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Indigenous ExtrACTIVISM in Boreal Canada: Colonial Legacies, Contemporary Struggles and Sovereign Futures

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Abstract: This article approaches contemporary extractivism as an environmentally and socially destructive extension of an enduring colonial societal structure. Manifested in massive hydroelectric developments, clearcut logging, mining, and unconventional oil and gas production, extractivism removes natural resources from their points of origin and dislocates the emplaced benefits they provide. Because externally imposed resource extraction threatens Indigenous peoples' land-based self-determination, industrial sites often become contested, politicized landscapes. Consequently, I also illuminate the struggles of those who strive to turn dreams for sovereign futures into reality through extrACTIVIST resistance to extractivist schemes. Presenting four case synopses—from across Canada's boreal forest and spanning a broad range of extractive undertakings—that highlight both sides of the extractivism/ACTIVISM formulation, this article exposes the political roots of resource-related conflicts and contributes to an emerging comparative political ecology of settler colonialism. While extractivism's environmental effects are immediate and arresting, these physical transformations have significant cultural consequences that are underlain by profound political inequities. I ultimately suggest that because extractivism is colonial in its causal logic, effective opposition cannot emerge from environmentalism alone, but will instead arise from movements that pose systemic challenges to conjoined processes of social, economic, and environmental injustice.

Keywords: activism; Canada; clearcutting; extractivism; First Nations; hydroelectric development; mining; natural resource conflicts; settler colonialism; tar sands

1. Introduction

Glimpses of black bears, wolves, and lynx punctuate my transect. Foxes, otters, beavers, and snowshoe hares are here, at home, along with smaller amphibious and invertebrate inhabitants and 300 species of summer birds [1]. My flyover reveals a carpet of conifers, poplars, and willows; a sea of green sporadically broken by muskegs, fish-rich lakes, First Nations settlements, and extractive industrial megadevelopments. I am envisioning Canada's boreal forest—more than two million square miles concurrently claimed as a biological treasure, Indigenous homeland, and extractivist frontier (Figure 1).

Extractivism removes resources from their points of origin, dislocating the emplaced benefits they provide. Massive hydroelectric dams, clearcut logging, mining, and unconventional oil and gas production represent extractivism in action.¹ Because capturing resources on such an enormous scale requires the physical rearrangement of landscapes and/or complex chemical processes,

¹ The term *unconventional* refers to recent technological innovations used to extract oil and natural gas from shale formations, sands, and coal seams.

undesirable environmental effects often ensue. Economically, extractivism is associated with a reliance on primary commodities, an export market orientation, and (as its critics point out) high poverty levels and inequitable wealth concentrations [2]. Politically, it has been tied over time and space to imperialist states that pave the way for extractive industries' success—a political formation international development sociologists Henry Veltmeyer and James Petras call “extractive imperialism” [3]. With interwoven systems of ecological and social destruction, extractivist production leads to local dispossession. Sites of ongoing extractivism almost always become contested, politicized landscapes [4–8].

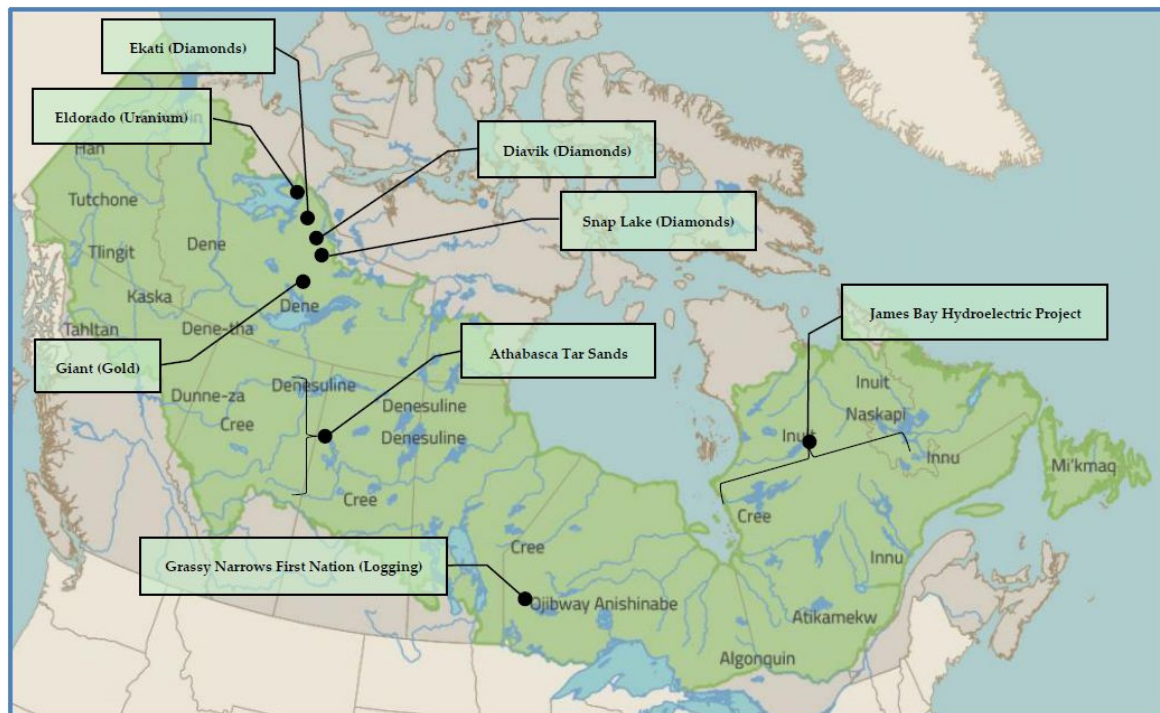


Figure 1. The approximate extent of Canada’s boreal forest, the main subarctic Indigenous groups, and the major extraction sites noted in the text [9].

Extractivism does not simply mean the *use* of natural resources, which is something humans—in the boreal forest and elsewhere—have been doing all along. Unlike extraction, *extractivism* is both principle and practice. As activist author Naomi Klein sees it, extractivism is rooted in “the central fiction on which our economic model is based: that nature is limitless, that we will always be able to find more of what we need, and that if something runs out it can be seamlessly replaced by another resource that we can endlessly extract” [10]. Relentless in its quest to obtain far more than needed to meet basic subsistence needs, extractivism values natural resources not primarily in and of themselves, but for the profits they can yield. Under extractivism, natural resources become vehicles for increasing personal wealth without regard for potential costs to others. Simply stated, extractivism transforms “nature” into a tool for the promotion of social injustice. More than just a way of using the land, extractivism is also a way of thinking. It is a way of being in the world; a way of positioning ourselves in a relationship to the natural worlds we occupy. Extractivism is thus a political as well as an environmental project, both a social and an ecological problem.

While its most deliberated consequences may be environmental, therefore, Canadian extractivism can also be contemplated as a contemporary manifestation of settler colonialism—one that is situated in a boreal forest that sustains hundreds of First Nations communities and is configured in its current incarnation by a global capitalist political economy. Likewise, while Indigenous objectors to extractivist projects call consistently and vehemently for environmental protection, they struggle simultaneously

for social justice and political empowerment. Far from personifying romanticized “ecological Indians”, today’s Indigenous activists are engaged in an enduring political battle to defend their ability to live in their own way, on their own land [11,12].

This article illuminates social and political dimensions of intensive natural resource extraction in Canada’s boreal forest, thereby revealing contemporary extractivism’s historical colonial foundations and contributing to a comparative political ecology of settler colonialism and its legacies [13].² At the same time, it sheds light on the struggles of those working to turn dreams for sovereign futures into reality through activist engagement. Selected for their salience, the four case synopses presented here—from across the boreal and spanning multiple extractive undertakings—highlight both sides of the extractivism/ACTIVISM formulation in order to expose the political roots of resource-related conflict.³

2. Origins

As Ecuadorian economist Alberto Acosta argues, extractivism’s guises have varied according to period and place, but its long history is closely intertwined with colonialism. Launched on a massive scale 500 years ago, Acosta explains, the extractivist world economy was structured by the European conquest and colonization of the Americas, Africa, and Asia [2]. There is nothing new about extractivism, Veltmeyer and Petras similarly suggest, for it has always demanded “the plunder and looting of a society’s wealth and natural resources, and the transfer of this wealth to the center of the system to the benefit of capital and empire” ([3], p. 222). Global trade and communication networks have intensified the speed and scale of resource removal, and combinations of perceived scarcity and new extractive techniques have brought industrial operations to areas with resources previously deemed inaccessible or uneconomical. Still, contemporary extractivism reproduces the resource colonialism of old, with symbolic and material benefits continuing to flow into already empowered (and usually distant) hands and local peoples continuing to bear disproportionate environmental and social burdens.⁴

While the early colonization of Latin America revolved around the physical removal of riches destined for return to Europe, Indigenous North Americans—especially and initially in the fertile east—were dispossessed of their lands by settler colonists seeking permanent access to territory [18]. After the industrial revolution, North American colonial processes “increasingly focused on the elimination of Indian peoples in order to gain access to their territory for the purpose of *resource extraction*” ([19], p. 222, emphasis in original). Across the continent, Native lands became “national sacrifice areas” as regions containing resources deemed necessary for the greater good of economic expansion (joined sometimes by calls for national security) were degraded by inadequately regulated industrial expansion [20].

Catalyzed by a renewed economic emphasis on natural resources and related technological innovations, Canada has recently taken its extractivism to new heights. Against a backdrop of multiple extractive industries, oil and gas sit at the center of Canada’s contemporary economy, with Prime Minister Stephen Harper declaring Canada an “energy superpower” in 2008 and critical analysts

² Taiaiake Alfred (Kahnawake Mohawk) and Jeff Corntassel (Cherokee) reflect on the meaning of settler colonialism today, stating that “contemporary Settlers follow the mandate provided for them by their imperial forefathers’ colonial legacy, not by attempting to eradicate the physical signs of Indigenous peoples as human bodies, but by trying to eradicate their existence as peoples through the erasure of the histories and geographies that provide the foundation for Indigenous cultural identities and sense of self . . . [Indigenous peoples] remain, as in earlier colonial eras, occupied peoples who have been dispossessed and disempowered in their own homelands” ([14], p. 598).

³ While a description of research ethics and reciprocity falls outside the scope of this brief article, readers interested in learning more about my stance should consult my earlier work [15]. In addition, Devon Mihesuah (Choctaw) and Luke Eric Lassiter have both published valuable guides on conducting research in Indigenous communities [16,17].

⁴ These costs are typically (and conveniently) left out of industrial accounting. The term *externality* refers to impacts of commercial or industrial activities experienced by third parties and therefore not reflected in the pricing of produce goods or services.

now using the term “petrostate” to describe Canadian economic and environmental policy [21,22].⁵ As long as the federal government continues to subsidize resource-extractive operations in the boreal forest and justify its position by claiming industrial extraction as the only possible path to a strong northern economy, the risks to First Nations communities and cultures remain profound [23].⁶

3. Challenges

Extractivism and ACTIVISM are two complex and non-exclusive sides in an ongoing global debate concerning how resources should be used and who should be empowered to decide. While Indigenous communities fight for the right to develop their own resources, they also struggle—sometimes simultaneously—to stop extractive schemes imposed by non-indigenous (and often multinational) corporations. As we will see, externally imposed industrial extraction threatens Indigenous peoples’ *land-based self-determination*; it undermines their ability to make independent choices regarding customary landbases and thereby determine the trajectory of land-based livelihoods, cultural beliefs and practices, and the array of opportunities available to future generations [24].⁷ Extractivism disrupts contemporary-traditional subsistence cultures, hinders communities’ capacity to function as effective independent entities, and occasions an affront to affirmative Indigenous identities. Because of the challenge extractivist projects pose to land-based self-determination, they are often perceived as attacks and are, accordingly, often met with defensive resistance. With emplaced Indigenous populations determined to protect their lands and lives from corporate entities equally determined to profit from resource removal, conflicts have been frequent and fierce.

Since the late 1980s, non-governmental organization affiliates, journalists, and academics have documented numerous high-profile natural resource disputes involving Indigenous groups. In 1987, for instance, the Penan of Bornean Malaysia commenced civil disobedience against the intensive logging that was ravaging their homeland [25]. Two years later, Kayapó and their supporters protested the construction of hydroelectric dams in the Brazilian state of Pará, causing the World Bank to suspend the project’s funding [26,27]. In the Colombian cloud forest, the U’wa staged local blockades throughout the 1990s and conducted international demonstrations in 2000 to demand an end to oil exploration in their territory [5]. In May 2000, protestors shut down Freeport Mining’s Indonesian offices in response to environmental and human rights abuses at the company’s West Papua Grasberg mine [5]. More recently, Indigenous communities have united against the Belo Monte Dam (in Brazil) and the Keystone XL Pipeline (in North America) [28,29]. These prominent incidents, like the Canadian cases described below, display extrACTIVISM—efforts to counter extractivist projects and processes—in action.

Many North Americans and Europeans who learn of Indigenous opposition to resource-extractive ventures in the world’s remote corners view it as a novel sensation and a unique byproduct of irresponsible production practices in the developing world. It is neither. Around the world, challenges to industrial encroachment maintain Indigenous citizens’ commitment to a multifaceted and multigenerational struggle for survival. While extrACTIVIST resistance is tied to contemporary global systems and dynamic historical progressions, its timing and techniques are culturally appropriate and situationally relevant, with contexts of resistance shifting over time and space so that physical confrontation and direct action are complemented by legal challenges, multiscalar alliances, international media drives, and corporate campaigns. As Tom Hall and James Fenelon

⁵ In a 2013 editorial, for example, environmental political scientist Thomas Homer-Dixon wrote that oil and gas extraction “is relentlessly turning our society into something we don’t like. Canada is beginning to exhibit the economic and political characteristics of a petro-state” [21].

⁶ In October 2015, Canadian citizens elected Justin Trudeau of the Liberal Party as Prime Minister. While the implications of this leadership change for extractive industry are still uncertain, Trudeau campaigned on promises of more stringent environmental regulation and fuller participation in the fight against global climate change.

⁷ I have elsewhere presented a detailed treatment of the land-based self-determination concept as it relates to contemporary Indigenous counter-mapping practices [24].

point out, Indigenous peoples who resist industrial incursions are “doing what they have been doing for millennia: adapting, adjusting, and adopting to changing circumstances to maintain their autonomy” ([30], p. 146).

4. Cases

In the pages that follow, I describe multiple manifestations of extractivism—hydroelectric power generation, clearcut logging, mining, and oil and gas production—in Canada’s boreal forest. I consider the consequences of extractivist thought and action for First Nations’ residents of targeted regions and survey a range of responses. Examining how the global extractivism/ACTIVISM phenomenon plays out in one settler colonial context (and one vast but defined ecoregion) (see Figure 1), these case synopses reveal the colonial legacies that complicate extractivist encounters and underscore the multidimensional challenge to entangled injustices that Indigenous resistance represents.

4.1. *As Long As the Rivers Run?*

Treaties in Canada regularly promised Indigenous signatories that their guarantees would hold “as long as the rivers run,” yet hydroelectric dams now prevent the natural flow of numerous northern rivers [31].⁸ On the unceded lands of northern Quebec, Labrador, and northern British Columbia, too, some rivers no longer run. While billed as a non-polluting, renewable energy source, hydroelectric development has caused extensive and irrevocable destruction of territory. As it destroys land, it also destroys peoples’ relationships to land. In so doing, it jeopardizes culturally distractive land-based beliefs and practices.

Because non-indigenous Canadians have long regarded water as an unlimited resource to make available to the public through technical solutions, hydroelectricity’s negative environmental and social consequences have been largely ignored [35]. Massive projects have reconfigured boreal landscapes and devastated once-productive ecosystems. Claiming water as a resource to harness, proponents of hydroelectricity have proceeded under the assumption that Canada’s north is an uninhabited wasteland. It is not. With 59 percent of Canada’s electricity supplied by the energy of moving water, dozens of Indigenous communities have been impacted by the nation’s nearly 600 large hydroelectric dams [36,37]. While water itself is not appropriated during the power generation process, the energy released by its movement is extracted and exported. The asymmetry of extractivism is typified as distant benefits yield local disruption and far away decision makers determine the fate of Indigenous lands and all that they sustain.

Beginning in 1971, this resource-colonial philosophy underwrote Hydro-Quebec’s James Bay Project, a regional megaproject expected to cost \$6 billion, erect dozens of dams, produce 28,000 megawatts of electricity, and disrupt a watershed the size of France [38]. While not the only Indigenous group to experience a colonial mentality in a material way, nowhere is the story of hydroelectric extractivism/ACTIVISM more emblematic than among the Cree of eastern James Bay. Cree communities were never consulted about the proposal and its projected impacts. According to Matthew Coon Come, then a university student in Hull, Quebec, his people were unaware of Hydro-Quebec’s plans until he learned from a newspaper article that their landbase was about to be submerged [39].⁹ Cree groups united in opposition, winning a temporary injunction to suspend the project in 1973. With construction already underway, the injunction was quickly overturned, but the need to resolve this and future disputes in a context of unceded Indigenous territory became clear.

⁸ The majority of Canada’s boreal region is overlain by 11 “numbered treaties” signed between 1871 and 1921 [32]. Although articulated in various manners, these treaties generally promise that Indigenous signatories would retain the right to engage in land-based subsistence throughout ceded tracts of land. Readers interested in learning more about Canada’s treaties and their relationship to contemporary questions of Aboriginal rights can consult books on the topic by J. R. Miller and Michael Asch [33,34].

⁹ Coon Come later led the Grand Council of the Crees and went on to become National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations.

Hoping to get something rather than nothing out of a project they had no part in planning but were unable to stop, the Cree came to the negotiating table.

With lands and rivers being destroyed daily, Cree negotiators faced extreme pressure to quickly settle title to a 215,000-square-mile traditional territory that had since time immemorial been a source of physical sustenance, cultural identity, and social/spiritual reciprocal relationships between human and non-human inhabitants. The first “modern” treaty in Canada—the James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement (JBNQA) of 1975—was the result [38,40]. In the end, the Cree retained exclusive title to 2158 square miles and secured funding for a subsidy program to support the continuance of land-based subsistence and culture, but Hydro-Quebec proceeded as planned [38]. Reflecting on the political asymmetry of the James Bay Project and the negotiations it impelled, Coon Come later observed, “I believe that the governments knew what they were doing: depriving the Cree people of our own means of subsistence in violation of our fundamental human rights” ([39], p. 157).

By the time James Bay Phase I was completed in 1986, ancestral gravesites were submerged, game populations had declined, unnatural water flows caused difficult travel on both the open water of summer and the winter ice, and high mercury concentrations caused by the decay of submerged vegetation meant that eating fish was now hazardous [38]. Cree citizens experienced these physical changes in intensely social and emotional ways. As emplaced memories were obliterated, intense feelings of loss accompanied the inundation of familiar landscapes [40]. As hunting and fishing sites were degraded and rendered unreachable, traditional ecological knowledge and cultural values were undermined. Instead of steady employment and full integration into the southern economy, hydroelectric development led to dependence on non-indigenous institutions and a generation of young people “out of touch with traditional values” ([41], p. 518).

By 1989, when work began on James Bay Phase II, Cree leaders were both more savvy and more vehemently opposed. A major complex slated for construction on the Great Whale River was met with a dynamic resistance campaign. Cree extrACTIVISTS launched legal challenges on points they believed were winnable, passed community referenda and resolutions to communicate their position, produced a film called *The Land of Our Children*, and took their case to the International Water Tribunal. Making use of media and public sentiment, they partnered with Inuit neighbors who also opposed the project to stage a highly publicized protest event in New York City on 22 April 1990. A vessel called an *odeyak* (a linguistic and physical amalgamation of Cree and Inuit features) was constructed on the coast of Hudson Bay and paddled to Manhattan Island to draw attention to the impending environmental and human rights disaster. New Yorkers listened. With the northeastern US market for Great Whale power on the wane, the project was suspended in 1992 [42].

Demonstrating the pattern of sociopolitical inequity that characterizes all extractivist endeavors, the power—and money—generated by the James Bay project was exported to the cities of southern Canada and beyond. Environmental, social, and cultural damage lingered in its wake. Until recently, few outside observers questioned this quintessentially colonial power structure. Fewer still believed boreal Indigenous communities would someday have the political clout to suspend hydroelectric development or eventually partner in determining its direction. However, in the early 1990s, Indigenous northerners fought for—and won—the ability to determine their homeland’s future. With the passage of another decade and high hopes for a fairer future, the Grand Council of the Crees and the province of Quebec signed the landmark *Paix des Braves* Agreement in 2002. The agreement allows extractive industry to proceed but requires Indigenous consent and revenue sharing for all hydroelectric and other development on Cree lands.¹⁰ Although anxieties about further impacts remain, the Cree majority voted to accept the agreement in anticipation that economic benefits will now be evenly distributed and that more equitable political relationships will augment the land-based

¹⁰ Signed on 7 February 2002, this agreement is formally known as the “Agreement Respecting a New Relationship between the Cree Nation and the Government of Quebec” [43].

self-determination that still sits at the center of their agenda [42,44]. The long-term ramifications of this agreement continue to unfold.

4.2. *Every Available Log*

In the fall of 2004, a visiting television director asked J. B. Fobister of Grassy Narrows First Nation what he thought the logging companies then wreaking havoc on portions of his northwestern Ontario homeland really wanted. What they want, Fobister replied, is “every available log in our territory.”¹¹ In its industrial incarnation, logging enacts the extractivist outlook by encouraging the economically efficient removal of as much timber as possible. In the boreal forest, this has usually meant clearcutting. In order to expedite a lucrative timber harvest, clearcutting requires “harvesting all the trees in one area at one time” [45]. Its ecological corollaries include biodiversity loss, habitat fragmentation and reduction, soil compaction and declining fertility, erosion and hydrological disruption, and carbon releases that contribute to global climate change [46]. With almost one-third of Canada’s boreal region allocated to industry and 90 percent of boreal forestry employing clearcutting practices, the expanse of forest cleared and the number of trees transformed into lumber and paper are both staggering and steadily increasing [47].

For Indigenous people who depend on the forest for physical, economic, and spiritual sustenance, these environmental consequences are experienced culturally and interpreted politically. While the bulk of clearcutting occurs on public lands formally managed at the provincial/territorial level, these forests are concurrently claimed at ground level by industrial license holders’ intent on profiting from their removal and Indigenous citizens reliant on ecologically viable traditional territories to sustain land-based lifeways. As a result of clearcutting, Indigenous communities across Canada have lost productive hunting and trapping grounds, local game populations have declined, sacred sites and emplaced memories have been wiped out, and the sanctity of forest life has been shattered. As logs are stripped from the land without First Nations’ consent, the sense of emplaced autonomy and control that lies at the center of communities’ land-based self-determination is destabilized. Not surprisingly, intense conflicts have ensued.

The story of Grassy Narrows First Nation—the site of the longest standing anti-logging blockade in Canadian history—is instructive for understanding both the consequences of clearcutting and the extrACTIVISM undertaken to challenge it. Grassy Narrows is a semi-remote Anishinaabe community located north of Kenora, Ontario. Although commercial logging in the region began in the 1920s, it was only in the 1960s that the area surrounding Grassy Narrows became accessible by road and only in the 1990s that large-scale clearcutting close to the community became a serious concern.¹² As multiple traplines were carelessly razed and customary hunting, fishing, and gathering sites became unusable or inaccessible, community leaders came to view the ongoing clearcutting as a local instantiation of a global environmental crisis, a potential health hazard, a threat to Indigenous rights and land-based subsistence culture, and a manifestation of systemic injustice ([49], p. 77). Starting in the late 1990s, concerned residents wrote letters to corporate and government officials, conducted peaceful protests in Kenora, and publicized their plight through press releases. In addition to fearing for the future of Anishinaabe beliefs and practices, community activists argued that as signatories to Treaty Three of 1873 Grassy Narrows, First Nation members possess a guaranteed right to continue making a living—and simply living—in the manner enjoyed by previous generations. Because clearcutting destroys the forest that makes land-based subsistence practicable, they are now unable to exercise these rights to the full extent.¹³

¹¹ From the author’s fieldnotes dated 9 October 2004.

¹² Annual logging rates in Canada’s boreal forests increased from 1.6 million acres in 1970 to 2.5 million in 2001 [48]. Northwestern Ontario was no exception to this trend.

¹³ Treaty Three clearly states that signatory Indians would “have right to pursue their avocations of hunting and fishing throughout the tract surrendered” [50].

Frustrated after years of unheeded objections, Grassy Narrows activists initiated a blockade on 3 December 2002 to prevent the movement of logging trucks and equipment through their 2500-square-mile homeland—an area which has today come to signify the physical and cultural continuance of an Anishinaabe way of life. Maintained around the clock until the fall of 2003 (and intermittently ever since), the blockade succeeded in its immediate goal of stopping the passage of logging trucks, but timber continued to flow from the northern and eastern portions of Grassy's territory. In response, Anishinaabe activists allied with non-Indigenous environmentalists and human rights advocates to launch an international media campaign targeting corporate purchasers of wood from their land [51]. In May 2008, Grassy Narrows First Nation and the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources entered into a memorandum of understanding to negotiate a resolution to the ongoing dispute. With negotiations expected to take several years, the company that was authorized to log in the area relinquished its license, representing a significant (if impermanent) victory for Grassy Narrows and its allies. Logging in Grassy's traditional territory has now been on hiatus for several years, but recently approved forest management plans leave open the possibility that clearcutting will recommence [52].

As it has historically happened, clearcutting is a form of extractivism that ships trees to distant mills for processing and profit. In the boreal, regeneration is always slow and never complete. While Grassy Narrows' citizens have refused to accept industrial logging on their land, however, some Indigenous communities have chosen instead to become forest management partners and beneficiaries. The Little Red River Cree First Nation of northern Alberta, for example, allows cutting in selected portions of its traditional territory, but works to ensure the integrity of subsistence and cultural sites and demands payments from producing entities [53]. Meanwhile, far to the east, the Innu Nation has played a lead role in the development of a comprehensive, sustainable, and culturally appropriate forestry plan for the Labrador district [54]. When it proceeds without the full and meaningful consent of emplaced Indigenous populations—when it attempts to erase the enduring existence of land-based lives, cultural practices, and political rights in order to appropriate forests for financial gain—clearcutting is an unjust act. Because this pattern only prevails when political inequity makes it possible, both resistance (which aims to stop extraction in its tracks) and equal participation (which challenges external imposition and control) defy extractivism's colonial logic.

4.3. Mining the North

Dene in Canada's Northwest Territories remember how gold mining came to their land in the 1930s. According to Joe Martin, an elder from Łutsël'k'é First Nation, an old Dene woman had a rock on her windowsill. When prospectors saw it, they promised three pipes for her woodstove if she revealed where she had gotten it. "Since that day, they have been taking gold out of the mine, out of the land," Martin said, "It is like that old lady has given millions and millions of dollars away for just three stovepipes" ([55], p. 153). Mining is a quintessentially extractivist endeavor. It shamelessly seeks riches underlying homelands that are often distant from centers of corporate power and mobilizes massive earth moving equipment to extract the minerals that are found. While the wealth generated by the global mining industry is immense, it has typically been mining's waste and scars (in a literal geophysical sense as well as a figurative sociocultural one) rather than its money that have stayed in the north.

The mining of the north began with the Klondike gold rush, which brought thousands of placer miners to the Yukon Territory between 1896 and 1898. Indigenous Hän residents were removed to a reserve to make way for the prospectors, resulting in deadly epidemics and severe sociocultural disruption [56]. To the east, gold was discovered (with the elderly Dene woman's assistance) near Yellowknife in 1933, prompting the construction of Giant Mine near what became the territorial capital. With open pit techniques and constant arsenic consumption, the contamination of Great Slave Lake and the area's Indigenous inhabitants soon followed [57]. To the northwest, the Eldorado Mine—located on the shore of Great Bear Lake at Port Radium—was also established in the 1930s, representing one

node in a network of communities besieged by what Indigenous scholars Ward Churchill and Winona LaDuke call “nuclear colonialism” [58]. Until 1962, Sahtu Dene workers from Délı̄ne handled dusty burlap sacks of uranium with no protective gear, and radioactive tailings were dumped directly into the lake and onto the land. Exacerbating the collective trauma caused by the presence of outsiders and the transition to wage employment, soaring cancer rates among miners led locals to designate Délı̄ne “a community of widows” ([55], p. 38).

Diamonds have driven the most recent northern resource boom. Mines opened at Ekati in 1998, Diavik in 2002, and Snap Lake in 2008, with several additional operations in various stages of planning and development [55]. Diamond mining has catalyzed a new wave of economic growth in the Yellowknife region, providing employment for some Indigenous individuals and contributing to Canada’s national economy.¹⁴ While its economic benefits are undeniable, however, so are its adverse ecological impacts. Most strikingly, northern diamond mining entails “dewatering” multiple lakes—a notion incomprehensible to many Dene elders ([55], p. 73). These lakes and the rich fisheries they formerly supported have been permanently erased from the landscape. Areas once hunted routinely have become unreachable and game habitat and migrations have been disrupted, hindering Indigenous residents’ land-based subsistence cultures and ecological relationships. Social disturbances caused by rapid shifts in employment and family life have also accompanied the industry’s interactions with northern Indigenous inhabitants [57,59].

With the long-term ecological and health effects of diamond mining still unknown, Indigenous communities face a thorny mix of benefits and costs. Unlike the blatant dispossession associated with mining in the past, agreements between local Indigenous communities and extractive corporations now promise employment opportunities and other economic benefits. While jobs and revenue sharing are usually viewed favorably, mining’s interrelated environmental and sociocultural repercussions have sparked trepidation about the decline of land-based knowledge, traditional values, and community integrity ([55], p. 240). Political asymmetry also remains a serious concern.

Ellen Bielawski, employed as a researcher and negotiator for Łutsëlk’é First Nation in the 1990s, describes the unbalanced process that permitted the mining of diamonds on Dene land in detail. As Indigenous leaders struggled to secure the best possible deal for their people, they believed they neither understood the full implications of the impending extraction nor had a true say in determining its trajectory. With the mining company setting both the negotiation agenda and its timeline, the sense that mines were inevitable produced pressure to concede to the less-than-ideal terms of their 1996 agreement. In a complicated context of unsettled land claims, the new era of mining carries the industry’s colonial legacy into the present. “To allow diamond mining on the Barren Lands, Canada has continued what it started with Treaty 8 in 1899,” Bielawski argues, “In 1899, 1900 and 1920, Canada drew arbitrary lines on paper maps and signed up aboriginal peoples as if sorting the cattle it promised in return for land. To this day, Canada adheres to those lines” ([55], p. 211). Diamond mining is merely the most recent activity to carry centuries-old conflicts between the government of Canada and northern First Nations surrounding control of Indigenous lands and lives to the surface.

In the past, Indigenous opinions and territorial rights were intentionally ignored as mining corporations staked claims and developed sites. Indigenous citizens received no compensation for lost hunting, trapping, and fishing resources, nor for the adverse personal consequences they and their families suffered. While planning for diamond mines has gathered Indigenous leaders and multinational mining representatives around negotiating tables to debate impacts and benefits, critics claim that these negotiations retain the asymmetrical structure of colonial extractivism: with no option to refuse mining altogether and dominant decision makers valuing economic gain above all else, political scientist Rebecca Hall argues that northern mining represents a capitalist “continuity of

¹⁴ The third largest source of diamonds in world, Canada’s diamond industry constitutes roughly 3 percent of the gross domestic product [55].

internal colonization" ([60], p. 385). Canadian diamond companies work hard to brand their products as socially responsible and conflict-free, yet this characterization ignores ongoing environmental degradation and sociocultural upheaval and is valid only relative to the horrors of historical northern gold and uranium mining. While today's economic benefits are experienced and valued by many Indigenous northerners, communities confronted with inevitable extraction are forced once again to choose between getting something and getting nothing in return.

4.4. *The Most Destructive Project on Earth*

The tar sands have been called "the most destructive project on Earth" [61]. This label was earned by the daily production of 400-million gallons of toxic sludge and tailings ponds visible from space [22]. With more than 230 square miles strip-mined to expose bitumen-laden sand, pollutants constantly conveyed down the Athabasca and Mackenzie Rivers toward the Arctic, and exorbitant greenhouse gas emissions, the tar sands exemplify extractivism on an unprecedented scale [62]. The existence of oil in northern Alberta has been known for hundreds of years. In the 1890s, the prospect of hydrocarbon extraction in the north motivated Canada to secure Treaty 8 of 1899, which covers a vast area extending from what is now northeastern British Columbia in the west to western Saskatchewan in the east and north to Great Slave Lake [19]. According to a report filed by the treaty's commissioners, Indigenous leaders refused to sign until promised that they would be "as free to hunt and fish after the treaty as they would be if they never entered into it" ([63], pp. 87–88). For a time, they were.

Extensive exploitation of the tar sands resource commenced in the 1990s. It was bolstered then, as now, by appeals to the energy security afforded by a vast North American petroleum source [62]. Proponents of unconventional extraction want their product to appear abundant, accessible, and clean. They use the term oil sands to promote these connotations [22]. In reality, "tar" is a more appropriate description for the substance stripped from the Alberta earth. As Jennifer Huseman and Damien Short explain in their analysis of the tar sands' human rights implications, "useable oil must be *extracted* from the sticky, heavy, viscous base material (bitumen) through industrial processes which have huge environmental and human costs" ([19], p. 221, emphasis in original). This intensive form of extraction requires strip or *in situ* mining to release bitumen from sand, which is subsequently transported by train and/or pipeline for processing into synthetic oil. Contemplating the immense quantities of natural gas burned in the production process, the poor return of oil produced per unit of energy expended, and the billions of barrels of fresh water withdrawn from the Athabasca River system, investigative journalist Andrew Nikiforuk concludes that "bitumen is what a desperate civilization mines after it's depleted its cheap oil" ([22], p. 16).¹⁵

As befits an extractive endeavor with a reputation for destruction, the tar sands have had severely deleterious effects on wildlife and ecosystems. Migratory waterfowl that (despite visual and auditory deterrents) mistake tailings ponds for safe landing sites become coated with toxic waste, resulting in recurrent mass killings ([22], p. 81). Numerous deformed fish have been found in Lake Athabasca near Fort Chipewyan, convincing local Dēnesųłiné, Mikisew Cree, and Métis people that the water has become unsafe [19]. As regular consumers of fish and wild game and with their main drinking water source downstream from tar sands operations, Indigenous and Métis citizens have not been spared the physical effects of industrial extraction. Leukemia and lymphoma, lupus, reproductive cancers, and (most strikingly) a rare form of bile duct cancer occur in the region at rates much higher than in the general population [19,64].

As elsewhere in the boreal forest, physical transformations associated with natural resource extraction have had significant cultural consequences that are underlain by profound political inequities. While many Indigenous Albertans continue to hunt and fish, these practices (and, inevitably,

¹⁵ Because it is so costly to produce, profitable tar sands production requires high oil prices and is therefore tied to the vagaries of the global market.

the cultural values that accompany them) are declining dramatically because of widespread environmental degradation, the vast expanse of territory rendered inaccessible by industrial activities, and the all-too-real conviction that once sustaining wild foods have become carriers of contamination. As a result of tar sands' extraction, Treaty 8 descendants are no longer "as free to hunt and fish" as past generations; controverting the treaty's guarantees, the tar sands industry has forced them to choose between ceasing traditional subsistence practices and diets out of fear or taking enormous risks to keep these relationships alive [19].

Like the diamonds removed from Northwest Territory mines, oil produced from tar sands bitumen is far from conflict free. It imprints an extractivist mindset on a physical landscape and puts colonialism's disregard for those who reside in the path of coveted lands and resources on open display. As Jen Preston (a scholar of social theory and decolonization) argues, "the rapid and massive proliferation of pipelines, refineries, mining and in situ excavation of bitumen, the sheer amount of clean water used in the process, the oil spills and the billions of dollars made by oil companies working in the Athabasca tar sands have all been made possible by the outright dismissal of Indigenous treaty rights, self-determination and sovereignty" ([65], p. 47).

The communities now experiencing the detrimental byproducts of bitumen extraction did not ask for this development. Furthermore, although a portion of industry jobs have gone to Indigenous individuals, the real economic benefits are enjoyed by settlers in Calgary and beyond. According to anthropologist Clinton Westman, the future envisioned by many Indigenous residents of northern Alberta (the ability to keep living on and with the land) and the future envisioned by the oil industry (Canada as energy superpower) are not compatible. With impact assessment structures and permitting processes valorizing energy extraction and economic profit, Westman observes, the tar sands' trajectory of environmental degradation and social injustice is poised to continue [66].

Yet the Indigenous peoples of the tar sands region refuse to go away quietly. Downstream groups have been at the forefront of opposition to the industry's destructive practices; Fort Chipewyan residents have voiced concerns about the tar sands' environmental and health effects for many years and are now working in concert with non-Indigenous allies to research and publicize these problems (at the provincial level), lobby the government to regulate the industry more rigorously (at the national level), and target corporations and investment firms who do business in the tar sands (at the international level) [62,67]. At a 2007 rally, Mikisew Cree chief Roxanna Marcel declared, "our message to both levels of government, to Albertans, to Canadians and to the world that may depend on oil sands for their energy solutions, is that *we can no longer be sacrificed*" ([65], p. 44, emphasis added). Contained within her statement is a fundamental challenge not only to tar sands production but to all extractive endeavors that occur on Indigenous lands. A challenge to the asymmetrical power structure that originated with colonialism and continues today. A challenge to the extractivist mindset that prioritizes profit over environmental sustainability, human health, and cultural continuity.

5. Conclusions

I bring these stories together neither because they have never been told nor because they are the sole examples of extractivism/ACTIVISM to emerge from Canada's boreal forest, but because they illustrate the range of industrial processes and challenges occurring in this important area of the world and because their juxtaposition exposes the political asymmetry on which all extractivism is based. This article has approached contemporary extractivism as an environmentally and socially destructive extension of an enduring colonial societal structure. While hydroelectric power generation, clearcutting, mining, and unconventional hydrocarbon extraction differ in immediate aims, appearances, and technical operations, they share extractivism's definitive ultimate goal: the large-scale removal of resources for profit. In the Canadian boreal, they also share a common dependence upon the active ignorance of Indigenous claims to lands and resources in order to perpetuate extractivist goals and gains, thus continuing the colonial erasure of Indigenous peoples to produce a perpetual *terra nullius*. According to Anishinaabe writer, scholar, and activist Leanne Betasamosake Simpson,

Extraction and assimilation go together. Colonialism and capitalism are based on extracting and assimilating...The act of extraction removes all of the relationships that give whatever is being extracted meaning. Extracting is taking. Actually, extracting is stealing—it is taking without consent, without thought, care or even knowledge of the impacts that extraction has on the other living things in that environment. That’s always been a part of colonialism and conquest. Colonialism has always extracted the indigenous—extraction of indigenous knowledge, indigenous women, indigenous peoples [68].

Drawn in the past into the mapped dominions of colonial entities, it is today the creation and conservation of international wealth that motivates local Indigenous dispossession. In boreal Canada, extractivism is colonialism’s new guise.

Writing from a Nepalese perspective, Pramod Parajuli argues that “whenever and wherever there are violations of human rights, environmental justice is violated, and where we see the violation of environmental justice, human rights are also neglected” ([69], p. 241). The cases presented here substantiate Parajuli’s bold claim. Manifesting in multiple manners (but always underlain by political asymmetry), extractivism had been challenged in many (equally political) ways. With Indigenous lands and resources claimed by means ranging from outright annexation to formal negotiation, responses have likewise ranged from the vehement resistance of direct action to the strategic accommodation of negotiation and industry participation [12]. Non-indigenous supporters and allies who expect ecological nobility to guide Indigenous responses to industrial extractivism are likely to be quickly disillusioned, for such resistance is not primarily or inherently “environmental.” Far from demanding the cessation of all extractive operations (although this aim is sometimes incorporated), the fundamental core of Indigenous extrACTIVISM is the quest for survival through land-based self-determination.

While extractivism’s environmental consequences are immediate and arresting, technical responses alone will not generate lasting solutions to the far-reaching problems it produces. Far more than a simple conundrum of resource management or environmental regulation, moving beyond extractivism is among the grand societal challenges of our era. Extractivism is colonial in its causal logic. Because it requires and reproduces conditions of political inequity, effective extrACTIVIST opposition cannot emerge from environmentalism alone, but will instead arise from movements that pose systemic challenges to conjoined processes of social, economic, and environmental injustice. While this may be especially pertinent in Indigenous communities—where sovereignty is enmeshed and cultural survival is tied to territory—extractivism everywhere thrives through the manipulation and continual (re)creation of political inequality. ExtrACTIVISM seeks to subvert exploitative thinking that conceives of homelands as wastelands in order to justify the appropriation and exportation of resources. It calls for refusing a sociopolitical structure that allows distant outsiders to profit from local citizens’ suffering, and demands that all people be empowered to decide the future of their own lands and determine their own destinies.

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