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## Cultural studies of extraction

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### ABSTRACT

The special double issue at hand offers Cultural Studies engagements with extractivism and the myriad of conflicts, struggles and other processes and phenomena that have risen together with the on-going intensification and expansion of extractivist industries and exploitation. In this article, we examine the political and epistemological stakes of these engagements, and introduce the different perspectives from which the notions of extractivism and extraction are approached within this issue. We argue that as a conceptual framework loaded with political meaning and potential, and able to address the on-going moment of dwindling resources, environmental degradation and heightened social and economic inequality, extractivism and studies of extraction are crucial for the discipline's efforts to engage contemporary culture politically, and to examine on-going processes of exploitation and subjectification through specific context and cases. Many of the articles included in this issue expand understandings of extraction, and present a broad range of methods and analytical frameworks through which different forms of 'extractivism' and its consequences might be examined, deciphered and discussed within Cultural Studies. And yet, what emerges out of these efforts eventually, is the ultimate centrality of the war between climate and capital for contemporary politics of globalization.

**KEYWORDS** Buen vivir; climate; energy; exploitation; extractivism; Indigenous struggles

As we are writing this, news about the Dakota Access Pipeline protests and their unbelievably violent clampdown by the Northern Dakota police force keep surfacing in the internet and social media, especially *Facebook*, where images and live videos of the protesters, their camps and their cause, as well as of police standing on armoured trucks, beating, arresting and pointing guns at activists seeking to protect future access to clean water, circulate at increasing volumes. Watching the scenes of the 'Standing Rock', one is unavoidably reminded, in a very concrete way, of something being incredibly wrong about the current (Western) interpretations of democracy, about the ways in which the relationships between the state, capital and people are

configured, and about the fact that still, at this point of growing environmental concerns and pressings signs of climatic change, clean water is a resource in need of protection against capital and the state. In a world becoming increasingly small, 'Standing Rock' speaks to many: it is, at the same time, an Indigenous struggle against the unending processes of colonization and land-grab; a struggle to protect the environment at the face of intensive exploitation and destruction that threatens all of us, and a struggle by local communities against omnipotent capital and for basic human rights, such as clean water.

Each of these entangled interpretive frameworks place the protests in Northern Dakota firmly in line with the countless struggles that are currently being articulated worldwide in opposition to *extractivism*. As an ideology and practice, extractivism is surely nothing new, nor is popular resistance against large-scale extractive projects, which are affecting and threatening local communities and the eco-system. What might be new, however, is the current intensification of extractive exploitation, as well as the fact that instead of taking place 'somewhere else' and in the margin, the extractive frontier is flowing, flooding and drilling increasingly close to urban areas and the centres of knowledge production, complicating earlier geographical and class divisions between those who extract, and those who are extracted, or who live with the consequences. From the mining pits in South Africa as much as Northern Finland, to the fracking fields of the English countryside and oil drilling in the Arctic, the extractive frontier is expanding, thereby also creating a new sense of commonality and translatability of causes across the Global South and North.

Alarmed by this conjuncture and motivated, above all, by the sense of urgency conveyed by on-going environmental degradation and social inequality, the present issue of *Cultural Studies* seeks to encourage cultural approaches to the study of extractivism and the myriad of conflicts, struggles and other processes and phenomena that have risen together with the on-going intensification and expansion of extractivist industries and exploitation. The issue has been in the making since the *Crossroads Conference on Cultural Studies* held in July 2014 in Tampere, Finland, where both of us participated in a plenary on 'Other Knowledges', and which resulted in Larry Grossberg's invitation to edit a special issue of *Cultural Studies* given that our work converged closely around several common themes, including the geopolitics of knowledge, Indigenous resistance towards exploitation and neoliberal politics, the relationship between Indigenous communities and the state, and political alliances against extractive industrial projects. Moreover, we approach these topics from widely different locations. One of us speaks from Scandinavia, from a society whose own self-understanding has been constructed upon a strong belief in Finland being a 'model society' of environmental and societal responsibility, but which is now grappling to come to terms with a massive expansion of multinational extractive industries, especially mining, and their

social, political, environmental and cultural consequences; and the other, from Colombia in Latin America, where the history of extractive exploitation is particularly long and tense, and which is also the home and laboratory for some of the most intensive on-going debates on extractivism and its alternatives.

Through various conversations, we eventually decided that this issue would centre on the notion of *extractivism*, for reasons that are at the same time political and epistemological. We do not propose that studying 'extractivism' should be seen as a goal in itself, nor are we claiming that the notion could provide an analytical framework that is fitting for all aspects of contemporary society and exploitation. However, as a notion so loaded with political meaning and potential, and one that it is able to address the sense of urgency raised by this on-going moment of dwindling resources, environmental degradation and heightened social and economic inequality, we felt that this notion would support the efforts of Cultural Studies to engage contemporary culture politically, and to examine on-going processes of exploitation and subjectification through specific context and cases beyond the established comfort-zones of the discipline. The notions of extraction and extractivism are offered here to inspire investigation of exploitation along various fronts, and as a conceptual framework, which allows us to place these investigations in communication with one another.

In the narrow sense, extraction and extractivism are usually understood in reference to mass-scale industrial extraction of non-renewable natural resources, most particularly the extraction of oil, gas and minerals, and to the ideologies, discourses and practices underpinning these industries' standing within the society. However, more recently extractivism – and alternatively, 'neo-extractivism' or 'new extractivism' – is increasingly viewed in a much broader sense, as an ideological construct and a paradigm of severe exploitation which is characteristic of contemporary capitalism and neoliberalism at large. In this expanded sense, extraction and extractivism are no longer necessarily defined by certain types of industries and activities, or tied to questions of land and natural resources as given objects that are disconnected from others. Instead, 'extractivism' is increasingly understood also as an analytical and also political concept that enables the examination and articulation of deeper underlying logics of exploitation and subjectification that are central to the present conjuncture of capitalist globalization and neoliberalism.

The relevance of these notions for cultural and political study and for distinctly postcolonial and decolonial approaches to global politics appears even more enticing for the fact that whereas extractivism has, in the past, been associated with colonial divisions between the 'periphery' which is extracted and the 'core' which extracts, today its political geographies are increasingly complex: for instance the mining boom is currently dividing communities and raising Indigenous resistance in Scandinavia, and in the UK and the

USA, it is white middle-class, property-owning communities faced with hydraulic fracturing that are now countering colonial extraction policies literally underneath their own houses. Meanwhile in the Global South, extractive industries and neoliberal land-based development projects are provoking unseen levels of forced displacement, environmental destruction, and social divisions and disintegration – as well as courageous and complex resistance from Indigenous, peasant and black communities that are most affected. Looking at this conjuncture through the political project of Cultural Studies which permits one to think the complexity of extractivism's meanings and consequences, and at the same time to search for and think other possible futures, appears important particularly in terms of the new political subjectivities, articulations and alliances that might arise in this context. How do the processes, practices and articulations linked to extractivism generate subjectivities and particular strategies of thinking and situating the political?

Against this background, it is actually rather surprising that 'extractivism' has not, so far, enjoyed particular attention within the discipline of Cultural Studies, neither in the narrow nor in the expanded sense. Within scholarly analysis and general public debate, the expansion of extractive industries continues to be addressed predominantly from economic, environmentalist and developmentalist perspectives, and in part for this reason, its impacts upon the society are also considered primarily in relation to statistical and quantitative data and in terms of costs and benefits. In contrast, a cultural approach to the study of extraction and extractivism would necessitate, for instance, the examination (through different contexts and specific cases) of extractivism's social and cultural consequences, meanings, implications, affects, resistances and everyday practices, and how they intersect with the current conjunctures of neoliberal globalization and intensive exploitation. By calling for cultural approaches to the study of extractivism and its discontents, our hope is therefore to broaden both the scope and the range of methods and analytical frameworks through which 'extractivism' and its consequences might be examined, deciphered and discussed. How, we want to ask, could Cultural Studies as a political project help us understand the epistemological, ontological and political stakes of the extractive moment, and imagine alternative futures? If extractivism is understood as a paradigm of exploitation rather than in reference to a limited set of specific industries, what does it mean in different contexts, and what are the sites through which it might be studied and examined? How are contemporary extractivisms experienced, lived and resisted transnationally and in particular locations, through the practices of everyday life, through cultural and social production, affects and through outright protests and political struggles? In what ways is extractivism and resistance to it reflected in popular culture and the arts? What would a Cultural Studies of the extractive moment in world politics look like?

These questions and themes were present in the short Call for Papers (CFP) which called for contributions to this issue and which was circulated through a variety of Cultural Studies, Indigenous and Native Studies and Political and Media Studies networks in Spring 2015. The CFP developed a response of nearly 50 submitted abstracts, out of which 10 were selected for this double issue. In addition, we are including two invited contributions, the first from Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson, and the latter from Imre Szeman, who has written a postscript for this issue. Mezzadra and Neilson's article 'On the multiple frontiers of extraction' opens the issue with a qualified support for working towards an expanded understanding of extractivism, calling for an approach that is attuned not only to literal forms of extraction but also to 'new extractive fronts' which are emerging alongside with capitalism's recurrent crises and transitions. In both cases, the authors argue, the expansive logic of extraction is connected with capital's ultimate dependence on its multiple outsides, that is, on the existence and reproducibility of new frontiers which capital has to transform into resources available for extractive exploitation. Although Mezzadra and Neilson are careful to point out that extractivism – as much as any other single category – alone cannot provide a dominant paradigm for analyses of contemporary capitalism, they suggest that attention to continuities and ruptures in the relationship between literal extraction and extraction in an expanded sense is necessary in order to understand the importance of extractive operations for contemporary capitalism at large. Even more importantly, the conceptual expansion of extractivism can contribute to the work of translating, mapping and joining the vast variety of counter-extractive struggles that are developing across literal and new extractive frontiers in seemingly distant and disconnected sites and places.

Mezzadra and Neilson's own research focuses on the fields of logistics and finance, and on emerging activities such as data mining and biocapital, but they also identify human cooperation and sociality among the key sources upon which the extractive operations of contemporary capital depend and draw upon. This point is elaborated by Jan Padios, whose article focuses upon capital's intensifying efforts to turn human emotions and emotion knowledge into exploitable resources. Drawing examples from a rich library of case studies and empirical material from the areas of service work, management, marketing, social media, artificial intelligence and neuroscience, her article 'Mining the mind' meticulously brings up and develops a concept of 'emotional extraction', leading the way for a gendered and racial analyses of the place of emotions in the production of difference within the contemporary moment of intensifying resource exploitation. Conversely, Hubert Alain flips attention to the human and to questions of agency across the extractive terrain. Alain's article 'Control: the extractive ecology of corn monoculture' discusses extractivism through the rise of industrial corn, and in

parallel with the discourses of the Anthropocene, which, he argues, should be understood as *extractivist-centric* rather than anthropocentric. Telling the history of corn monoculture from a new materialist standpoint, he argues that instead of a war between species - the human and the non-human - extractive activities become our own 'regulatory apparatus', an extractive ecology that standardizes the human as a consumer species, allowing only the extractive version of the human to survive.

In both contributions, the extractive frontier emerges as a messy and porous front characterised by invasion, mutual transformation and by the dispersion of agency across more-than-human encounters. Martin Fredriksson and Johanna Dahlin's 'Extracting the commons' approaches this expansive frontier through the conceptual framework of the *commons*. Drawing on widely different cases - mining in Australia, bioprospecting, and digital copyrights - they investigate how resources perceived as common become constructed as property for the purposes of extractive exploitation, through the processes of prospecting, enclosure and unbundling. Although these processes involve legal manoeuvring, they are always also social and cultural since the uses of the 'commons' are regulated through cultural and social norms that need to be altered for the purposes of extractive property creation. Subsequently, Fredriksson and Dahlin examine how groups and communities affected by extractive projects challenge and resist exploitation through different practices of *commoning*; by finding new ways to 'work-in-common' and through maintaining and protecting existing commons, or even creating new ones, by making previously restricted resources free for anyone to access.

What is thus highlighted here is the fact that there is nothing natural or self-evident about what kinds of substances, elements, objects, or pieces of knowledge become understood and seen as resources available for extractive operations: the discursive construction of something as a 'resource' always entails the employment of a wide set of knowledges, practices and power relations which regulate how the relationship between nature and the society is imagined and enacted at different points in time and space (Ferry and Limbert 2008). Similarly, naming and identifying these operations as 'extractivist' (a project in which also this special issue participates) entails discursive construction. The genealogy and politics of this discourse, as well as its limitations, is examined in detail by Thea Riofrancos, whose article '*Extractivismo* unearthed' traces down the origins and politics of the concept of extractivism in the context of Ecuadorian politics. Riofrancos argues that although the critical 'extractivismo discourse' has been highly successful at joining different struggles in the neoliberal context and at altering the horizon of possible futures in Ecuador, the ascendancy of the leftist president Rafael Correa and the rise of his 'twenty-first Century socialism' into an official state policy has fragmented the field of radical politics and formented a protracted intra-left dispute around the politics of resource extraction.

A central aspect to this intra-left dispute concerns the actual meanings and interpretations of *buen vivir*. This concept, which originates in the Indigenous Kichwa worldview of *sumak kawsay* and which has become central to Indigenous struggles across Latin America, suggests sustainable and ecologically balanced life, which promotes and upholds harmonious life on personal and communal levels, and as part of the nature. In Ecuador, *buen vivir* was incorporated into the new Constitution and development plans issued in 2008 by Rafael Correa's leftist government – a government which, paradoxically, is also known for its strong support for a 'neo-extractivist' model of development. In this context, the very meaning of *buen vivir* emerges as a central nodal point for struggles along the extractive frontier. The spatial articulation of such struggles is examined by Alejandra Espinosa, whose article 'Space and architecture of extractivism in the Ecuadorian Amazon region' looks at the cultural transformations taking place through the construction of Playas de Cubano, one of the many 'Millennium Community' housing projects initiated by Correa's government in compensation for Indigenous communities affected by the state's neo-extractivist policies. Espinosa argues that despite the official rhetoric claiming adherence to *sumak kawsay* and to social and cultural difference or *pruliculturalism* in Ecuador, the architecture and spatial organization of Millennium Communities begets governmental commitment to modernist and colonial narratives which herald the benefits of oil extraction and privilege national over Indigenous identities. Contributor Juan Ricardo Aparicio turns the lens on cultural processes and paradoxes taking place in Colombia, where the on-going conjuncture of peace talks and increasing rates of foreign investment in regions recovering from a prolonged armed conflict is promoting a transition to large-scale industrial agri-business. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork, his article 'Affective capitalism, humanitarianism and extractivism in Colombia' examines the ways in which these processes are experienced and translated by different subjects on the level of the cultural and the popular, and in the context of everyday life.

Taking us to Northern America, Jen Preston's timely 'Racial extractivism and white settler colonialism' examines the interrelated histories of settler colonialism and transnational oil and gas industries in the context of the Athabasca region in Canada, bringing the concept of race into analyses of extractivism. Preston argues that while race has been constitutive of the Canadian settler state's claims to Indigenous lands, today the extractive industries in Northern America are anchored in racial logics which instill sentiments of entitlement on racial grounds and through the neoliberal rhetoric of individualism and private property. While the unfolding events in Northern Dakota have once again made the racist foundations of the extractive-settler state openly visible, in terms of very concrete forms of state violence, Preston's account takes us also to the question of how the racial logic of extractivism intersects



with, and is also complicated by, the notion of class – a point that finds elaboration in the two other contributions. The first is Melissa Meade's almost poetic 'In the shadow of the coal breaker: *Cultural Extraction* and Digital Dialogical Communication in the Anthracite Coal Mining Region'. Writing, in part, her own history as a member of a mining community in Northeastern Pennsylvania, Meade traces the legacy of coal extraction and the abandoned community's sense of identity, memory and place at the interstices of a traumatic past and an insecure present of social neglect. This work of tracing evolves around the figure of a ruined coal-breaker, which used to be the labouring community's focal point as well as a site of their physical exploitation, and which is now set for demolition. Using digital ethnography, Meade draws a complex picture of social reproduction and affective life within a community negotiating a traumatic past, which, despite the loss and disaster, is also their source of identity and pride. Brian Harnetty also writes the collective memory of a North American mining community. However, here this memory is traced in reliance to our hearing senses: 'Earthquakes and frack-waste: Sounds of extraction-related disaster in Appalachian Ohio' seeks to literally listen to what energy-extraction sounds like. Building upon a sonic archive, Harnetty conveys a convincing soundscape of extraction-related disaster in a region that has experienced several extractive booms and busts, placing the life of the mining community within a larger, cyclical and more-than-human rhythmic pattern of extractive expansion and contraction, instead of a linear narrative of progress and development.

Both Meade and Harnetty highlight the importance of affects and the politics of time in relation to extraction and extractivism. How are subjectivity and everyday life connected, on a personal level, with extractivist discourses and practices that traverse institutions, ideologies, desires, fears and longings? And how does the affective get articulated together with the temporal aspects of extractivist ideologies, for instance as a promise of development and progress of nations that the idea of 'resources' may raise, or as anxiety for their possible shortcomings and looming disaster, or as nostalgia for extractivist booms which have already terminated and left a memory of better times? Thinking critically and past extractivism inevitably involves problematizing the modern temporality of progress and development, in order to create and reveal other forms of being-in-time (Chakrabarty 2007) which alter and challenge the dominant narratives of neoliberalism and capitalism. Attention to the affective-temporal opens up a politics of time that is permeable to the ahistorical and the contingent, and hence also for the re-imagination of alternative futures.

Finally, Timothy Neale and Even Vincent place the critical lens on our own labour as academics and critical scholars. Their article 'Mining, Indigeneity, Alterity: or, mining Indigenous alterity?' bring analyses of industrial mining in Australia together with a very different kind of mining - the mining of

Indigenous difference for the purposes of critical scholarship. Focusing upon the ontological turn within Anthropology and Cultural Studies, Neale and Vincent are concerned, above all, with the moral economies that are emerging around these disciplines' renewed interest in Indigenous difference and 'radical alterity', seen largely as the ontologically defined locus for resistance and for the radical possibility of 'being otherwise'. Instead of reading Indigenous difference in ways that might respond, above all, to critical scholarship's own search for salvation-in-alterity, the authors call scholars to engage contemporary Indigenous realities and to defend Indigenous autonomy on empirical grounds. Such critical practice, they argue, would rely less on 'broad concepts such as "Indigenous ontology"', and place the emphasis instead upon shared material experience, or (as the authors put it) upon the 'existence and potential arrangement of shared worlds, as they are lived and struggled over'.

Neale and Vincent's contribution is a healthy reminder of our own ethical and political responsibility as scholars. Theorizing social injustice is important; however, the challenge of devising real (and concrete) alternatives - or, in Gudynas' (2013) terms, a transition towards 'post-extractivism' - is where critical practice and scholarship is most needed. This point is emphasized also by Imre Szeman, whose beautifully written afterword takes 'extractivism' back to the most fundamental level where it may be discussed: to the limit that capitalist globalization is meeting in the 'state of our planet's environment'. Building on his previous work on petroculture, Szeman emphasizes the crucial significance of energy forms, most especially fossil fuels, as material forces that have shaped modernity through and through. While this era is now inevitably coming to an end as a result of the depletion of the world's oil reserves, Szeman argues for the importance of recognizing the forthcoming energy transition as an unprecedented moment of political opportunity to 're-shape the principles and practices guiding global society as a whole'. In fact, achieving greater levels of environmental sustainability and social justice within the field of energy, Szeman argues, should not be difficult given the wide availability of renewable energy sources, such as solar power. However, since the idea that 'we just leave everything in the ground' appears impossible in a world of expanding human population and increasing need, a broader transition towards 'post-extractivism' demands much deeper reflection on our relationship to the planet and the environment.

We want to thank every writer warmly for offering their insights and expertise which, we hope, will encourage broader interest towards the study of extractivism within Cultural Studies. Given this journal's long-term commitment to Cultural Studies as a political project, and as a field of decolonial engagement seeking to imagine alternative futures beyond universalizing 'euromodernity' (Grossberg 2010), we could not have thought about a

better place for such a conversation. Although we might not have answers to the challenges in front of us, it should be clear which side we - embodied beings depending on water, soil and air - belong to in an escalating war between capital and the climate (Klein 2014).

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

### Notes on contributors

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**Catalina Cortes-Severino** is an assistant professor at the Department of Anthropology, Universidad Nacional de Colombia. Working through the mediums of academic writing and the arts, her research concerns the questions of memory, history of the present, image-time, everydayness, ethnography, affects and processes of subjectification.

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