap specific to our petroculture but also the quasi-transcendental movement of class politics today.

### **Conjunctural Trappings of Time**

What avatar of the staples trap might then be articulating petroculture and petrostate in the current conjuncture? One aspect of this is no doubt what Brendan Haley (2011) has called a “carbon trap” and his argument is a useful place for us to begin. The investments necessary and the costs of production of bitumen mining were deemed prohibitive until the price of oil reached around sixty US dollars per barrel. Since then, bitumen mining has required heavy capital investment to bring this unconventional oil to market. Moreover, the process of separating oil from sand was developed through Canadian taxpayer funded research and the first Syncrude operation of 1978 was also heavily subsidized by the public purse. (Crane 1982, Haley 2011: 113) The scale of such investment is only amplified by investments in the urbanization of the boreal forest into the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo and in its administration as well as

in infrastructure connecting the site of production to global markets. The current political conflicts over various pipeline proposals incur a political investment in this resource as well whatever results from them. Moreover, the education and coordination of various forms of technical, administrative, financial, commercial and legal expertise entails a massive social investment in this industry even if not all of this was borne locally or nationally and, like the investment of political capital, defies measurement. Innis' writings on staples development enables us to understand how such high stakes in a monumental collective project creates a developmental "bias" and, in a world of high velocity, footloose capital, imparts inertia to the facticity of invested capital, especially in the form of vested political interests in preserving such a staple assemblage. Haley then draws our attention to the ways such stakes in resource development revert into the rigidities of a carbon trap. The broader context of bitumen mining is of crucial importance here, especially the urgent and escalating necessity for the world to revolutionize modes of production into low carbon energy paradigms. Various social, cultural, economic and political forces in play around the world are indeed searching for paths through to such transitions and this too is a decisive aspect of our current conjuncture. Understood against this backdrop, the full range of stakes now committed to tar sands megadevelopment—from infrastructure, money, desire, to forms of life and modes of social cooperation, institutional arrangements and other existences of time—constitute so many obstacles, locally, and nationally certainly but to some extent even globally, to the search for low carbon energy paradigms, *precisely because* the value and viability of these stakes depend on the deferral if not ultimate failure of such transitions taking place. Haley notes, for example, that both of the International Energy Agency's Current Policies Scenarios forecast global demand by 2020 to fall far below the

current planned expansion of bitumen production to 7.2 million barrels per day, resulting in an “unused capacity” crisis characteristic of the staples trap. The IEA’s first scenario assumes that governments take no further action regarding climate change, not even following through on current commitments, resulting in a catastrophic rise of average temperature by six degrees centigrade. In this case, global energy demand and world prices for oil continue to rise and tar sand mining expands to produce 4.6 million barrels per day by 2035. In their second scenario, governments do follow through on existing commitments to the fullest. The demand for oil in this case peaks at only four million barrels per day above current levels by 2020 after which it declines. The price of oil then reaches a ceiling at ninety dollars per barrel in 2020, at which point new tar sands projects are no longer worth undertaking. These would be only small steps toward a sustainable low carbon energy paradigm and jurisdictions not captive to the interests of the oil industry will only intensify their search for an alternative paradigm. “This battle over a future based on the persistence of an economic trajectory with oil as a key input” argues Haley “versus one that realizes the emergence of a green economic paradigm to reduce GHG emissions creates a series of vulnerabilities, uncertainties, and instabilities for oil sands interests.” (Haley 2011:115 ) Petrostate and petroculture as we are living it in Canada today, I will then want to argue, are articulated by the imperatives of just this battle.

### **The Multitude and the General Intellect**

One compelling provocation of Haley’s argument regarding our current carbon “lock in” is the unexpected light it sheds, not only on the interplay between cultural politics and class politics in this conjuncture but especially as this imposes itself on the cultural politics of the

university sector in Canada. As Haley observes, one needs to understand systemic innovation of the kind capable of making some transition to a low carbon energy paradigm in terms of learning processes across social and cultural assemblages through which trajectories of technological innovation unfold. (2012: 123) Moreover, Imre Szeman's (2007) study of contemporary discourses of oil capital underscores the importance of the imaginary to any actual transition process. As Szeman argues, "the problem" is as much a narrative one as it is scientific and technical, insofar as predictions and calculations are interpreted and acted upon in relation to social narratives of fear and hope. As is often enough noted, some kind of "interdisciplinary" education in the human, social and natural sciences, indeed precisely of the kind cultural studies programs often seek to provide, is a crucial condition then for the emergence of an environmentalist subjectivity capable of going beyond "nimby" reaction and finding a path through the blockages and limits of our contemporary carbon lock-in. With regard to one of its crucial, indeed Utopian and negative, determinations then, "petroculture" is nothing less than a generalized need for new kinds of people dispossessed of the habits of the recent past and so able to live together in new ways and invent the rationalities with which a new mode of social reproduction may be built. But this raises new stakes in the cultural politics of the university and we can begin to discern the outlines of class politics unfolding with this conjuncture by attending to just these stakes, especially if we extend the line of analysis opened by Edward Said in his masterwork on the politics of knowledge production, *Orientalism*. (1978)

It will be recalled that *Orientalism* concludes with a discussion of the postwar expansion of the university system and, in the US especially, the emergence of area studies programs answering to the needs of the Cold War. (284-328) Domination of the Middle East and control

over oil supplies of course was a crucial strategic imperative for fighting the Cold War and Said details both the continuities with and the displacements of nineteenth century Orientalism in the representational field of Middle Eastern studies that emerged with the new postwar university system. In doing so, Said famously inaugurates a key point of intersection between the cultural politics of cultural studies and that of postcolonial studies but it is rather several other implicit dimensions of his argument that is important for us here. First of all, the very expansion of the university system itself has often been described, problematically but not entirely wrongly, as its democratization. Insofar as the expansion of the Canadian university system entailed no-frills knock-off imitation of both U.S. and British models but within a mostly public framework at first, the characterization of expansion as democratization is less wrong in this instance.

Nonetheless, the contemporary theory of the multitude (Hardt and Negri 2004) needs to be contextualized in relationship to this historical rupture. The transformation of elite institutions for those born to rule into mass institutions is one key condition of possibility of the “making of the multitude”, though not the only one. The theory of the multitude seeks to discover a virtual body of political power and an immanent plane of commonality not only across different kinds of cultural and affective production, teaching, research, as well as diverse kinds of service work, all classified under the unfortunately misleading concept of “immaterial labour”, but with every other kind of proletarian wage dependency as well. For these ambitions, the theory has drawn criticism, especially from those who overlook the transcendental dimension of Hardt and Negri’s argument and then understandably fail to find the multitude anywhere in the heat and dust of our present. I will present a different kind of criticism of this theory below but for the moment will only underscore an Utopian desire animating this narrative character. One crucial dimension of

this Utopianism is the invitation the theory places before us to search through the wars of position mounted over the last few decades by the alterglobalization and anti-capitalist convergence of new social movements not only for some elusive and ever fleeting possibility of solidarity but also for their intersection with class politics under the changed conditions of globalized capital flows, debt crises and informationalized production, all which separate our conjuncture from the inaugural conjuncture of the new social movements in the world revolution of 1968. This search would have to include the various inroads these movements have made in the universities over this period as well as their current prospects in the face of relentless reclaiming of these institutions by proprietors of capital by means of public underfunding. This is the moment to then recall another implication of Said's intervention. The discourse of Orientalism is only possible through the mediation of its various discursive opposites. Cultural politics waged across and through the high culture/popular culture opposition consequently involved negotiation with projections of class and culture through each other. To make a long story short, US cold war strategists refurbished and deployed "the discourse of the West" in order to rehabilitate a former world war enemy, now West Germany, as a member of the NATO alliance. (Jackson 2006) One of the main fronts of contestation between the academic Right and the cultural studies Left that emerged in the wake of *Orientalism*, was comprised of the trenchwork of this last, late essentialism. The defenders of canons in the humanities sought to continue the ethnopolitical project of ontologizing the flag of this geopolitical class alliance through the rhetorical fabric of racialized particularity. The keyword of this project was the same as ours, "culture". Among the range of critical opposition to this project, two currents will be important for my argument below. The first of these are the interventions of postcolonial

theorists such as Anibel Quijano (2000) , Ranajit Guha (1988), Stuart Hall (1996), Arif Dirlik (1994) among others who argued that questions of our modernity/postmodernity, of contemporary cultural politics, of the legacies of Enlightenment, could not be productively addressed without our forging a new historiographical imagination able to grasp the links between colonialism and capital accumulation and their implications for the operations of power in the present. The second critical current is the reassessment of the significance of Marx's critique of the discourse of primitive accumulation by Michael Perelman (2000), David Harvey (2003), Kalyan Sanyal (2007) and especially Sylvia Federici (2004). These interventions not only deepen our understanding of the concept of exploitation, bringing to the foreground its inflection as an account of power. But they also enables us to restore to contemporary discussions of "the common(s)" its historicity. While Hardt and Negri's reformulation of this discourse on the commons usefully cuts through the reified opposition between nature and culture to include affects, codes, knowledge, language along with land, forests, and the seas as a kind of *dispositif* of the wealth, power and fullness of being (2009, 127), the result is a synchronic spatialization of this plenitude of biopolitical living labour power (including its exploitation). For Hardt and Negri and their followers, the singular but connected pasts of the common's formation are not granted any consequences in a present conceived to emerge without any environmental-historical path dependency.

Before we turn to those issues, however, it remains to be noted that the spatial turn in cultural studies has nonetheless made it possible to understand that beyond the matter of forging alliances under US leadership between different, competing factions of national and transnational proprietors of capital, the political tasks assigned to the discourse of the West included the

enclosure of a zone in the world economy clustered with what Innis called “monopolies of knowledge” constituted by technological innovation. (1997: 384-389) The construction and protection of monopolies of knowledge has been a crucial component of the strategy of capital accumulation since the rebooting of capitalist production under US leadership after the protracted crises of the first half of the twentieth century, culminating with the second world war, and especially so over the globalization decades, as intensifying competition between industrial producers increased the pressure on the rate of profit system wide. This then was the other main fault line of contestation with which the postwar university has been riven; by conflicts between the priorities of pure and applied research, over commercialization and corporatization, litigation over patents and copyrights, struggles against biopiracy, the emergence of the open access movement, and resistance, mostly ineffective, against the marginalization of the lone, iconoclast Arts researcher by the juggernaut of Schumpeterian entrepreneurs drilled into mega-productive research teams. In their many different ways these conflicts converge in a point of resistance to the continuing enclosure of the knowledge commons. The current crisis of the discourse of the West, coincident with the deep crisis of US world hegemony within a decade of an alleged cold war victory, is tied up with the intensifying contradictions of commodifying knowledge. This is a situation that G-8 governments do not know how to handle, alternately investing heavily in their universities only to suddenly slash budgets back in hopes of striking the right balance between stimulating “breakthrough” innovation and installing an “apparatus of capture” securing enclosure. (OECD 2013: 179) Nonetheless, the possibility of transitions to low carbon energy paradigms that Haley discusses also hinge on the outcome of these struggles against the continuing enclosure of the knowledge common, as proprietary knowledge cannot possibly

establish the rationality of low carbon energy based social and cultural practices. The current fiscal crisis imposed upon universities in Alberta as a spur to commercialization can then be better understood as an imperative of our petrocultural carbon trap; a tactic of system-shock born of the need to forestall the emergence of a new mode of social reproduction out of the multitude of innovations in the being of our times.

### **Time Bias of the Common**

Among the mediations connecting these strategic transcendentals of the cultural politics of knowledge to class politics beyond university campuses is the strategic significance of technological innovation in setting in motion “disruptive change” in the historically constituted practico-inert of the social division of labour. One dimension of this, especially relevant to cultural studies, involves the speed of technological innovation which undermines and devalues the experience and insight people might develop of the social and political materiality of production over the course of their working lives. Labour processes restructured from top to bottom and transformed beyond recognition from one generation to the next yield little by way of storied cunning and wisdom regarding the politics of production worth passing down to the young. The deskilling and planned obsolescence of labour power resulting from Taylorized line-assembly, then automation and now informationalization then is strategically also cultural political as much as it is a tactic of class politics. Continual “disruptive change” imposes tight constraints on the capacity for sites of production to give rise to autonomous cultural traditions. What Marx theorized as the real subsumption of production now includes this mediation of

popular culture by mass culture on the one hand and by what Lacan theorized as the university discourse of expertise on the other. Innis' diagnosis of the space bias of the industrialized world is instanced in such obliteration of the popular work culture of the past (and so of the future as well). (1997: 326- 346)

Innis' communication theory is thus helpful for formulating a critical cultural political response to such a situation, as his alternate critical category, time bias, points toward other marginalized, subordinated and exorbitant poles on the compass, instead of positing a symmetrical, and therefore imaginary, opposition between a-priori forms of space and time. To turn up the dial on the time bias against the space bias of our present, then, (this metaphor from the analog world itself gestures to the temporality of its obsolescence in the digital), requires another kind of cultural and technical innovation, one involving a form of social and historical poesis that breaks with Eurocentric plato to nato linearity in both of its dominant and widespread forms; whether of Heideggerian authentic civilizational continuity or its Foucauldian discontinuous opposite. At stake here is some aesthetic articulation of theory and praxis which very specifically takes up for its domain of intervention the temporality of the common. To this end, Innis' theory of the bias of communication can thus help us grapple with a structural ambiguity in the concept of the multitude that this discussion of cultural politics thus far implies and make the necessary adjustments that will enable us to map the class contradictions of this emerging conjuncture.

The multitude, as the "singularity of differences in common" is meant to serve, in Hardt and Negri's (2004, 2009) account, as a concept of class that builds on the insights generated by the literature and politics of intersectionality; and it is in this regard that this theory is

indispensable to our concerns here. But the possibility for the “making of the multitude” into an agent of class politics turns, for Hardt and Negri, on a noncontradictory linear advancement of Fordist industrial production into postmodern biopolitical production, and the emergence of a knowledge society with a service economy where symbolic operations, affective production, informationalization are all attended furthermore by both new patterns of migration and increasing precarious informalization. But the whole world has not become Silicon Valley nor even are the great global cities of high finance and hot data cloning themselves universally, and Hardt and Negri concede this by qualifying biopolitical production as the hegemonic mode of production: “Even though immaterial labor is not dominant in quantitative terms, our claim is that it has imposed a tendency on all other forms of labor, transforming them in accordance with its own characteristics, and in that sense it has imposed a tendency on all other forms of labor . . .” (2004: 141) Hardt and Negri claim to be following Marx’s method of identifying the dominant historical tendency here, but their argument turns on the most dubious reading of Marx’s chapter on historical tendency in the first volume of *Capital*. Marx’s discussion there has nothing to do with the succession of one technological paradigm by another or even the hegemony of one kind of social relations of production by another. Rather, the historical tendency Marx is concerned with are the crises tendencies of capitalist production and the discussion draws out the implications of his insight that the more capitalist production succeeds, the more it paints itself into new corners, especially with regard to the capitalist form of private property. (Marx 1975: 535-36) We have already noted how the time is “out of joint” recurrently and enduringly in our corner of the world economy with regard to the crises of the staples trap. In any case, the undeniable importance of computerization and of services to the world economy

today still does not mean that this process is without its own contradictions and that all production will become “immaterial”.

Yet there is a second difficulty with Hardt and Negri’s argument for us here. The very socio-historical processes Hardt and Negri point toward as the historical-transcendental conditions of possibility for the making of the multitude, the proliferation of biopolitical services, new movements of migration, the “flexible” informalization of work, are also processes that have given rise to what Leslie Sklair (2001) and his colleagues theorize as the transnational capitalist class. In Hardt and Negri’s trilogy, the newly minted concept of Empire works as a narrative character standing in the place of the absent description of this class formation of the proprietorship of capital. We must therefore concede that the concept of the multitude is not identical to itself insofar as it is structurally undecidable as to whether the transcendental historical conditions of possibility turn out to be those of the class agency of a new world proletariat or that of a transnational capitalist class, since in historical fact, the historical processes are the conditions of possibility of both, as Hardt and Negri themselves recognize (2009, 293). This binary structure of the multitude qua transnational capitalist class manifests itself in two ways that will be important for my discussion below. If what we used to call the new social movements emerged through protest against the cooptation of the old social movements by the postwar global interstate system, then the proliferation of NGOs over the neoliberal decades can be understood in terms of the cooptation of the new social movements themselves by this interstate system (and, in some cases, new forms of class struggle against this cooptation). Moreover, the twentieth century’s global environmental movement is surely a paradigmatic example of the multitude’s political creativity. Political contestation *within* this

movement, especially between conservative, elitist, technocratic and astroturf currents in the movement on the one hand and those working toward more radical transformations oriented by egalitarian concerns regarding social justice on the other are then another manifestation of this binary form of the multitude.

I have therefore argued elsewhere (Mookerjea 2010, 2012, 2013) that the character of the multitude, in order to become adequate to the Utopianism of its concept, points toward its own completion by another character of class heterogeneity with contemporary currency: the subaltern. From Gramsci to Ranajit Guha and beyond, the problematic of subalternity has entailed a crucial theorization of the social heterogeneity of class identifications and politics, especially so by theorists in the global South. Gramsci's inaugural appropriation of the term from military nomenclature alerts us to the relative and contextual character of subordination it implies which then usefully allows us to highlight the intersection of oppressions as a defining feature of social heterogeneity. The multitude qua "singularity of differences" can be differentiated from the transnational capitalist class only in so far as it is subaltern. In this regard we can say that the subaltern names the non-identity of the multitude with itself.

Ranjit Guha (1988), however, introduces a new problematic to the theoretical discourse on subalternity that has remained important to a younger generation of scholars despite the various disparate directions the subaltern studies collective has subsequently travelled. This was his breakthrough insistence on a history of an autonomous domain of subaltern politics. For Guha, this originally referred to the autonomy of heterogeneous subaltern insurgencies from the Congress-led Indian national independence movement. The significance of this breakthrough for us today however follows from the vast expansion of not only a world proletariat but also of

social inequality, both quantitatively but especially qualitatively, over the decades of attempted neoliberalization. The long term consequences of this has only rarely been contemplated let alone theorized, though governmental rationality fantasizes this relentlessly through myriad scenarios of imminent threats to security.

### **Subaltern Counter-environments**

More specifically for us here, however, the importance of the theory of the autonomous domain of subaltern politics to the question of petrocultural politics has to do with what aboriginal activist Clayton Thomas Muller (2013) and others call the “native rights based strategic framework” of popular movement building and resistance to tar sands development and petrostate neocolonial power. This strategy seeks to forge political solidarity between the Idle No More movement, the environmental movement and other grass-roots social justice movements from below. But a further important dimension of this strategy involves the constitutional status of treaty and other aboriginal rights. The constitutional recognition of aboriginal rights is a symptom of the rational impossibility of legitimizing law and Canadian sovereignty, founded, as they are, upon the enclosure of the commons. The native rights based strategic framework aims to use this symptom of historical violence in the positivity of law to constitutionally limit the ambitions of petrostate power. From a cultural studies perspective, the success of this strategy would depend on the success of building the anti-capitalist solidarity movement and this in turn would depend on both cultural production and cultural politics; all of which are recognized by the advocates of this strategy. As Thomas-Muller explains, in “the fiduciary obligation governments have to Native Americans—defined by our sacred treaties, trust

relationships and other unique legal instruments— Native American and First Nations peoples have an important tool. We are the keystones in a hemispheric social movement strategy that could end the era of big oil and eventually usher in another paradigm from this current destructive time of free market economics.” (2) Indeed, the poetics of this cultural production and this politics derive from the historical contingency and symbolic power of the treaties themselves. The treaties concluded between the Crown and some First Nations are of course a communication technology and in that regard are an ethico-political mediation of social belonging; in fact they are an counter-environmental ground (McLuhan 2009) for the mediation of canals, railroads and satellite networks that feature prominently in standard accounts of nation-building, especially since the earliest treaties establish a state of peace. As media, the treaties are therefore singular in the domain of law in several ways: The treaties are part of the text of the written document of the constitution but they are also oral traditions with their own modes of iteration, the time bias of which as such always remains supplementary to the space bias of the letter of the Charter. In so far as this text (which exceeds any opposition between speech and writing) mediates any trajectory of purposive analysis in constitutional reasoning (Macklem 2001, 162-67), the written documents oscillate between the possibilities of being simulacra, corrupted copies without originals, and outright forgeries. Yet they are corrupted or forged in determinate ways and there is a determinate tradition of their interpretation as there is of their suppression. No interpretation of their prescriptions for us now is therefore possible that is not given to the domain of cultural politics. Such a quasi-transcendental poetics of the treaties has made possible a long established tradition of cultural production and politics in Canada which is now seeking to lead political opposition to big oil and petro-state power: “This multi-

pronged campaign would contain elements of legal intervention, base-building, policy intervention (at all levels of government, including the United Nations), narrative-based storytelling strategies in conventional and social media, civil disobedience and popular education and a whole lot of prayer and ceremony”. (Thomas Muller 2013: 5) Moreover, this repoliticization of constituted power allows us to specify more rigorously the importance and significance of the autonomy of the domain of subaltern politics.

The treaties bind not only nations to nations but places to all kinds of beings and as such are capable of producing the Utopian sacred. In this regard, not only are they directed to the forging of political alliances and solidarities, but in doing so they also consequently negate their own particularity in the making of something common. Indeed, this politics asserts that all citizens of Canada (and therefore also all aboriginal peoples) are bound by and so possess treaty rights (Thomas-Muller 2013b) and this is a crucial ethical supplement to the axiom of equaliberty (Balibar 1994: 39-60); one that is both a defence against the real danger of clientelist manipulation as well as against the instrumentality of articulatory practices and affinity calculations, all of which otherwise lead to a war of all against all through which Empire will once again triumph. Moreover, the rescue of constitutional legitimacy through the recognition of Aboriginal rights also depends precisely on this ethical supplementation of equaliberty. In the sense of this negation of particularity, then, one must now also say that the multitude names the non-identity of the subaltern with itself. In so far as repoliticization here is constituted as the forging of solidarities and as the negation of particularity through joining in a common cause of peace, the autonomy of this domain of politics consists of its refusal of both liberal democratic platitudes regarding recognition and deliberation (as this only involves depoliticization through

assimilation and normalization by Orwellian empty speech) as well as its cynical, realist opposite: The foundation of politics on drawing a Schmittian line in the sand between friend and enemy, a stance now shared by many influential positions on the theoretical Left as well as the white supremacist Right. (Mouffe 1999; Johnson 2011) As the counter-environmental ground to world-enclosure, the autonomous domain of subaltern politics endures in a line of flight from this circling of wagons, an evasion of this trap of transcendence, through an act of political theatre in which multitude and subaltern are imposters in an anonymous agon. In this regard, the native rights based strategic framework's radicalization of opposition to the conjunctural reconstruction of hegemony not only articulates its politics as a class politics, a struggle against the enclosure of the commons, but in doing so also turns up the time bias of political mediation. At stake in this politics is precisely what the quasi-transcendental poetics of the treaties makes possible; a subalternist historical imagination that remembers how different systems of oppression build upon each other through the accumulated violence of world enclosure; how this violence of the capitalist form of private property —whether with regard to resources or to technology, since these both belong in common— calls forth living labour power in a counter-environmental struggle against the resurrection of our planet's passage through the world of the dead.

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