

“Fighting the Same Old Battle”: Obscured Oil Sands Entanglements in Press Coverage of Indigenous Resistance in the Winter of 1983

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ABSTRACT

Background This article examines a week-long road blockade that took place in northern Alberta in January, 1983, organized by members of the Fort McKay First Nation and the Fort McKay Métis Community. The communities leveraged their blockade against a logging company, expanding the conversation to demand compensation, tougher oil sands pollution management, and better healthcare access.

Analysis A critical discourse analysis of newspaper coverage of the blockade in the local Fort McMurray Today and the provincial Edmonton Journal shows how links between the blockade and broader oil sands politics were minimized.

Conclusions and implications The article closes with considerations for contemporary journalistic practices of covering oil development, energy politics, and Indigenous resistance.

Keywords Oil sands; Energy; Indigenous peoples; Alberta

RÉSUMÉ

Contexte Cet article examine le blocus d'une semaine organisé par la Première Nation de Fort McKay et la Communauté Métis de Fort McKay au nord de l'Alberta en janvier 1983. Ces communautés ont mis à profit leur blocus contre une entreprise forestière pour demander des compensations, une gestion plus stricte de la pollution provenant des sables bitumineux et un meilleur accès aux soins.

Analyse Une analyse critique du discours utilisé pour parler du blocus dans les journaux, au niveau local dans le Fort McMurray Today et au niveau provincial dans le Edmonton Journal, démontre comment les liens entre le blocus et les politiques plus larges des sables bitumineux ont été minimisés.

Conclusion et implications L'article conclut avec des considérations pour les pratiques journalistiques contemporaines dans la couverture du développement pétrolier, politiques énergétiques et résistance autochtone.

Mots clés Sables bitumineux; Energie; Résistance autochtone; Alberta

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The town of Fort MacKay,¹ Alberta, north of Fort McMurray, is surrounded by oil company leases. A trapping-driven economy along the Athabasca River (before and after the signing of Treaty 8 in 1899) has given way to one determined by its relationship to the industrial extraction of tarry bituminous oil (see Fort McKay Industry Relations Corporation, 2001). Processes of extracting this oil negatively affect land, water, and air, and create more greenhouse gas emissions than other kinds of oil (see Israel, 2017; Lothian, 2017; McNeill, 2017). The oil sands have put the people who live in Fort MacKay in a position of unique wealth (see Steward, 2015), and also at a distance from the futures some community members envisioned and fought for as recently as 35 years ago.

This article takes up one part of that fight: a week-long road blockade organized by members of the Fort McKay First Nation and Fort McKay Métis Community in January 1983. The blockade began when the community refused access to 10 logging trucks expected to drive through Fort MacKay each day. The trucks were supposed to pick up timber that had been left by the previous summer's forest fires. On the basis of their children's safety, the First Nation and the Métis community said no. On its face, the terms of the blockade appeared straightforward and, at first, anchored to the immediate dispute. However, in the days following, as the local *Fort McMurray Today* and provincial *Edmonton Journal* newspapers covered the blockade and ongoing negotiations between Indigenous communities, the logging company, and the provincial government, a media space was opened to shed light on the human impacts of oil development in the region. This space was limited, however, by coverage that obscured the dispute's oil sands entanglements, despite efforts by the Indigenous communities to connect one form of natural resource extraction to a far larger land and resource battle.

In this article, "oil sands entanglements" is a term proposed to refer to both the affects and effects of oil extraction for Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities in and outside northern Alberta. Its use follows an interview with Eriel Deranger, a co-organizer of the Tar Sands Healing Walk outside Fort McMurray in 2014. She referred to her own Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation and other local Indigenous communities as "entangled" (personal communication, June 27, 2014) in the politics and economics of the oil industry. The oil sands industry provides sources of employment; oil extraction curbs access to land; and the environmental impacts of ongoing development affect the health of people and animals. Following Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing (2015), who urges us to think through assemblages to understand how humans, non-humans, and human systems are entangled, this article argues that the concept of oil sands entanglement begins to account for how diverse needs and interests are knotted together with oil. Contemplating entanglement means refusing to entrench easily summarized binary oppositions, such as development versus anti-development, progress versus tradition, or environment versus economy.

To some, Fort McKay First Nation today is an example of a good news story of the oil sands and Indigenous communities (see Flanagan, 2016). For more than 30 years, it has worked with industry through the nation-owned and -operated Fort McKay Group of Companies (see Fort McKay First Nation, 2017, para. 7). The McKay Métis Group, owned and operated by the Fort McKay Métis Community, is also invested in

areas of industrial development (see McKay Métis Group, n.d.). In 2016, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) reported that, according to Fort McKay First Nation Chief Jim Boucher, the nation was home to “an unemployment rate of zero, an average annual income of \$120,000, and financial holdings in excess of \$2-billion, thanks to its willingness to do business with Canada’s oil and gas companies” (Tasker, 2016, para. 3; see also Canada Action, 2017a, 2017b). To others, Fort McKay is a “tar sands sell-out”; as the U.K. based *Guardian* writes, “While oil made some people here rich, it is also poisoning the waters of the Athabasca River” (Goldenberg, 2015). In this international publication, jobs do not necessarily make up for supporting an industry that is “choking the planet.” But the space between sell-outs and business leaders occludes the settler-colonial histories that underpin present-day oil sands developments. This problematic binary casts people and communities as either “pro” or “anti” oil sands, failing to fully capture how oil entangles and ensnares.² Further, it fails to investigate shifts in position.

Entanglement assists in this investigation. As Tsing (2015) describes it, entanglement ties humans and non-humans in co-constitutive relationships. This article argues that oil sands entanglements are binding: they are powered by politics, economics, and survival; they are not easily escaped nor easily imagined differently. This suggests an exertion of force, though entanglement’s power is multidirectional (Tsing, 2015). Thus it is helpful to weigh systemic questions of petro-politics, or how oil can challenge democracy’s workings (see Ross, 2001; Shrivastava & Stefanick, 2012), although fully entertaining the scope of entanglement means locating one’s own relationship to and responsibility for the oil sands. This is a critical exercise: unlike the rhetoric of industry supporters who emphasize the benefits of the oil sands for “all” Canadians (see Gunster & Saurette, 2014), introducing the concept of oil sands entanglement is not an invitation to describe (or celebrate) connections but to envision *disentanglement*. This disentangling is particularly important in a settler-colonial context, as the oil sands are just one “particularly demonstrative site” (Preston, 2013, p. 43) of the ongoing politics and processes of “environmental racism, Indigenous oppression and violence” (Preston, 2013, p. 43) that continue the workings of colonialism through neoliberalism and resource extraction. Just as it is not enough to describe connections, it is not enough to describe settler-colonialism; an anti-colonial ethic would instead seek to pull apart its processes, examine them critically, and begin to conceptualize alternatives.³

This article explores the public record of the blockade to better understand histories of living with oil sands development and the alternatives proposed by blockade organizers in 1983. By analyzing newspaper coverage of the Fort McKay blockade, it attends to how oil sands entanglements were both brought forward and put aside throughout the period of protest. Eight days of coverage in the *Fort McMurray Today* and *Edmonton Journal* are analyzed to examine the discursive strategies that were employed to minimize anti-colonial and future-oriented claims made by Indigenous communities throughout the blockade period. This article connects to a cross-section of Canadian communication studies that have looked closely at mediated representations of Indigenous-led resistance. The following sections describe: how this research is approached; the oil sands in the late 1970s and early 1980s; and the blockade itself. Next

the newspapers' coverage is analyzed with the aim of beginning to grapple with how the earliest days of large-scale oil sands development inform today's political and media landscape.

In coverage of the blockade, resistance to the oil sands was discursively contained within a narrative that emphasized conflict between Indigenous peoples and non-Indigenous government and industry representatives. This narrative largely ignored how the blockade was informed by its settler-colonial setting. This article specifically attends to: how the effort was criminalized; how those participating were shown to be unreasonable; how the goals of resource extraction were privileged; and ultimately how Indigenous claims were glossed over. Each of these discursive strategies appear repeatedly throughout the selected 28 news and opinion pieces, and each serves to further normalize both the oil sands and settler colonialism.

These findings are the result of an historical and critical discourse analysis (CDA) of *Today* and *Journal* coverage of the blockade (see Figure 1). Critical discourse analysis is an approach to make sense of relationships "between discourse and power" (van Dijk, 2008, pp. 85–101; see also Fairclough, 1995) by looking closely at what assumptions and shared ideologies (Henry & Tator, 2002) are communicated in texts.

Figure 1: Complete list of stories analyzed

<i>Fort McMurray Today</i>	<i>Edmonton Journal</i>
Friday January 14, 1983: "MacKay Indians set up blockade," p. 1.	Saturday January 15, 1983: "Angry Indians block road," A1.
Monday January 17, 1983: "Fort MacKay blockade continues," p. 1.	Sunday January 16, 1983: "Indian roadblock remains after meeting with minister," A1.
Tuesday January 18, 1983: "MacKay natives take case to feds," p. 1.	Monday January 17, 1983: "Indians ready for RCMP showdown," A1 (early edition).
Tuesday January 18, 1983: "Showdown today?" p. 1.	Monday January 17, 1983: "Natives bracing for showdown over road," A1 (final edition).
Tuesday January 18, 1983: "Shields condemns protest," p. 1.	Monday January 17, 1983: "Survival more than safety roadblock issue, chief says," B1 (early edition).
Wednesday January 19, 1983: (No title; op-ed), p. 4.	Monday January 17, 1983: "Survival of Indian band at root of roadblock protest," B1 (final edition).
Wednesday January 19, 1983: "Time running out for logging effort," p. 1.	Tuesday January 18, 1983: "Natives reject deal to lift roadblock," A1 (early edition).
Thursday January 20, 1983: "Protesters to vote on offer," p. 1.	Tuesday January 18, 1983: "Natives callous, Pahl says," A1 (final edition).
Friday January 21, 1983: "A victory for some..." (op-ed), p. 4.	Tuesday January 18, 1983: "Roadblock puts squeeze on truckers," B1 (early edition).
Friday January 21, 1983: "Blockade down, natives jubilant," p. 1.	Tuesday January 18, 1983: "Truckers may sue Indians for losses," A8 (final edition).
	Wednesday January 19, 1983: "Native roadblock holds as gov't seeks meeting," A1 (early edition).

Figure 1: (continued)

<i>Fort McMurray Today</i>	<i>Edmonton Journal</i>
	Wednesday January 19, 1983: "Roadblock stands as talks considered," A11 (final edition).
	Thursday January 20, 1983: "MacKay Indians among poorest," A8 (early edition).
	Thursday January 20, 1983: "Indians behind blockade among Alta.'s poorest," D2 (final edition).
	Thursday January 20, 1983: "Natives at MacKay to vote on roadblock," A1 (early edition).
	Friday January 21, 1983: "Deal ends native roadblock," A1 (early edition).
	Friday January 21, 1983: "Indians remove roadblock," A8 (final edition).

The stories that were analyzed were accessed via microfilm archives of both the *Journal* and the *Today*, held at Library and Archives Canada in Ottawa. In 1983, both the *Today* and the *Journal* published stories about the blockade prominently on their front pages. This analysis attended to elements of individual texts and how they framed stories (such as choice of words, headlines, "lede" paragraphs, quotes, and final or "kicker" paragraphs),⁴ and asked how messages were conveyed. To share the results of the analysis, reference styles used by Mark Cronlund Anderson and Carmen L. Robertson (2011) and Robert Harding (2006) for identifying articles by their headlines and publication dates rather than the names of their authors are loosely borrowed. This choice is made first for clarity: just a handful of reporters were assigned to cover the story; editorials published in the *Today* were unsigned; and the *Journal* published two slightly different stories each day in its early and final editions. Headlines are thus the best guide for other researchers to find the same stories in the future. This is also a choice in keeping with attention to discourse over individual writers' intentions.⁵

The oil sands in 1983

The decision to track down coverage of this blockade was prompted by a passing reference to the event in the *Guardian* (Goldenberg, 2015, paras. 35–36):

Under her [Chief Dorothy McDonald's] leadership, Fort McKay tried to blockade the oil companies. [Current Chief Jim Boucher] said he put up a teepee on the main road. The community won that round, forcing industry to come to more favourable financial terms. But it was an empty victory, Jim said.

"We did win the fight at that point of time but it was most expensive and costly. There was a toll on every side," he said. "It divided the community."

When Chief Dorothy McDonald talked about the 1983 blockade in a 1990 interview with the *Journal*, she said, "We had nothing to lose" (Goyette, 1990). The blockade was contextualized by oil sands development that had not yet yielded any benefits for the

Indigenous communities of Fort MacKay. In 1975, a planning report for the Northeast Alberta Regional Commission, now held at the Provincial Archives of Alberta in Edmonton, describes Fort MacKay as a community of about 250 people, the vast majority of whom were Indigenous and wary of oil sands development despite wanting better roads and more public services (Ekistic Design Consultants Ltd., 1975). “The community has been dependent economically, until very recently, on trapping, hunting, and fishing” (Ekistic Design Consultants Ltd., 1975, p. 30), the report says, adding the estimated 35 oil sands-related jobs available were all held by non-Indigenous people.

At this time, there were just two companies operating in the oil sands: Suncor, which began production in the late 1960s as the Great Canadian Oil Sands (Suncor, n.d.); and Syncrude, which began operating in the late 1970s (Syncrude, n.d.). Both were “plagued by continuing mechanical and technical setbacks” (Malcolm, 1982, para. 20). In 1982 there were reports of an incident at Suncor that resulted in a spill of pollutants into the Athabasca River; Chief McDonald reported illnesses among members of the Fort McKay First Nation (*Fort McMurray Today* & Canadian Press, 1982). Later the same year, foul-tasting fish shut down local commercial fishing for the year (DeCory, 1982).

The blockade

The Fort McKay blockade began on Friday, January 14, 1983, and was taken down the following Thursday (January 20). In a joint news release, published in part by the *Today*, organizers told the provincial government:

You will have to jail every member of the Fort MacKay community and every other Indian that comes to support us before that road will be opened. ... If we cannot convince you of our sincerity to resolve these issues in this manner, we believe we have other, more direct means of convincing you. ... the federal and provincial governments must recognize their actions for what they are—genocide. An ugly word but unfortunately for us, true. (January 14, 1983, “MacKay Indians set up blockade”)

Community members were said to have met with government officials several times to explain the danger posed by the trucks for children in the community. In response, provincial government officials had offered to: prevent the trucks from passing through when children were going to or from school; impose a 30-kilometre-per-hour speed limit; and improve the road’s condition. Instead, the community wanted the trucks to be banned between 8 a.m. and 5 p.m. (*Journal*, January 15, 1983, “Angry Indians block road”), or to go around Fort MacKay altogether.

Nicholas Blomley (1996) argues that a blockade is not defined by its duration or its motivation, and it can be a part of a broader resistance strategy involving the courts or media. Blockades may deal directly with an issue of “movement into or from a traditional territory,” or, “protest some unrelated grievance[s]” (p. 12). In attending to the potential for media attention, Blomley situates blockades at least in part within a politics meant to spur on further dialogue and engagement. This aligns with the Fort McKay First Nation and Métis communities’ public claims-making.

After putting up the blockade, organizers also sent an appeal to the federal health minister, reaching past the provincial government officials with whom they were al-

ready dealing to advance demands that explicitly tied the logging trucks conflict to the oil sands. As reported in the *Today*, blockaders' demands included

- The replacement of “traditional hunting, trapping, fishing and food gathering areas” lost to the Syncrude Canada Ltd. and Suncor Inc. oil sands plants.
- Compensation for lost wages and food supplies suffered by Fort McKay residents and trappers through the loss of income from traplines to oil sands projects.
- To receive the “same benefits” as other local communities have received from the “development of the tar sands plants on our land.” (January 18, 1983, “MacKay natives take case to feds”)

These demands exceed the immediate matter of the logging trucks and go to the heart of resisting settler colonialism and imagining alternatives to a status quo of resource extraction. Darin Barney's (2014) handling of a “politics of immobility” is useful to consider here. By January 1983, Fort McKay First Nation Chief Dorothy McDonald had issued press releases, held press conferences in Edmonton, and threatened to take companies to court in her opposition to the oil sands. This work had yielded some coverage in both the *Today* and *Journal*, but nothing like the daily attention accorded to the blockade. McDonald's power to do politics as usual, then, did not compare to the potential power of *stopping everything*,⁶ albeit alongside strategies of publicly appealing to government officials for change.

The blockade concluded following meetings between provincial government representatives, Fort McKay First Nation and Métis leaders, the owners of the logging company, and the president of the Alberta Indian Association, acting as a mediator. Flag people were to be posted on either side of the town and the logging trucks were escorted when they passed through Fort McKay. New “methods for dealing with the long-standing band grievances over environmental issues and compensation for trappers for lost land, trap lines and wages” were also to be set up (*Today*, January 21, 1983, “Blockade down, natives jubilant”).

This retelling of events only outlines the blockade; a survey of work on media representations of Indigenous-led resistance movements informs analysis of coverage of the blockade.

Media representations of Indigenous-led resistance

Swept broadly, representations of Indigenous peoples in Canadian media have long been marked by emphases on the negative, perceived threats to settlers, oversimplification of issues, and absences from media altogether (Todorova, 2016). Media coverage of protests and other resistance movements follows similar patterns. As Augie Fleras (2011) writes, Indigenous-led protests are often mediated as “acts of criminality and threats to Canada's social order” (p. 19), and de-contextualized from the broader politics and histories against which Indigenous peoples are pushing. Fleras's observation is important in analyzing a blockade that was about two issues at once: the passage of logging trucks and the encroachment of industrial oil sands development. Ignoring or minimizing the latter in coverage of the blockade is tantamount to decontextualizing both its purpose and its setting.

While media may not be able to direct audiences' thinking, they can direct audiences' attentions (Harding, 2006). Mediated discourses can serve to rationalize colonial practices by "masking oppressive behaviour" (LaRocque, 2010, p. 37) and systematizing inequality. In their analysis of more than a century of English-language newspaper coverage of Indigenous peoples (1869–2009), Mark Cronlund Anderson and Carmen Robertson (2011) argue "the colonial imaginary has thrived, even dominated, and continues to do so in mainstream English-language newspapers" (p. 3). This imaginary provides the cultural and discursive backbone for broader policies of colonial violence, they write. They found newspapers have perpetuated essentialist stereotypes that are ever-changing in terminology, but consistently locked on an image of Indigenous peoples as inferior and resistant to change (Anderson & Robertson, 2011). In a study focused on friction between communities, governments, and industry in connection to broader questions of extraction and industrialization, the notion that Indigenous peoples refuse progress deserves special attention because of its persistence.

Many scholars have unpacked problems with media coverage of Indigenous-led protests, blockades, and confrontations between Indigenous peoples and the state, in the latter half of the 20th century (cf. Anderson & Robertson, 2011; Lambertus, 2004; Miller, 2005; Roth, Nelson, & David, 1995; Valaskakis, 2005). These studies highlight the media's powerful framing role, critique the absence of thorough context in stories of conflict, and map patterns of over-reliance on government or state sources. Of particular note is the media handling of standoffs outside Montréal in 1990 and in southern Ontario in 1995, because of the coverage's emphasis on violence. Regarding the standoff between Mohawks and the Canadian government in 1990, Lorna Roth (Roth, Nelson, & David, 1995) recounts how Montréal newsrooms responded to early calls about protests to protect sacred land from a golf course expansion by asking whether there would be guns: "The media, in other words, were saying, 'We'll only cover you if there is a possibility of violence'" (p. 58).⁷ Analyzing print coverage of the standoff at Ipperwash Provincial Park in southern Ontario in 1995, John Miller (2005) argues there was little national media attention until a protester, Dudley George, was killed (p. 6). As coverage continued, Miller (2005) writes, reporters tended to interview "official sources" (p. 8), such as the police, and few seemed to understand the nature of the dispute, which had stemmed from the appropriation of the Chippewas of Kettle and Stoney Point First Nation land during the Second World War. Without that context in place, First Nations people were essentially framed as "causing a fuss" rather than as "people who believe they have a legitimate right to their land" (p. 8).

Though the issues and disputes that lead to the realization of each resistance movement are place- and time-specific, it is important to look across media case studies of Indigenous-led protests to recognize some of the basic misunderstandings that underpin patterns of coverage. News coverage can treat events in isolation, imbuing them with a sense that they come and go while missing the bigger picture (or broader entanglements). Gail Valaskakis (2005) sums up conflicting ways of understanding mobilization:

For Indians, resistance is national, tribal, even local; assertions of cultural persistence expressed in petitions, court cases, demonstrations, and

deaths that are remembered and reconstructed in the discursive struggles of today. For other North Americans, Indian resistance is movement, a progression forward or backward in incidents of action that are episodic explosions of political confrontation, which are ahistorical and unpredictable. (p. 36)

In recent years, a refusal to have their resistance cast as flashpoints seems to be embedded in the self-representation and media practices of Indigenous peoples. In a critique of the media's coverage of Idle No More, an Indigenous-led grassroots movement that began in 2012 to oppose sweeping Canadian government legislation that would curb environmental protections, Leanne Simpson (2014) writes,

Idle No More has consistently rejected the framing of protesters as fed up and angry, or of the mobilization as “new.” The movement is in fact a continuation of 400 years of resistance. We have also rejected the media's need to focus on a single leader or spokesperson, and on a concise list of short-term demands. Instead, Indigenous peoples have consistently brought in the historic and contemporary legacy of colonialism, occupation, and dispossession as context to our deepening movement. (p. 297)

Mediated stereotypes mislead and misrepresent, but so too can absences from the shared public record. Perpetuating stereotypes and mis- or under-representing Indigenous issues risks making cross-cultural engagement in a broader dialogue about settler colonialism and how it works in the context of resource extraction more difficult. The following section unpacks sets of media discourses evident in coverage of the Fort McKay blockade that stood to minimize community claims and obscure oil sands entanglements.

Waiting for a showdown: Criminal discourses

The criminalization of protests in general is well-trod ground in media studies (see Cammaerts, 2012). It nonetheless bears examining here as a way of better understanding how local and provincial media framed the Fort McKay blockade. Emphasizing potential arrests or police raids sent the message that the blockade was illegal and a nuisance rather than an exercise in resistance and rights recognition. As Fleras (2011) writes, media's power to “articulat[e] right from wrong, acceptable from non-acceptable, normalcy from the deviant, and what counts from who doesn't” (p. 5) stands to back up an existing status quo. In the context of the Fort McKay blockade, the status quo was the smooth extraction of resources. Interrupting the flow of goods and the routes of extraction represented a break from the norm and, in both newspapers, an illegal act that would not be tolerated for long.

A handful of headlines in both papers seemed to promise a confrontation between those holding the blockade and the police. Exemplifying language used, three headlines warned: “Indians ready for RCMP showdown” (*Journal*, January, 17, 1983); “Natives bracing for showdown over road” (*Journal*, January, 17, 1983, final edition); and, “Showdown today?” (*Today*, January 18, 1983). Though a confrontation between blockaders and police never occurred, it was set up as unavoidable: in both newspapers, reporters led stories more than once with the possibility of a police raid or jail

time for participants. Starting on the fifth day of the blockade, and in consecutive stories until it ended, the *Today* included a sentence in its articles outlining the maximum penalties that participants in the blockade faced if they were arrested: a \$500 fine and six months in jail (January 18, 1983, "Showdown today?"; January 19, 1983, "Time running out for logging effort"; January 20, 1983, "Protesters to vote on offer"; January 21, 1983, "Blockade down, natives jubilant"). The inclusion of this sentence coincides with a shift in the *Today's* tone covering the blockade. In initial stories, a fairly descriptive style is employed, making room for Fort McKay First Nation Chief Dorothy McDonald's framing of events and motivations. Later, stories read as somewhat more suspicious of the claims underpinning the blockade. By the time the blockade was taken down, a *Today* editorial titled, "A victory for some..." argued those behind the blockade had made no serious concessions, "other than graciously allowing logging trucks to roll on a public road which they had no legal right to block in the first place" (January 21, 1983). This observation further compounded the notion that the blockade was not legal, suggesting it was also not fair play. There is also a sense that the editorial writer felt as though those behind the blockade used the media unfairly:

The worst part of all this is that the proposal which was eventually accepted differed only slightly from earlier efforts. In effect this settlement could have been reached much sooner than it was. But the [sic] again, the event wouldn't have attracted as much national media coverage if that had been settled earlier—and that was obviously the idea behind the protest.

It is unlikely that media, let alone national organizations, would have covered other avenues of negotiation as prominently. Media have an entrenched selection bias toward "conflict and negativity as newsworthy" (Fleras, 2011, p. 14). Rima Wilkes, Catherine Corrigan-Brown, and Daniel J. Myers (2010) analyzed newspaper coverage of 230 Indigenous resistance mobilizations between 1985 and 1995, and found "disruptive tactics" (pp. 350–351) are most likely to land on the front page. In social movement theory, it is generally accepted that the presence of very large numbers of assembled protesters, combined with the spectacle of doing something unusual, are the tickets for amplifying dissent, disrupting and capturing the attention of those you wish to sway, and garnering media coverage (cf. Cammaerts, 2012; Della Porta & Diani, 2006). Wilkes and her co-authors (2010) argue "the use of contentious tactics" (p. 351) can make up for small crowds and garner more coverage. However, they write, not just any kind of contentious action works; they found land occupations that did not directly affect people outside Indigenous communities generally received little attention while road or rail blockades that "disrupt the lives of outsiders" (Wilkes, Corrigan-Brown, & Myers, 2010, p. 351) played prominently in news media.

Valaskakis (2005) argues Indigenous communities are well aware of the "media attention" and "public visibility" that violence or threatened violence brings, and some use these strategies "to gain a voice in the enduring political struggles between Natives and nation-states" (pp. 40–41). Threatening to go to jail may have been an amplification strategy used by those behind the blockade. From the first press release issued, organizers foregrounded their willingness to go to jail rather than see logging trucks

pass through their community. In the first days of the blockade, the newspapers named McDonald as their source for expectations that police would move in to remove the blockade and arrest people. This framing also showed that those behind the blockade were resolute in their demands.

As the blockade progressed, an RCMP raid was cast as imminent and there seemed to be questions as to why the provincial government had not yet ordered one. In a *Journal* story about independent truckers who were losing pay as a result of the blockade, one person is quoted asking,

This is a public road, isn't it? They're breaking the law and there should be no exceptions to that. I'm sure that if we were speeding through town or something like that they'd pull us off the road right away. (January 18, 1983, "Truckers may sue Indians for losses")

The inclusion of the above quote in the story allows a slip between a nuisance crime (driving too fast) and political claim-making (installing a blockade). The slippage betrays what Taiaiake Alfred and Lana Lowe (2005) describe as "the settler instinct," to "criminalize and otherwise de-legitimize indigenous resistance" (p. 23). Another mode of de-legitimization is evident in coverage of government, industry, and police responses to the blockade.

"It seems kind of crazy ...": Unreasonable discourses

Throughout the coverage, state authorities and the owners of the logging company were presented as both confused by the blockade and trying to avoid a full-blown confrontation with protesters. Where, on the first day of *Journal* coverage, McDonald and members of the Fort McKay First Nation were described as "angry," owners of the logging company were described as "surprised" by the blockade. The RCMP was said to want to avoid confrontation. In most stories, Alberta's Minister Responsible for Native Affairs was consistently presented as conciliatory and hoping to see children back in school as soon as possible until, midway through the blockade, he suggested the children were being used as "pawns" (January 19, 1983, "Time running out for logging effort," *Fort McMurray Today*). Stories framed Indigenous protesters as passionate if overreaching in their demands, while representatives of the settler state and industry appeared to be calmly puzzled. This underlined the notion that the blockade was unnecessary and continued what Emma LaRocque (2010) has described as a "'civ/sav' dichotomy" wherein settlers are positioned as arbiters of reason and Indigenous peoples as unreasonable.

If criminalizing discourses suggested the blockade was at its root illegal, framing blockaders' actions as confounding suggested the effort was misguided and without focus. In an interview with the *Today*, the area's federal member of parliament said the blockade was not an acceptable avenue for negotiating "treaty grievances with local oil companies" (January 18, 1983, "Shields condemns protest). In the same interview, the opposition member dubbed the organizers' demands "unrealistic," suggested they failed to recognize that "large trucks [going] through small communities" is just a "fact of life," and is quoted saying First Nations, "have some very legitimate concerns, but to tie it all in with this issue is not too realistic. I don't think she's [McDonald's]

gaining any sympathy from it.” In a *Journal* story that ultimately unravelled motivations behind the blockade, authorities’ confusion about what the blockade was meant to accomplish was the lead framing device:

Numbing night time temperatures that dipped to -30C late Saturday night failed to cool the resolve of this community into abandoning its three-day-old road block.

When the brilliant sunrise Sunday morning only managed to warm the temperature a few degrees, the tired and haggard looking group of Indians and Métis seemed only more determined to stay on. ...

The extreme measures the natives have taken to ensure the safety of school children from logging trucks rumbling through the community appears to have most officials mystified. ...

“It seems kind of crazy to go through all of that trouble and maybe go to jail just to block some trucks,” said one RCMP officer. (January 17, 1983, “Survival more than safety roadblock issue, chief says”)

The rest of the *Journal* story notes local community members had lost land and access to trap lines thanks to relatively new oil sands operations. There were also reports of pollution and the previous year’s fishing season closing. The blockade was clearly about more than “block[ing] some trucks,” but inserting the officer’s comment and suggesting the action “mystified” officials undermined its motivation.

Those behind the blockade had an explicit set of demands: they wanted their children to be safe; they wanted to be compensated for lost land and access to trap lines; they wanted a local health unit; and they wanted pollution in the region to be better policed. Nonetheless, both newspapers adapted a shorthand for these demands, grouping them as “long-standing” and “local” grievances. The community was said to have a “series of local issues” and a “history of turbulent relations.” This shorthand allowed some distance between the claims being made and the matter at hand: ending the blockade of logging trucks. As Robert Harding (2006) writes, “unhinging the present from the past” (p. 206) is another way of perpetuating stereotypes and for scaffolding state practices that depend on forgetting. In this case, minimizing or muddling the circumstances of oil sands development unhinges the blockade from both the past and the present, or the ongoing drive to extract the region’s resources. To dub a grievance as long-standing is to suggest it is so embedded that it is insurmountable and perhaps best forgotten. Glossing over precise issues allows them to be ignored and enables the obscuring of oil sands entanglements. Obviously, it does nothing to explain Treaty 8 and the specific nature of so-called local grievances.

In cases of Indigenous resistance, Fleras (2011) writes, the binary of state authority versus Indigenous protester is further contextualized as a clash between “Eurocentric norm[s] of engagement” and “dangerous or irrational” behaviour (p. 18). Fleras acknowledges Sue Abel’s (1997) book, *Shaping the News: Waitangi Day on Television*, when noting the contrast allows “lawful authorities” to be “framed as above the fray” (Fleras, 2011, p. 18) altogether. This framing allows authorities off the hook: Indigenous

protesters are positioned as unpredictable and needing to be managed while state authorities are seen not as *engaged* in the process but *above* it, ensuring the dispute will not get out of hand. In *Today* coverage, RCMP officers are framed as friendly onlookers and even helpers. In a sea of coverage that highlighted the possibility of those behind the blockade going to jail, one story described a police officer helping build the teepee that stood as part of the blockade. A follow-up op-ed piece clarified the officer's help in response to readers who called the newspaper to complain:

the officer was just trying to be friendly and co-operative so he lent a hand rather than adding to the tension of the situation. We pointed it out to illustrate that there was no attitude of confrontation at the site, not with the intention of making the police look foolish. The RCMP should be credited for their attitude, not condemned. (January 19, 1983, untitled op-ed)

Discourses suggesting an absence of reason on the part of blockaders and a paternalistic disinterest in the outcome of the blockade on the part of the RCMP evacuate the settler-colonial context of the blockade. Jen Preston (2013) writes, "settler colonialism ... colludes with capital in a multitude of ways; land-centred, it requires private companies and public agencies to work together to secure access to land and resources while strategically managing 'the Indian problem'" (p. 49). Analyzing media coverage of the blockade through this lens connects the logging company's interests to broader extractivist interests, which in turn were an extension of government interests. In coverage that emphasizes the need for a speedy conclusion to the blockade, these interests seem to be presented as the non-Indigenous public's interests, too.

Now or never: Extraction discourses

Discourses that prioritized resource extraction worked in three ways: first, by sharing logging company owners' and workers' confusion and frustration with the situation (exemplified above); second, by avoiding the possibility of *not* moving the timber; and third, by emphasizing the poverty of the Fort McKay First Nation in tandem with McDonald's explanations for the blockade.

It must be noted that at no point in the articles analyzed here was there any question as to *whether* the trucks would eventually gain access to the logs on the other side of Fort MacKay, only *when*. Both papers laid out a set of facts that seemed inarguable in their repetition: the window for accessing the timber was short (it had to be picked up before the spring thaw for it to have any value); going around Fort MacKay would be too expensive; not picking up the timber on time would lead to lost revenues and incomes. Of all the solutions on the table, from police escorts for the trucks, to limiting the number of hours trucks could pass through the community, cancelling the timber haul was not addressed. Treating the logging company's work as necessary discursively justified the continued extraction of the logs at the centre of the conflict, and, implicitly, the continued work of other extraction industries.

While different state authorities were on the record as dubious of the communities' efforts to link broader problems to the passage of the logging trucks, the conflict had discursively come to stand in for questions of economic development and modernization in Indigenous communities. If, for First Nations leadership, the passage of

logging trucks symbolized the continuing onslaught of extractive industries in the area, the blockade provided news media with an opportunity to elaborate the community's failure to embrace development. This comes into particularly sharp focus in a *Journal* story about the removal of the blockade that explains First Nations people were "worried about the erosion of their traditional hunting and fishing rights by the encroachment of *civilization*" (emphasis added; January 21, 1983, "Indians remove roadblock"). Civilization stands in for notions of progress, modernization, or development, skirting problems of environmental disruption and the interruption of existing economies.

How Fort McKay's poverty was framed, and how this served to prioritize continued industrial development, is illustrated in a *Journal* story wherein McDonald justifies the blockade:

"It's like the last stand for us," [McDonald] said. "We're fighting the same old battle that Indians everywhere have fought. We're struggling to survive as a people."

Situated just north of the giant Suncor and Syncrude oil sands plants, the biggest employers in Fort McMurray, MacKay stands as a bankrupt community that survives mainly by the pursuit of traditional trapping and hunting ways.

Less than 50 of the 250 people in the community have jobs and few of those work at the oil sands plants. The band office is the single biggest employer in the town.

In the community's eyes, northern Alberta's economic development is their biggest threat to survival. They see no benefits to be gained. (January 17, 1983, "Survival of Indian band at root of roadblock protest")

The assertion that the community "see[s] no benefits to be gained" is not the same as writing that there had been no benefits of oil development for the community; rather it suggests community members may not be looking for benefits or solutions to their poverty. This embedded doubt is compounded in a later *Journal* story describing the community's "history of turbulent relations with government and development industries" (January 20, 1983, "MacKay Indians among poorest"). The later story notes that the Fort McKay First Nation had maintained opposition to further development, unlike "other Indian bands in northeastern Alberta, [who] through the Neegan Corp., signed an agreement with Suncor for native jobs in the oil sands expansion." Just as the solution to the blockade was always cast as the logging company doing its work, the solution to problems faced by Indigenous communities in northern Alberta was framed as working with the oil industry.

In the newspaper articles analyzed here, McDonald often seemed quite aware of the ways in which her claims were being framed as unreasonable or out of touch with the realities of the day. In a *Today* story about her appeal to the federal health minister, she described the demands as "things we want and which are owing to us," adding: "They are not unreasonable at all when you realize what we have given up and how

much my people have suffered and will continue to suffer unless something is done” (January 18, 1983, “MacKay natives take case to feds”). In the same story, McDonald is said to have, “called the blockade a fight for the ‘survival’ of the small native community—one based on traditional native lifestyles, shunning the megaproject developments to the south.”

Though certainly in keeping with contemporary oil sands discourse, implicitly and explicitly presenting work with oil companies as the solution for Indigenous peoples going forward undermined the anti-colonial claims that were being made in tandem with the blockade.

Legacies of the blockade and considerations for media coverage

The spectre of the 1983 Fort McKay blockade appears from time to time in contemporary media coverage, but it is rarely dealt with in any depth. This is not terribly surprising: in an analysis of contemporary *Calgary Herald* coverage of the oil sands, Shane Gunster and Paul Saurette (2014) argue First Nations experiences are taken up rarely; further, the blockade tells a story about Fort McKay First Nation that is not completely in keeping with how we understand its relationship to the oil sands today.

However, portraying communities as pro- or anti-development betrays how oil sands entanglements continue to be obscured and how narratives of extraction can be taken for granted. This article illustrates how binary approaches and failures to communicate the broader context of a conflict can drain it of its meaning, shut down dialogue in and between communities, ignore how the oil sands work to bind people and communities, and produce a lingering blind spot in media representations. In the context of oil development and ever-evolving energy politics in northern Alberta and in Canada, this marks missed opportunities to more fully understand and engage with how tar sands extraction works its way through Indigenous and other communities. The case study of the Fort McKay blockade tells us about how communities position themselves to live with *and despite* the oil sands. It also points to how claims may change as oil sands entanglements strengthen.

In an interview with the *Journal* in 2013, Fort McKay First Nation Chief Jim Boucher troubles the binary pro-/anti-oil sands narrative when he describes his community as,

not pro-development, we were anti-development for a long time. We wanted to maintain our traditional lifestyle, we wanted to maintain our land, the integrity of our land, and at the end of the day we as a community were devastated as a result of the end of the fur campaign. And gradually, you know, we came to recognize we had no other options but to try out the new economy and develop a new economy of our own. Today I think our community is benefiting from this oil sands development, but we do so because there is no other economic opportunities. (quoted in Jackson, 2013)

The blockade, as one chapter in an ongoing story of entangled pressures, challenges, and responsibilities, also signposts alternative routes through oil development in northeastern Alberta. However, there is more research and journalism work to be done on

this front. In 2015, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015) argued media are conduits for public information that is “both for and about Aboriginal peoples,” and this role is freighted with the responsibility of reflecting the diversity of Indigenous peoples and providing “fair and non-discriminatory reporting on Aboriginal issues” (p. 292). Fulfilling this responsibility means journalists need to “be well informed about the history of Aboriginal peoples and the issues that affect their lives” (p. 295). This effort includes becoming better informed about the rather recent sets of circumstances that inform today’s oil sands entanglements.

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Notes

1. On terminology: a) Fort MacKay refers to the town, located about 60 kilometres north of Fort McMurray (Fort McKay First Nation, 2017), Fort McKay is the correct spelling for both Fort McKay First Nation and Fort McKay Métis; b) this article refers primarily to the “oil sands” when discussing bituminous oil extraction, though they are also known as the “tar sands.” For more on these terms, see J. Paskey, G. Steward, & A. Williams (2013) and Dan Woyntillowicz, Chris Severson-Baker, & Marlo Reynolds (2005); c) this article analyzes historical newspaper stories, wherein the Fort McKay First Nation was referred to as the “Fort McKay (or MacKay) Indian band” and the Fort McKay Métis community was referred to by its governance organization “Red River Point Métis Society” (see Fort McKay Métis Sustainability Centre, 2016). Newspapers during this period also referred to the people behind the blockade as “natives.” These terms appear when newspaper articles are directly quoted. However, those involved in the blockades are more often referred to as First Nations and Métis, and as Indigenous peoples. The term “Indigenous” inclusively refers to all peoples indigenous to what is now Canada, including First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples.
2. This kind of binary opposition is hardly surprising; as Miranda Brady & Salma Monani (2012) illustrate in a case study of wind power development on American Indian lands, development of any sort is a complex matter for any community. But it is made still more complex when it carries external or stereotypical expectations that Indigenous peoples must continually show how they (and their decisions) are “close to nature” (p. 149).
3. As a guide, consider the spirit of actively “dredging” (Spivak, 1999, p. 1) the public record.
4. See Frances Henry & Carol Tator’s (2002) extended discussion of CDA. For further analysis of framing, see Robert Entman (1993).
5. As a journalist and a researcher, I am also sympathetic to the constraints reporters work with when synthesizing difficult stories, and CDA does not take questions of practice into account. Practical constraints can include meeting tight deadlines, having stories cut in length or otherwise edited, and travelling to a community on short notice (which means finding sources to interview quickly before filing a story). This last practice can be critiqued as “parachute journalism,” or, “when reporters are sent in without preparation to cover a sudden outbreak of violence under tight deadlines” (Miller, 2005, p. 11). Though far from ideal, parachute journalism is at risk of becoming even more common as legacy newsrooms across Canada shrink in ranks and narrow their regular coverage to smaller areas. I recommend journalists read the *Reporting in Indigenous Communities* (n.d.) guide. In keeping with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s (2015) calls to action, I also follow the works of others (including but not

limited to Rice, 2014 and Todorova, 2016), in advocating a reconfiguration of relationships between legacy media institutions and Indigenous peoples.

6. On the potential for collective stopping among those who may have less access to power, Barney (2014) writes, “in a material context in which mobility and its technologies (including things like gas pipelines and wireless telephone networks) are structurally related to economic power and therefore culturally normalized, the possibility of politics might rely precisely on ‘going nowhere’ and ‘going on forever’” (p. 16).

7. Roth (Roth, Nelson, & Kasennahawi, 1995) cites Perigoe’s (1990) article, “The media and minorities,” published in *Content* (September/October, pp. 10–13).

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