

# Contested Futures: Time, Extraction, and (Hydro)Power

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**Abstract:** This paper explores how visions of the future shape diverse responses to resource extraction projects. I consider three different reactions to northeastern British Columbia's controversial Site C Dam to suggest that individuals' relationships with the future—and, more precisely, their interpretations of themselves as temporal actors—play important roles in disputes surrounding resource extraction and, ultimately, in the culturally constituted (but materially manifested) process of creating the socionatural worlds of tomorrow. Incompatible imaginings of what the future should bring ensure that debates about extraction and land management are profound contests over who has the power to convert vision into reality.

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→Time—the ubiquitous context in which all human lives unfold—has captured the attention of several generations of anthropologists (Gell 1992).

**2**

→Within the anthropology of time, however, much more attention has been directed backward than forward. The anthropological propensity for origins, tradition, and cultural reproduction resulted in an “anthropological neglect of the future” (Munn 1992, 115) in which tomorrows were often overshadowed by yesterdays. In recent years, numerous anthropologists have recognized our discipline's disregard for the future as a serious problem. Notably, Arjun Appadurai calls on us “to place futurity, rather than pastness, at the heart of our thinking about culture” (2013, 194). Answering this call, the anthropology of the future is now emerging as a vibrant area of study.

**3**

→Examining divergences in how futures are imagined can help make sense of natural resource disputes, especially when visions of the future prove to be mutually incompatible. People

everywhere, it seems, eagerly attend to some futures while refusing to entertain others. As societal power structures determine whose visions seem inevitable and whose seem impossible (Westman 2013), futures become profoundly contested.

→This paper is about relationships with the future and their implications. More specifically, it is about how visions of the future shape diverse responses to resource extraction.

**4**

→During the summers of 2016 and 2017, I conducted ethnographic research in northeastern British Columbia, hoping to illuminate residents' experiences of and attitudes toward the region's major extractive industries. I stepped into a context of enduring external control and intensifying cumulative effects (which I describe in detail elsewhere).<sup>1</sup> In addition to focused participant-observation research, I conducted forty-eight interviews with northeastern British Columbia residents.<sup>2</sup> In most of these conversations, the Site C Dam—under construction and deeply controversial—dominated the discussion. In nearly every interview, I had the opportunity to ask how individuals envisioned the future of their region. The following discussion draws on interviewees' responses to this prompt and presents one small segment of a much larger research project.

**5**

→One of the highlights of my fieldwork was my participation in Paddle for the Peace, an annual event that is part celebration of the free-flowing Peace River and part protest against the Site C Dam. 2017's Paddle was blessed with perfect weather. The water was frigid, but a summer sun warmed the air. My boat was one of 200 or so to make the ninety-minute trip downstream to our designated landing site at Bear Flats. Perhaps I'd fallen victim to stale metaphors and 1980s

lyrics (“time is a river, rolling into nowhere”), but floating downstream in a borrowed canoe seemed like the perfect opportunity to contemplate the past, present, and future of a waterway that could soon be permanently transformed.<sup>3</sup> It was this journey—and my memories of it—that inspired these reflections.

## 6

→Once we accept that “our lives are constructed around knowledges of the future that are as full (and flawed) as our knowledges of the past” (Rosenberg and Harding 2005, 4), it follows that decisions we make today are inevitably influenced by predictions about what tomorrow will bring as well as by past experiences that condition what kind of future we desire and expect. This is as true when we choose a spouse or job as it is when we invest in—or take to the streets to protest—uranium mines and oil pipelines.

## 7

→We find ourselves permanently suspended between past and future, stuck in the precise moment when the fixed forces of “what has been” meet the mutable prospects of “still to come.” Although what we make of all three temporal planes is contoured by cultural assumptions, values, and justifications, the present is our one and only chance to act. It is in the here and now that we fulfil destinies and chart courses.

→ Important decisions leave us keenly aware of just how tightly the future is bound to the present. The ordinarily taken-for-granted flow of time is disrupted by the realization that we are forever at a crossroads, with no option but to choose (even if through inaction) what happens next. This is true not only for individuals, but also collectively, as communities chart courses for land and life. As the Site C story shows, expectations about the future are foremost among the

factors that determine whether hydroelectric extraction is viewed as progress, as a necessary evil, or as an intolerable affront.

**8**

→The message I want to get across today is this: Diverse responses to industrial resource extraction are based not only on past experiences and received cultural values, but also on visions of the future and expectations about who can create it. Over the next few minutes, I'll briefly sketch out three different reactions to British Columbia's proposed Site C Dam to suggest that individuals' relationships with the future—and, more precisely, their interpretations of themselves as temporal actors—play important roles in debates surrounding resource extraction and, ultimately, in the culturally-constituted (but materially-manifested) process of creating the worlds we leave behind.

**9**

### **Progress**

→Dam proponents view extracting electricity from flowing water through the temporal lens of progress. The dam, for them, embodies steady movement through time toward an ultimate goal; hydro-extractivism is a chance to contribute to continuing economic growth and keep the dream of a high-producing, high-consuming industrial civilization alive. Proponents evoke the proud certainty of inevitability in explaining their support for the Site C project and envision the Peace River's third massive hydroelectric dam as a logical and necessary extension of modernity's teleological transformation of the environment to advance the human condition.

**10**

→Site C was first imagined in the 1950s, when then premier W.A.C. Bennett set out to develop the province's vast northeast (Loo 2007). By 1958, fourteen potential dam sites had been

identified along the Peace River and in 1961, BC Hydro was created to lead the hydroelectric charge. The first massive dam was completed in 1968 and ultimately given Bennett's name. A second, smaller dam was completed at Peace Canyon in 1980. From the beginning, then, BC Hydro acted to implement what it had already decided, with the W.A.C. Bennett Dam envisioned even during its construction as the first in a series and the second dam at Peace Canyon justified to the public as "an integral part of the much larger Peace development" (Sawatsky 1974, 7).

## 11

→Although plans to build a dam at the site "C" location were rejected in a 1983 review, the possibility that a dam might someday stand at Site C loomed, residents say, like a "dark cloud over the valley." Renewed interest in the project emerged in 2007, when the British Columbia government began discussing climate policy solutions and promoting non-hydrocarbon energy sources. A new generation of political leaders appeared determined to build a dam at Site C. With proponents arguing that a third Peace River dam is essential to keep the wheels of socioeconomic progress turning, the conjoined concepts of progress and inevitability served to push the project forward. BC Hydro made sure that constituents could easily picture the dam's presence; even before construction began, it was frequently depicted as an already existing entity.<sup>4</sup> BC Hydro consistently describes the form the dam *will* take and the effects it *will* have, almost never allowing for the possibility left open by *may* or *might*.

## 12

### **Pragmatism**

→Northeastern British Columbia residents who take a more passive stance regarding Site C also subscribe to the doctrine of inevitability. Yet their imaginings of the dammed future tend

toward anxiety and anticipatory grief rather than pride and purpose. They envision a future with a dam they do not desire. Along with project proponents, members of this largest but least vocal group accept existing political and socioeconomic structures, not because they endorse and enjoy the status quo but because they see no realistic alternative. Far from a full-blown fatalism, however, their relationship with time is marked by the proactive process of pragmatic adaptation to a landscape-altering and life-changing project they feel powerless to stop.

→I was initially taken aback to hear interviewees lament the ecological and cultural damage they expected to follow the dam's completion and then, almost in the same breath, concede that their communities needed the jobs and other economic benefits that flowed from Site C. These individuals framed their acquiescence not as capitulation but as levelheaded compromise; it wasn't that they didn't care about the impending ecological and cultural losses, but simply that they could see no practicable way to prevent them. They were prepared to adapt to circumstances deemed outside of their control and determined to make the most of an imperfect situation.

### 13

→Many northeastern British Columbia residents view the dam—like environmentally destructive industry more generally—as an unavoidable means to the end of socioeconomic sufficiency. Convinced that economic development and full participation in modern industrial society are true necessities—and in some cases understandably desperate to avoid the suffering that poverty brings—they see no other way to put food on tables and roofs over heads. Those who pragmatically accept Site C believe (all puns aside) that they are damned if they endorse the dam, but even more damned if they don't.

14

### Visionary Activism

→ In stark contrast with those who—whether eagerly or reluctantly—accept Site C, anti-dam activists counter declarations of inevitability with vibrant visions of alternative futures for the Peace Valley. The significance they accord their here and now actions is elevated by an activist relationship with time in which the present moment is recognized as the crucial connection between a valorized past and an optimistic but uncertain future. Profoundly aware of their legacy, dam opponents take action today to ensure the best possible tomorrow for the land and the human (and non-human) communities it sustains. At least as important as their ability to articulate plans for a free-flowing river is the shared belief that their actions can influence outcomes; while residents who see the dam as inevitable concentrate on how they can make the most of uncontrollable circumstances, those who take a stand against the project are much more likely to advocate ways of life that actively challenge what “progress” has handed them.

15

→ Anti-dam activists do not share a singular cultural identity, nor do they have a common relationship to the environments they inhabit. They are instead united by a sense of belonging to a shared landscape that is now under threat—what Grossman calls “place membership” (2005:25). Recognizing that a free-flowing river sustains diverse ways of existing in the Peace River Valley, they contend that it is not *one* future but rather *multiple* futures that stand to be erased. The value of the valley’s agricultural lands—nearly 16,000 farmable acres lie within the designated flood zone—was mentioned repeatedly by interviewees; with their rich alluvial soils and mild microclimate, this irreplaceable asset may someday prove vital to northern food security (Holm 2018). The physical, cultural, and spiritual sustenance supported by land-based

subsistence—and the fact that Treaty 8 of 1899 promised Indigenous signatories that they would be “as free to hunt and fish after the treaty as they would be if they never entered into it” (Fumoleau 2004, 87-88)—were often noted by First Nations citizens and allies. And the gains that could come from realizing the recreation and tourism potential of the valley were matched by descriptions of habitat (for wildlife) and peaceful enjoyment (for humans). All of these possibilities would be mutually precluded by the Site C Dam and its 83-kilometer reservoir.

→Even after the Site C Dam was approved and preliminary construction commenced, its opponents continued to believe they could positively influence the future of the Peace. Evocative of the acutely asymmetrical power struggle surrounding the Site C project, dread of worst-case scenarios, nostalgia for foreclosed futures, and ideas of the future as an entity that can be “lost” or “stolen” are common drivers of anti-dam sentiment. Angered by the divide-and-conquer strategies employed by BC Hydro to subvert coordinated opposition, one First Nations woman asserted that the provincial utility is “creating a future that [is] non-existent for our future children and great grandchildren” (interview August 1, 2017). What is stolen, of course, is not time itself, but the ability to aspire to the version of tomorrow that is most desirable today.

## 16

→Every moment, every action undertaken by ourselves or by others expedites some possibilities and negates others. Whether we linger to mourn or let alternate options slip quietly away, some futures are no longer possible. We are haunted by the ghosts of past futures, Rosenberg and Harding tell us, so that “more and more, our sense of the future is conditioned by a knowledge of, and even a nostalgia for, futures that we have already lost” (2005, 3). Yet even in the face of anticipatory grief and dread, visionary activists find the courage to envision futures they know

may never transpire. Taking strength not only from their children but also from their elders, they will continue to defend their visions of tomorrow—even if the future does end up dammed. In northeastern British Columbia, the power of now—the sense that the present moment may be our only chance to create the kind of future we want to see—is a prominent component of anti-dam activists’ experience of being in time.

**17**

### **Another World Is Possible!**

→ Together with other Anthropocene citizens, we tie present to future in two interrelated ways. On the one hand, today’s decisions are made with disparate envisionings of the future in mind. On the other, these same decisions set in motion the tangible work of creating the socionatural realities we (or our descendants) will soon face. While we cannot accurately predict what the future will bring, we can be certain—or *make* certain—that some prospects will never be realized. From the multitude of possible futures, we select some to reject and others to nurture.

**18**

→ “The possible passes into the real through limitation,” Gilles Deleuze tells us, “the culling of other possibilities” (1991, 187). Along the Peace River, anti-dam activists point out that “flooding the valley for a single use—electrical generation—will destroy all the current uses that the valley serves” (Dusyk 2011, 878). Multiple futures, they argue, would be sacrificed to satisfy a singular goal.

→ While both proponents and opponents of Site C take inspiration from comprehensive imaginings of what they believe the river’s future should entail, the incompatibility of their scenarios ensures that debates about the dam are more profoundly contests over who has the

power to convert vision into reality. Natural resource disputes, in this view, are about “who has the power to tell the story of the future and then to enact it” (Westman 2013, 112). In northeastern British Columbia and far beyond, alternative futures that challenge the politically dominant extractivist status quo are deliberately—and all too often effectively—excluded from the realm of possibility.

## 19

→What roles, then, might anthropologists who share their research participants’ concerns for the future of a river (or the future of the world) play? More broadly, as Samuel Gerald Collins asks, “can anthropology change the world by writing about the future” (2007, 122)? Collins’ answer is affirmative. Other worlds, even those that currently seem unrealistic are not just possible, he argues, they are “virtualities waiting to be actualized” (Collins 2007, 122). In this sense, looking forward to tomorrow’s engaged anthropologies is also looking back on the things that make our discipline unique. Convincing audiences that we can live differently has long been on our list of essential duties. Reminding readers that countless human lives have been—and will necessarily be—premised on socionatural relationships that do not entail relentless exploitation. Assuring anxious students that it doesn’t have to be like this. Wherever existing power structures conspire to make some prospects appear “inevitable” and others “impossible,” we can endeavor to expand the range of foreseeable futures. We can inspire more people to cling to enticing visions of what tomorrow could bring and less to succumb to the doctrine of inevitability. We can promote less blind “progress” and more possibilities. An anthropology that amplifies, perhaps even innovates, alternative futures takes a bold but necessary first step. It dares people to dream.

## 20-Thanks

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<sup>1</sup> In addition to hydroelectric generation, forestry, oil and natural gas, and coal are major industries in the region.

<sup>2</sup> 60% of my interviewees had a First Nations affiliation, 50% were female, and ages spanned five decades.

<sup>3</sup> These lyrics come from Steve Winwood's hit song "The Finer Things" (Winwood and Jennings 1986).

<sup>4</sup> An artistic rendering of the completed dam graced the cover of project's environmental impact summary statement.

Released in 2013, this report is available at

[https://www.sitecproject.com/sites/default/files/site\\_c\\_eis\\_executive\\_summary\\_amended\\_%28july\\_2013%29.pdf](https://www.sitecproject.com/sites/default/files/site_c_eis_executive_summary_amended_%28july_2013%29.pdf)  
(accessed January 30, 2019).