CHAPTER 3

Raw Materials

Natural Resources, Technological Discourse, and the Making of Canadian Nationalism

Melissa Aronczyk

We frequently encounter national histories as histories of determined individuals, willful pioneers whose vision and tenacity carved the contours of territorial sovereignty. Inherent in these narratives are the romantic themes of progress, manifest destiny, and mastery over nature. Left out of these versions of national achievement, however, are the material affordances that make it possible to tell the stories in this way.

I am referring to three kinds of material: first, the material properties of the land itself—its geographic and geological properties—and the available technical means—equipment, machinery, tools, explosives—that make certain kinds of work imaginable and others not possible. Second, we might consider the ways that particular knowledges and logics are "materialized" in contractual and regulatory frameworks, professional organizations, military or other political institutions, and temporal arrangements (Foucault 1991; Davidson and Gismondi 2011, 23).[1] The third consideration is of material artifacts that work to embed these logics into the public consciousness—artifacts such as surveys, maps, letters, travelogues, archival collections, newspapers, advertisements, and other paraphernalia. All three modes of materialization, in concert or

separately, enable and disable articulations of national identity at certain times and in certain places.

In Canada it is not possible to ignore the determining role of the first kind of material. Westward expansion through the Canadian Rocky Mountains prior to the Act of Constitution in 1867 would surely have been delayed if not for the prospecting by the Geological Survey of Canada and the building of a rail line by the Canadian Pacific Railway company. But to craft the tale of this technological expansion as a precursor to national feeling, and to extend this mythology into the twenty-first century, considerable work has to be done by the second and third kinds of materials.

This chapter charts the interplay of material and affective work in the making of Canadian nationalism through a close examination of the dominant national mythology known as the National Dream. The National Dream, a metaphor orienting identity and place around the material requirements of industry, has been used to characterize the building of the railway in the nineteenth century and the collective will to sovereignty in the twentieth. In the twenty-first century, this narrative has been deftly applied to Canada's most recent "national" industrial project: the extraction, development, and distribution of oil. Buried in the sand under the boreal forest across 142,200 square kilometers (over 88,000 square miles) in northern Alberta lie enormous deposits of a treacly black substance called bitumen, now recognized as the third-largest source of proven oil reserves in the world. Described as "the largest industrial project in history" (Davidson and Gismondi 2011, 1), the assemblage of mining operations, refinery plants, storage and waste facilities, and pipelines, both actual and planned, promises to draw the contours of a new global empire.[2]

I conduct a genealogy of the origins of this myth, providing historical and social context for the periods in which the myth became visible and material as well as actively productive of the national imagination. I chart two distinct lineages in the articulation of Canada's National Dream. In the first section, I look at the promotion of the railroad by the Canadian Pacific Railway Company and its sympathizers in the second half of the nineteenth century, drawing on archival sources and historical treatments of Canada and the railway in the period, as well as speeches, maps, and advertisements. I then examine the myth's "rebirth" and popularization in the late 1960s via the publication and promotion

of a romantic history of the railway. In the second section, I describe the present-day promotion of oil sands infrastructure and industry, making use of ethnographic fieldwork conducted in 2014 in Fort McMurray, Alberta. The guiding thread connecting these historical moments is the ongoing effort in each instance by state and corporate actors to present the foundations of national unity as both emerging from material infrastructure and also sustaining it.[3]

Beyond the case at hand, I aim at revealing aspects of continuity and change in the discursive structure of nationalism itself. If "the task for scholars of nationalism," as Geneviève Zubrzycki argues (2011, 22), "is to identify when, why, how and to what extent national mythology 'works' in concrete cases," the question is how the material and discursive interact to produce similar affective investments across a range of concrete cases. As William H. Sewell (2005) has described, "The relationship between language and built environment should be understood as dialectical" (365), whereby semiotic practices give rise to material matrices that in turn enable and constrain possibilities for further meaning making.

THE PROMOTION OF TRADITION

Scholars of nationalism working in the "constructivist episteme" (Apter 1999, 214) have demonstrated that the nation is the product of both remembering and forgetting; that its seemingly primordial traditions can be invented for diverse purposes and to serve various interests; and that its past is always subject to the contexts and content, form and performance, of its elaboration in the present (e.g., Zubrzycki 2013a). Yet in our haste to point to the constructed nature of our national selves, we sometimes overlook ways that past patterns repeat themselves in modern contexts.

One of these repeated patterns in the making of Canadian identity is the particular style and form—the genre—of historical narration. In his historiography of early Canada, M. Brook Taylor (1989) notes a particular tendency for writers to indulge in a "National interpretation" of Canadian history. Similar to, but distinct from, Whig history, which is devoted to a partisan notion of progress, the National interpretation "promoted the concept of Canada as a nation housing a common people

who sought common goals and inhabited a common land. . . . Advocates of the National position used history to confirm their predispositions and were unapologetically anachronistic in their reading of the past" (166).

The reason for this National interpretation, Taylor finds, is that it is mainly the product of *promoters*, individuals who stood to profit in some way from the account they provided. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, chronicles of North America written for European audiences were largely devoted to attracting these populations to their shores:

> Among the many men on the spot upon whom European governments, potential investors and settlers, and the simply curious relied for information, promoters were those who had tied their personal fortunes to the fate of the colony observed. In most cases this was why they were where they were . . . contemporary Europeans were to a disturbing extent dependent upon promoters for information about the New World during those crucial early years of acquisition and settlement. (Taylor 1989, 11)

To account for the National interpretation of history is to attend first and foremost to the context-specific claims and interests of these interpreters and the way in which these figures earned the authority to interpret. By whom, via what means, and for what reasons did the origin myth of Canada's history as a technological nation, as the product of a National Dream, get told; and how were the many alternative versions of the historical record left out?

In what follows I argue that the motivating force propelling Canada's dominant national mythology, the way in which this national mythology "works" over time, is through what Andrew Apter (1999) calls "the subvention of tradition": the sponsorship and promotion, by state and commercial actors, of a particular set of beliefs and behaviors that advance these actors' own strategic interests and values. The point of the subvention of tradition is to foster a "culture effect"—the notion that a national culture is "visible and autonomous" from the state and private capital, even as it is underwritten by them (215). Neither Canada's national railway, nor its national pipelines, was ever the product of a solely domestic, or solely political, will. Rather, they are the complex and contingent outcome of domestic political struggles, personal vendettas, commercial competition, injections of foreign capital, transient and displaced

populations, and most importantly, the interests of a (then British, now global) empire. That such massive and variously motivated projects could become symbols of a singular national consciousness is a symptom of the "culture effect" at its strongest.

FOUNDATIONS OF THE NATIONAL DREAM

Building the Canadian Pacific Railway, 1867–1935

The Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) was never intended solely as a nation-building enterprise. In order for a project of such massive scale and requiring such massive injections of funds to be built, its proponents had to convince the "mother country" of the railway's relevance to the empire. CPR officials promoted the project in Britain as a thoroughfare between Europe and Asia. The CPR understood its mission not as a national endeavor but as a global purveyance of transcontinental traffic. The company arranged for mail subsidies with England for Pacific service; developed the Pacific harbor and negotiated for steamship lines, eventually building its own ships; established a telegraph system; created first-class coaches and dining and sleeping cars on its trains; and built a network of hotels along the railway lines (Gibbon 1937, 300–307). The CPR carried passengers and freight, focusing especially on building up trade with Asia. Canada's rail infrastructure was thus abetted by other physical infrastructure projects that would have a major effect on not just national but also international spatial arrangements.

In order to obtain the necessary favors and funds of the government officials on site, however, an essential cause was to help Canadian political figures and their publics visualize the nation. The "visionaries" of the CPR were not only the capitalists and politicians but also the geological surveyors, mapmakers, engineers, and chroniclers whose representations of the land made tangible the idea of a Canada from "ocean to ocean" (Grant 1873). One example of such a chronicle is indeed George Grant's *Ocean to Ocean,* written in 1872 and published the following year. A Presbyterian minister, the Reverend George Monro Grant accompanied a member of his congregation, the CPR's chief engineer Sandford Fleming, on a surveying trip from Halifax (Nova Scotia) to Victoria (British Columbia) along the planned route of the railway. His account of

the 5,314-mile, three-and-a-half-month expedition, "so popular that it went into several editions and was serialized in the newspapers" (Berton 2001a, 42), functioned as a sort of advance public relations tract for the company's project. "What we see in Grant's work is not so much a vision of the west as it was in 1872 but of the west as Canada of the post-Confederation period wanted it to be" (Jackel 1979, 7). This idealized West was free of American competition (for either rail lines or settlers) and deeply beholden to the superiority of British institutions:

> I shall not parade statistics to show the material progress that we are making, for material progress is only one—and not the most important—element in the history of a people. The growth of national sentiment throughout every part of the great Dominion, unattended possibly with the noisy ebullitions that more excitable peoples delight in, more than corresponds to our material progress. And insight into our stock and fibre, combined with that true imagination that realizes manifest destiny—imagination which is the vision of the people more than of the most gifted individual of the people—entitles Canadians, while legitimately cherishing pride in the past and present, to look forward with confidence to the future of their country. (Grant 1873, 394)

Such a "National interpretation" is clearly anachronistic, as Taylor (1989) has argued. By coloring in the history of a voyage along a not-yet-built route with "purple" national prose, Grant sought to draw a portrait of Canadian identity. The pedagogical function of the portrait was clear: "Canadians, in their quest for political order, social stability, and national identity, used history as a source of examples with which to implant in the minds of younger generations (and even mature politicians) an established pattern of acceptable conduct, to secure conformity by habit, not law" (166).

Of course, in projecting a strong image of national unity, this portrait also excluded populations and practices whose presence might detract from it. Some of these exclusions were deliberate—Grant's patriotic loyalty to the Crown meant that the "noisy ebullitions" of "excitable peoples" likely refers to Americans—and some the product of well-entrenched habit. Local indigenous peoples, for instance, while acknowledged in the cast of characters listed at the outset of the book as "Guides, Voyageurs, Packers, etc." and described in various passages, were no more part of Grant's collective dream in this period than were the flora or fauna.

The dominance of these "sponsored" images is a major factor in historical writing about nineteenth-century Canada. Chronicles of the company's efforts written in this period are often presented, at least implicitly, as histories of the Canadian nation. Three tropes dominate this literature: (1) the material benefits of the country in terms of geography, natural resources, and fertile soil, made possible—or at least accessible—by the CPR; (2) the genius and foresight of the political and commercial elites of the day; and (3) the possibility of a properly Canadian identity midwifed by the railway. This latter trope was both heavily anti-American (so as to stem competition from U.S. railway companies trying to build lines in Canada) and loyal to the British Crown (to maintain the financial and symbolic support of the mother country). The contradiction between anti-American sentiment as a strong motivation for the railway and the influx of American capital and capitalists involved in the railroad enterprise is testament to the multiple inconsistencies that can nevertheless constitute a national discourse.

When the railway was completed, in 1885, the population of Canada was four and a half million residents, nowhere near enough to make the railway a profitable enterprise. A central preoccupation of the railway's stakeholders and Conservative politicians was therefore to promote and populate the newly joined territory. Through the CPR's Department of Colonization and Development, an incredible range of visual artifacts was created to represent the Canadian nation to the European public. Pamphlets, advertisements, posters, maps, photographs, slide shows, and traveling exhibitions were dispatched to Europe to encourage potential immigrants to settle in Canada (Francis 1997; Peel's Prairie Provinces, n.d.). Government representatives, such as Governor-General Lord Lorne, were also sent abroad to deliver public lectures and hobnob with British journalists in an effort to acquire favorable press (Berton 2001b, 35). These massive promotional efforts made the CPR the prime exponent of a united nation with a collective sense of itself. As Francis writes, "The CPR 'created' Canada not by binding it together with steel rails, but by inventing images of it that people then began to recognize as uniquely Canadian" (1997, 28).

A second but no less important reason to encourage settlement around the railway was the system of land grants enforced by the contract signed between the CPR and the Canadian government. In addition to a government subsidy of twenty-five million dollars; duty-free imports of rail

equipment; free (and permanently duty-free) land for railway yards, stations, and other buildings for operation; and the ownership of the lines, the contract awarded the CPR twenty-five million acres of public land, against which it could issue land-grant mortgage bonds (Berton 2001a, 355; Canadian Pacific Railway Company 1881). Since the value of the land was correlated to its cultivation, it was strongly in the CPR's interest to bring people there as quickly as possible.

A singular champion of this promotional vernacular was John Murray Gibbon. A Scotsman, Gibbon was hired by the CPR in 1907 as European Publicity Agent, "responsible for presenting Canada and the CPR effectively to the European public" via his home in London (Neilson 2011, 129). Gibbon organized press junkets and exhibitions, designed posters, pamphlets and advertisements, and fed newspapers content (some true, some entirely contrived) designed to educate British journalists as well as potential immigrants and tourists of the benefits of the newly joined Canada. By 1913 he had become General Publicity Agent and moved from London to Montreal. In this capacity he continued to publicize Canada as a destination and the CPR as its intermediary.

For the next thirty years Gibbon engaged wholeheartedly in the subvention of tradition in the form of literature, music, and folk arts festivals. Sixteen arts festivals were organized and run by Gibbon for the CPR in the late 1920s. The festivals employed artists, provided content for the radio broadcasting networks, and commissioned new Canadian compositions, in addition to promoting hotels, museums, and other institutions which stood to benefit from the events (Neilson 2011). The connection many made between the CPR and Canadian culture through the festivals was evident in the press coverage the festivals received: "All this remarkable fostering [of Canadian culture] would be of wonderful assistance to a railroad. It is culture first and last that makes a race great, it is culture that brings the proper immigrants and settles them—and thus adds immeasureably to a railroad's earning power" (Glynn, quoted in Neilson 2011, 133).

Nationalizing the Dream, 1964–1974

Despite the best efforts of the CPR's many boosters, sponsors, and underwriters, it was not until a century after Canadian confederation that the railway entered the popular imaginary as the vertebrae of the Canadian nation.

Even by the late 1950s, it was clear to many that the rail line serviced some populations far better than others; and political infighting undermined the notion of the railway as a cause of national unity. Before history could be framed as geography, a narrator was needed to spin this tale.

With the publication of his book *The National Dream* in 1970, the Canadian author Pierre Berton, his publisher, and his publicist sought to reenvision Canadian culture as a culture of confidence, determination, and obstinacy, in which notions of progress and manifest destiny nourish the formation of a collective will to sovereignty and independence. With the Canadian Pacific Railway as his muse, Berton and his entourage set out to craft a new national consciousness, one which suited not only the "new nationalism" of the time but also the desire to cement Berton's own personal legacy.

In his lifetime Berton wrote some seventy books, more than a hundred magazine articles, and over a thousand newspaper columns. He lent his name to radio plays, film scripts, skits, and songs. He was also a television personality, hosting local and international figures on *The Pierre Berton Show*, which ran for eleven years from 1962 to 1973. He was deeply involved with cultural policy and participated in a number of commissions and helped author their reports. Each of these media served as promotional devices for one another; and all of them promoted the celebrity of Berton himself.

In inventing the metaphor of the National Dream, Berton sought to recreate the railroad as the literal and figurative backbone of Canada, a discourse that Maurice Charland (1986) calls technological nationalism. The discourse of technological nationalism gains its power by "creat[ing] the conditions of its own reproduction" (197): it enables and perpetuates a powerful myth of the state as both the engine and the product of space-binding technologies, and presents national consciousness as mediated by the state. Technological infrastructure thus appears as "the material condition of possibility" for the Canadian polity and its people.[4]

The project of the National Dream was not Berton's alone but was rather conceived with his longtime publisher, Jack McClelland. It was McClelland who first wrote to the Public Relations and Advertising department of the CPR to gauge interest in the "total public relations potential" of a book about the company that would be published in the context of Canada's centennial celebrations in 1967 (McKillop 2011, 410). The project was part of a broader strategy adopted by the McClelland &

Stewart publishing house to best competition by "corner[ing] the market" (415) on books about the centennial: a dramatic example of the subvention of tradition at work. CPR president N. R. Crump's archivists and press services staff provided Berton with company materials, and made the company superintendent's business cars as well as hotels along the railway available to him and his assistant so that they could experience the CPR holdings for themselves (484–85).

As Berton's biographer explains, the project's scope came to exceed the history of the railway for a number of reasons. Central among these appears to be that Berton sought to write a book that would cement his legacy as a historian of Canadian culture. "In the months when Berton assembled the Canadian nation in his mind and put the story of one of its greatest ventures on paper, he was aware of the culture of fear in the Canada of his own day, and set out to do something about the problems that fuelled it" (McKillop 2011, 493). More than a historical chronicle of nineteenth-century events, then, *The National Dream* was a promotional device for a particular self-serving version of Canadian unity: one which articulated Canadian sovereignty as the product of private and public enterprise; celebrated the pragmatic nationalism born of technological achievement; and marginalized populations and practices that appeared anathema to it. A passage toward the end of the book's first volume encapsulates these themes:

> The contract [between the CPR and the Canadian government to build the railway line] was the most important Canadian document since the British North America Act. . . . It represented a continuation of the traditional partnership between the private and public sectors, which always had been and would continue to be a fact of Canadian life whenever transportation and communication were involved. The geography of the nation dictated that the government be in the transportation business. . . . The express and telegraph systems, the future transcontinental railways, the airlines and the pipelines, the broadcasting networks and communications satellites—all the devices by which the nation is stitched together are examples of this loose association between the political and business worlds. Like the original CPR they are not the products of any real social or political philosophy but simply pragmatic solutions to Canadian problems. (Berton 2001a, 354)

A second, perhaps equally important reason for Berton's "National interpretation" of history was that Jack McClelland believed the book would

sell more copies if it explicitly tied the history of the railway to the history of Canadian identity. Canadian nationalism, of the sort that married political will to a national spirit, was more effective than the history of workers and the physical work required to build a railway in the nineteenth century. That McClelland also used Canadian nationalism to promote his own company's agenda was clear: the company's profit margins would increase with a book promoting national identity, particularly in the context of the late 1960s. The "new nationalism" of this time was rooted in fear; fear of both American encroachment and Quebec's growing enlightenment and resultant separatism. The National Dream was therefore not only about celebrating national unity as the product of material progress but also about articulating a narrative that would foreclose on threats from within (Quebec) and without (the United States).[5]

To ensure that profit was forthcoming, a massive PR effort was mobilized to promote *The National Dream*. A book launch for the press was followed by a series of appearances by Berton at various events and a tour of Western Canada (McKillop 2011, 499–502). The book was a best seller, reprinted (in a single volume) for the United States market as well as in an illustrated version. It was selected for the U.S. Book-of-the-Month Club, the first Canadian book ever to have been so honored. Another launch party and round of publicity was held for the 1971 publication of the second volume, entitled *The Last Spike.* The books editor of the *Calgary Herald* newspaper labeled Berton "perhaps Canada's best salesman of nationalism" (McKillop 2011, 513). This interpretation was helped along, no doubt, by the television miniseries based on the book, also called *The National Dream*, which aired in eight one-hour episodes on the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation network in 1974. The TV scriptwriters were supplied with reference material and images by the CPR's librarians.

It is in the reception of the book that we see how Berton's promotional story came to foretell the future. Editorials and reviews used the book's narrative to speculate on the current political situation, issuing commentary on the Trudeau administration and on the apparent encroachment of American influence (McKillop 2011, 504–6).[6] Even Berton's biographer was caught up in the rhetoric, suggesting:

> The National Dream resonated with Canadians far beyond its explication of their history, significant as that was. In a time of confusion,

> uncertainty, and fear for the future, Berton gave them hope. Canadians had tackled impossible tasks before, and had prevailed. They had repelled American influence, and built a railway with little American or British financial support. They did so when their political system was in as much turmoil, and was even more corrupt, than in their own day. . . . All that was needed was national will. (McKillop 2011, 506)[7]

The effectiveness of Berton and McClelland's National interpretation is evident in its codification in state policy, due at least in part to Berton's participation on federalist committees and delegations which promoted government support of Canadian cultural industries (McKillop 2011, 495). The narrative of the National Dream is now part of the standard history, replicated in museums, textbooks, state archives (Library and Archives Canada), and in the study guide for Canadian citizenship applications.

If, as Charland has written, the effect of technological nationalism is a "disembodied" culture, the ostensible purpose of the National Dream was to restore body and soul to the Canadian persona. Berton's book and its publicity offer a prime example of the interplay of material and ideational factors in the ongoing process of Canadian nationness. Print capitalism (Anderson 1991) established a market for the National Dream as an affective trope of pan-Canadian goodwill. At the same time, the book activated and extended a discourse of state power that could be drawn upon for diverse purposes: the politically expedient vision of Canada as a unified, federated state, independent from its colonial parent and its southern influences; a retrospective rationalization of national destiny, linking steel rails and territorial obstacles to cultural pride and justice; and an economic justification for ongoing construction of large-scale infrastructural networks of exchange.

In the next section I extend these observations to the present context. My aim is to show how this discourse was mobilized in the service of the oil industry, functioning both ideologically and phenomenologically to yoke national identification to industrial development. State and commercial interests tout the oil sands as the new "National Dream," evoking Berton's now-famous phrase. The metaphor of the National Dream lends moral value to the rationalized project of industrial oil production. It allows the construction of a network of pipelines across the continent to be promoted by the federal government not only as "an extraordinary catalyst for economic growth" but also as a "powerful symbol of

Canadian unity" (McKenna 2012). Selectively interpreting the features of the Laurentian thesis (Berger 1976; Creighton 1937; Innis 1962), which described the colonial exploitation of staple resources, state and corporate stakeholders assert the spatial fix of the tar sands both as evidence of a collective national obligation and as a source of collective national pride. In the hands of oil sands advocates, Canada's "national dream" of the present reflects the unifying properties of its materially instantiated past.

THE NATIONAL DREAM IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

History : Geology :: Future : Technology

Museums have long been recognized as institutions that not only reflect but actively shape national identity (Hinsley 1981; Kaplan 1994). The curating, cataloguing, and placement of museum objects construct a vision of the national self and its role in the world. This vision typically reflects national ambitions for the future as well as homage to the past. Museums also reflect the values of their donors and visitors—sometimes to the detriment of more complex representations of their home population, as Peggy Levitt observes in Chapter 4 in this volume.

At the Oil Sands Discovery Centre in Fort McMurray, Alberta, the role of its state and commercial sponsors is front and center. The objects on display celebrate a nation whose core identity comes from the land—not merely from the work upon its patriotic soil but deep below the surface of the earth. If its history is literally buried in geological sediment, the country's future is presented as a matter of technological and industrial innovation to unbury its riches, sanctioned and supported by the benevolence of its government sponsors. Here the material and the national are inextricably joined (Figure 3.1).

At the front desk, next to pamphlets advertising helicopter tours and fact sheets prepared by the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers, sits a small cardboard box labeled "Oil Sand Sample Kit—$9.99" (Figure 3.2). Inside are two small Ziploc bags and a vial. One bag is marked "Oil Sand," the other "Tailings Sand." The vial reads "Bitumen." Despite the quasi-scientific package and labels, the substances in the sample kit

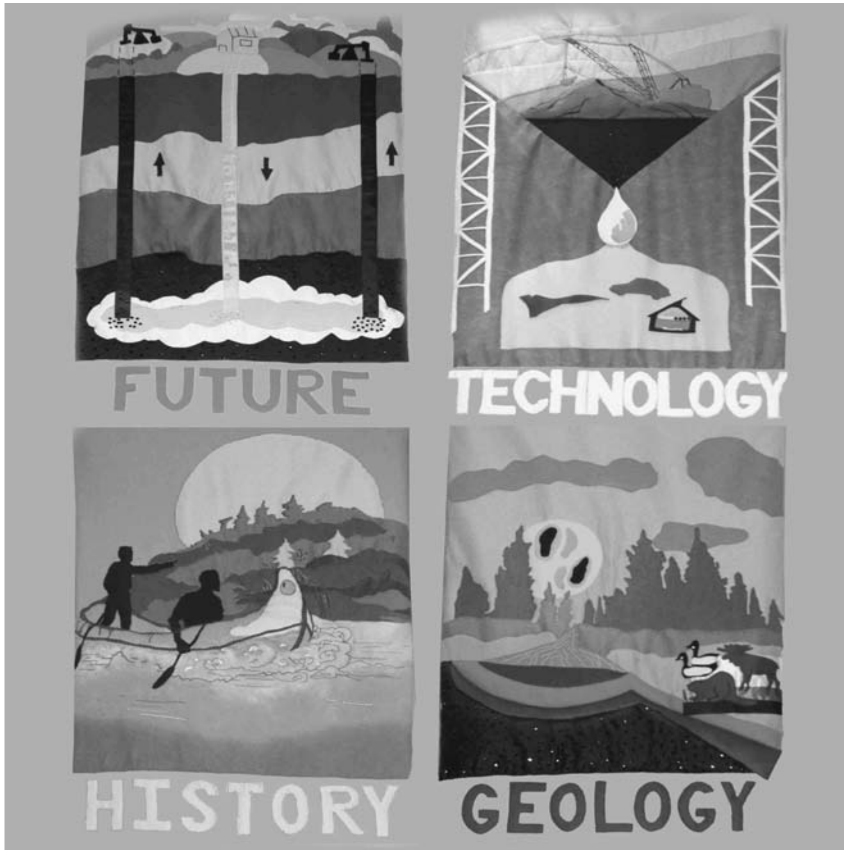

Figure 3.1. Wall hangings in the auditorium of the Oil Sands Discovery Centre in Fort McMurray, Alberta, summarize the mantra espoused by the tar sands industry. *Source*: Author, July 2014

appear prehistoric: black, treacly ooze leaks out of the oil-sand bag. The juxtaposition of scientific clinicity and natural, raw deposits, joined in a display of technical mastery over the environment, is the primary element of "discovery" promoted by the center—and an apt demonstration of the transformation of brute materials into social ones (see Chapter 2).

In addition to the sample kit there are many other opportunities for visitors to engage with the materiality of the oil substance. An interactive exhibit near the entrance encourages visitors to "Dig and Sniff" the oil sands through a plastic dome. Center staff perform live demonstrations of the process by which the oil is separated from its chemical bond with

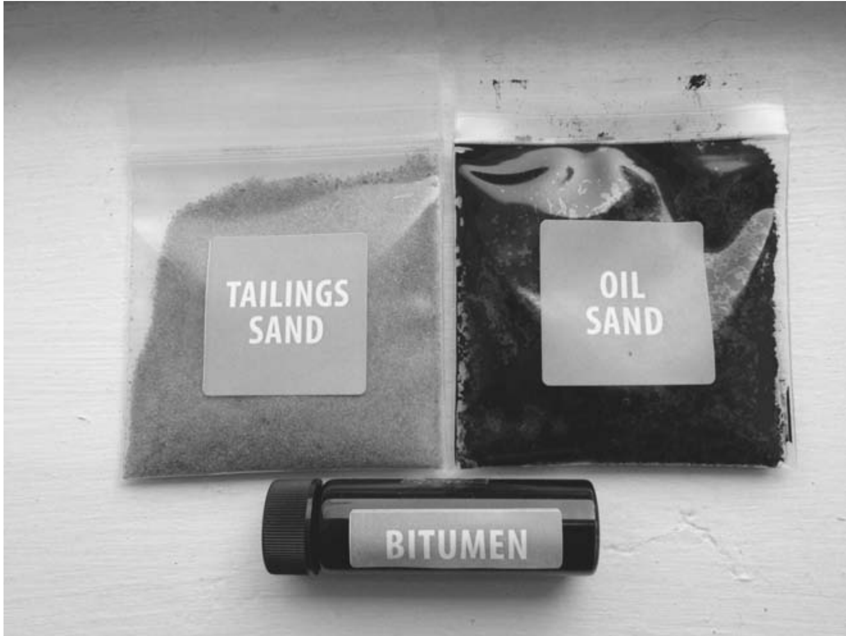

Figure 3.2. Sample sand kit for sale at Oil Sands Discovery Centre. Samples are also available on eBay. *Source*: Author, July 2014

the sand. Two films, *Quest for Energy* and *Pay Dirt*, are screened on a continuous basis, summarizing the narrative espoused by the Discovery Centre's sponsors, the Alberta government and the major oil extraction and distribution companies in the region, as well as more recently by the Canadian government.

Essentially, the story proceeds as follows: millions of years of geological processes saw the development of vast natural deposits of bitumen in the sandy floor underneath the taiga of what would become northern Alberta. Generations of explorers marveled at the possibilities, but none could unlock the central mystery of how to get the oil out of the sand. Throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, undaunted and intrepid individuals, "entrepreneurs, engineers and visionaries," pursued their singular obsession. The government played a nurturing role, sponsoring research and the construction of an experimental plant and permitting private companies to test the plant's commercial viability.

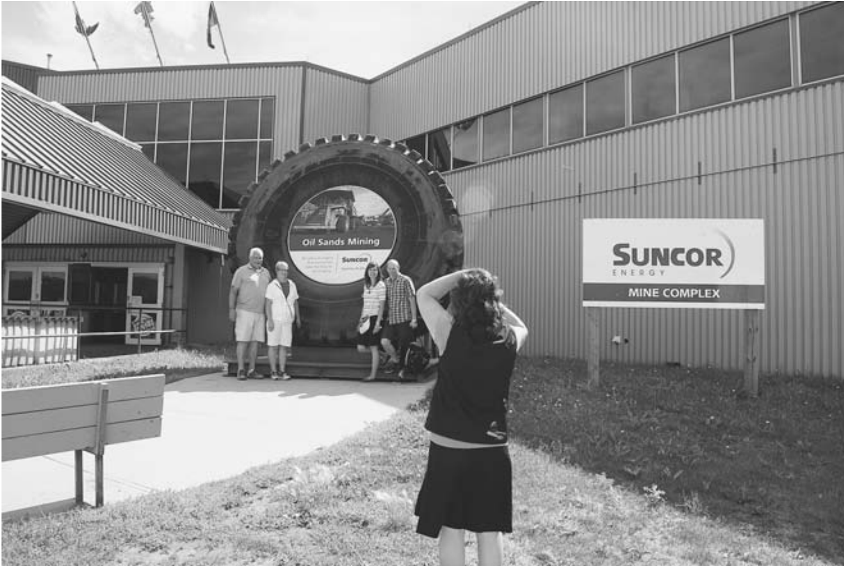

Figure 3.3. "Experience the Energy" tour guide photographing tourists. *Source*: Author, July 2014

In 1967, following years of complex deal brokering between the government and potential investors over royalties for the lease of the land and the purchase price for the oil produced, the Great Canadian Oil Sands (GCOS) project, established and supported by Sunoco (Sun Oil Company, later renamed Suncor Corporation, Canada's largest energy company) and its president, John Howard Pew, came "on stream." The GCOS project produced 30,000 barrels of oil per day. In 1974, construction began for a second major oil sands operation, Syncrude, which would by 1978 produce 125,000 barrels of oil a day. As technical mastery of operations increased, supplies of conventional oil dwindled, raising interest and investment in the oil sands as a reliable and secure source of oil over decades to follow.

This narrative is repeated in the tour of present-day facilities. The "Experience the Energy" tour bus departs from the center, driving up Highway 63 past the new $180 million Suncor Community Leisure Center to reach the Suncor mining site. Armed with statistics and technical details, the tour guide's script is crafted to prepare visitors for the visual experience of technological utopia (Figures 3.3, 3.4).

Figure 3.4. A bucketwheel reclaimer at the Giants of Mining outdoor exhibit, part of the “Experience the Energy” tour. These machines were retired because they were too expensive to maintain. This one was put up for sale. *Source*: Author, July 2014

Two features are apparent during the tour. In order to “see like a state,” to borrow James Scott’s metaphor (1998), one must inscribe legibility into, and project legitimacy onto, processes and policies that are not necessarily certain or defensible by all actors involved. Thus the tour guide may recount the number of workers at Suncor’s massive facilities and offer the fact that the plant never closes, without showing the visitor what these conditions require: the import of thousands of temporary foreign workers, flown in and housed in on-site barracks (but not counted in official censuses). She may describe the company’s pioneering efforts at land reclamation, while giving short shrift to the effects of tailings ponds (wastewater that remains after the oil extraction process is completed) or the overuse of freshwater. She will explain that the operators like Suncor do not own the land; they lease it from the state government and are “provided the opportunity to recover the resource on behalf of the people of Alberta”; but absent from this script is the explanation of the lasting effects of mining on the quality of the land or the patterns of its inhabitants (Figure 3.5).

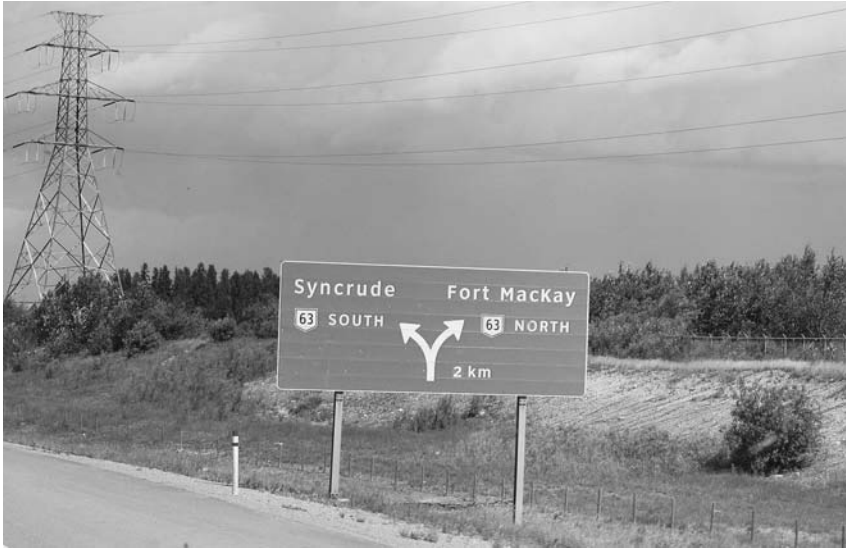

Figure 3.5. Company as place. The main highway through Fort McMurray leads to Fort MacKay or to the Syncrude Oil plant. *Source*: Author, July 2014

A second notable feature of the tour is the absence of the National Dream narrative. There are several reasons for this absence. First, as Davidson and Gismondi (2011) explain, the nation-state is the wrong unit of contemplation for the development of the oil sands. "The Province of Alberta, rather than the Canadian federal government, has historically been not just the most active political body associated with tar sands development, but also officially has the greatest level of authority to do so" (10). This history, mired in regional battles over resource distribution and various failed schemes to implement a national energy program, precludes the embedding of a national discourse in this part of Canada.

A second, related reason has to do with various properties of the commodity itself. The oil sands are not a national resource, if by "national" we are referring to their distribution across a nationally bounded territory. They are buried in the earth under the forest floor in a remote region of northwestern Canada. As Fiona Greenland observes, the "brute materiality" of a thing is as relevant as its social materiality (see Chapter 2). The oil commodity is not only physically fixed in space but also chemically bound to another material, from

which it must be separated if it is to become a commodity in the first place.

Neither are the oil sands a national resource if by this appellation we mean they are meant for the use of the national population. Canada is less a user than it is a major exporter of unconventional oil. Oil is Canada's largest commodity export, and approximately two-thirds of all crude oil production in Canada is exported to the United States.[8] Though the Canadian government does not have reliable statistics on foreign ownership in the Canadian energy sector, 2015 estimates suggest that 40–50 percent of the sector is foreign owned.[9]

Finally, they are not a national resource if by "national" we mean that they express the common commitments, interests, or character of a national people, either to themselves or to a global community of interlocutors. Considerable contestation exists from nongovernmental organizations, aboriginal groups, activists, and the international community. Yet this latter point has been deemed a priority for the federal government. If the oil sands cannot be made national by practical means, the focus would be rather on the nationalization of oil in the collective imaginary.

The "New" National Dream: Canada as Petro-Nation

On 14 July 2006, the then-recently elected prime minister of Canada, Stephen Harper, addressed a crowd of business and government elites at the Canada-UK Chamber of Commerce in London. Held up against the context of nineteenth-century exhortations for the building of the Canadian Pacific Railway discussed above, the speech offers a fascinating parallel, as well as a blueprint for the next eight years of Conservative Party rule.

Harper began by expressing his country's gratitude toward the "benign" and "brilliant" actions of the motherland in Canada's formative years, retrospectively casting the empire's rule as the root cause of the former colony's current strengths in industry and security. Britain's influence stemmed not only from the Confederation era but centuries prior, when "much of Canada was effectively owned, operated and governed" by the Hudson's Bay Company. Thanks to Britain's long-standing "genius for governance," Canadian sovereignty and heritage were emblems of pride and beacons of international reputation. The historic

bonds forged between the gentle empire and its loyal New World subjects made of Canadians "eternal allies."

As an ally, Canada now stood to return the many favors bestowed upon it by Britain, in the form of energy. Canada is becoming "a global energy powerhouse," the result of enormous technical and capital investments in the "ocean of oil-soaked sand under the muskeg of northern Alberta." Moreover, Canada was "a stable, reliable producer in a volatile, unpredictable world," a nation whose people "believe in the free exchange of energy products based on competitive market principles, not self-serving monopolistic political strategies." For this reason, he intoned, "policymakers in Washington—not to mention investors in Houston and New York—now talk about Canada and continental energy security in the same breath."[10]

In its themes of security, attractiveness to foreign investment, and commitment to the commodification of resources, Harper's speech echoed a chorus of voices from political and commercial spheres dating back to the early twentieth-century attempts to commercialize the oil sands. In his appeal to Britain as benevolent parent, however, Harper sought to yoke the oil sands to the sentiment contained in the promotional documents of the nineteenth-century boosters: that nation building is predicated on the building of infrastructure, even as this infrastructure is designed to serve purposes beyond those of the nation itself.

Representatives and proponents of the Harper administration lost no time in repeating these missives, positioning the oil sands as a transformative nation-building endeavor in both the material and the symbolic sense. Many made explicit reference to the National Dream, evoking "the sepia photo of men in stovepipe hats driving in the last spike of the transcontinental railway" (Prentice 2011) or the "indomitable will of our early railroad pioneers against the rugged Canadian terrain" (McKenna 2012). In op-eds, government-sponsored reports, chamber of commerce speeches, and industry ads, oil sands promoters insisted on the national boon afforded by energy development: jobs, economic growth, public revenues, and technological innovation.[11]

It was arguably oil company representatives who fostered the initial connection between the railroad and the pipelines. In a speech at the Empire Club of Canada on 8 December 1994, then-CEO of Syncrude Canada, Eric Newell, rhapsodized:

> One hundred and ten years ago, Sir John A. Macdonald had a vision of holding this country together. The Canadian Pacific Railway became a symbol of pride and a focus of business growth in the last century. And with prosperity came a unity of purpose that kept this country together for a long time. . . . I think it's appropriate that today, in a railroad hotel, I tell you about a new national dream. We want to rekindle the spirit of 1884, when optimism reigned as the last spike was hammered in.[12]

Optimism and unity of purpose remain a motivating influence behind contemporary publicity efforts, such as oil company Cenovus's advertising campaign, "More than Fuel," in which the iconic representation of the "last spike" is featured. "Conviction, tenacity and determination are traits that have long been associated with Canada," indicates the Cenovus website. "We're a nation with a will to succeed. We're a nation that can make the impossible possible. That same sense of conviction, tenacity and determination that built our country helped unlock the oil sands—one of Canada's great natural resources—when no one thought it was possible."[13]

Commentators in Canada decried the "petromania" (Karl 1997) of the Harper administration and argued for delays in regulation and environmental legislation that could stem the development of oil infrastructure (e.g., Hoberg 2014; Linnitt 2013). Meanwhile, lobbyists for government and industry were retained to promote Canadian oil as "ethical" and "conflict-free," attempting to insert moral relativism into considerations of oil consumption and to tie social values to economic interests.[14] Government partnerships with private industry increased under Harper's watch, not only in technological and economic realms but also in cultural ones. In November 2013, the Canadian Museum of History announced a new sponsor through 2018, the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers.

CONCLUSION

Every version of the National Dream as a form of Canadian cultural autonomy—from its "original" vision in the midnineteenth century via the transcontinental railway to its memorialization in popular media one hundred years later, and on to its current elaboration in the debate over Canada's oil sands—has been sponsored, underwritten, and promoted

by transnational state and market forces. These forces yoke material property to moral progress, providing a salient account of how state and market actors have historically participated in constituting both the symbolic and material parameters of the nation-state. I have argued that these state/market parameters are not dichotomous but are rather mutually constitutive in the articulation of national consciousness.

Like all myths of national consciousness, the National Dream is both a prospective and a retrospective narrative. To elaborate the National Dream in the present, in any present, is to conjure a particular telling of past moral and material structures and to advocate for a particular version of their future. Its power derives from the articulation and repetition of its form, even as its content changes over time. Tellingly, it is studying the absences or elisions of content that may yield the greatest insights. The theme of materiality in the constitution of national consciousness should also be accompanied by an awareness of immateriality: that is, what is elided or excluded from the national record. Networks of exchange are made powerful by what is not allowed to circulate or what is made to disappear. As we have seen above, the National Dream renders invisible multiple forms of contestation against such a unifying narrative of progress. These invisible forms include both social and material factors: precarious labor conditions; French-speaking and other minority populations; environmental hazards; regional disputes; and international production chains.

Barney (2017) writes that technological nationalism transforms global economic interests into the collective ideal of the nation, harnessing industrial development to collective well-being. To link national identification to the notion of technological prowess is also to promote a culturally and politically "neutral" narrative, in which all forms of resistance become unnecessary obstacles to technology's progressive march. To promote a narrative of progress, destiny, innovation, and efficiency, and to use this narrative to promote national attachment is a cunning strategy. It is not just a means of making raw materials like steel or oil into a source of national identification; it is a way of transforming national identity itself into a natural resource in the collective imagination.

The subvention of tradition requires technological nationalism; it allows the state and corporate actors to present the foundations of national unity as both emerging from the infrastructure project and also sustaining it. Thus national consciousness is harnessed as a "raw

material" in its own right. And like all raw materials that need to be brought to market, the work of promotion is paramount. By turning culture into nature, the grounds of possibility for a truly "material" national culture can be achieved.

<insert line space>On 1 May 2016, a massive wildfire leapt out of the forest and into the streets of Fort McMurray. Hundreds of thousands of hectares of land smoldered and buildings burned to the ground as nearly ninety thousand residents left their homes. News footage of the oil sands mecca captured desperate ironies: a snaking line of cars and trucks, out of gas and abandoned along Highway 63 as owners tried to evacuate; black carbon, char, and ash falling through the sky like sparks as houses burned to the ground. No one would dare dream such a scene; and so no metaphors have been applied. But stark evidence of the conjoining of materiality and nationality is found in the political contests now being waged over how to rebuild the ravaged town, where to build new pipelines, and at whose feet to lay the blame. In moments of crisis, the link between our material existence and our national narratives is revealed to be even stronger.

Following Timothy Mitchell's (2011) analysis of "carbon democracy" as the production, institutionalization, and nationalization of "petroknowledge" (139), the Canadian context today allows us to observe the merger of national interests with the national oil sands industry and its attendant technologies. Rather than seeing this as a new development, the genealogy I have traced in this chapter reveals the long-standing interplay of material and affective features in the national infrastructure. The building of a nation is at once a material, technological, discursive, economic, and institutional project. By combining and overlaying these paradigms, we observe how the nation is made to matter across time and space.

NOTES

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1. By "temporal arrangements" I am thinking of the invention of "railroad time," or international standard time, adopted in 1884.

2. In 2015, three major pipeline distribution projects were the TransCanada Corporation's Keystone XL to transport oil to the United States (rejected in

November 2015 by U.S. president Barack Obama); the TransCanada Energy East project (which would extend across Canada toward the Atlantic Ocean); and the Enbridge Northern Gateway project to take oil to British Columbia, for ocean transport across the Pacific to Asian markets.

3. A similar argument has been made in regard to other places and other times. See Weber (1976) on nineteenth-century France; Bouzarovski and Bassin (2011) on contemporary Russia; and Guldi (2012) on nineteenth-century Britain.

4. As Charland demonstrates, this material condition is not merely attributed to the past; it is also a rhetoric of the future. The introduction of subsequent networks—radio and television broadcasting, air, road, and water travel, postal service, telephones—was given legitimacy in Canada via the articulation of a technonational necessity.

5. Tellingly, for specific populations in Canada, notably Québécois, Acadian, and aboriginal groups, the National Dream is not a recognized cultural trope. The execution of Métis leader Louis Riel in 1885 and subsequent limitations to French-language instruction in certain provinces foreclosed on the applicability of the National Dream to French-speaking Canada; though one does find evidence of a "*rêve national*" in federal state-funded institutions such as museums. See, e.g., "Sur les rails du rêve national" at www.mccord-museum.qc.ca/fr/clefs/circuits/GE_P2_4_FR

6. During his candidacy for prime minister in 1967–68, Pierre Trudeau campaigned on the platform of a "Just Society": a vision of equal opportunity for diverse populations in Canada and a federated state independent from Britain and the United States. Media commentators treated his personal charisma, along with his economic and political nationalism, as a dramatic illustration of the National Dream realized.

7. It is perhaps important to note here that McKillop's biography was published by no other than McClelland & Stewart.

8. This is a 2010 Government of Canada statistic. See www.nrcan.gc.ca/publications/statistics-facts/1239#sec2

9. Andy Blatchford, "Level of Foreign Ownership Unclear in Energy Sector as PM Seeks More Cash." www.ottawacitizen.com/business/Level+foreign+ownership+unclear+energy+sector+seeks+more+cash+memo/11670502/story.html

10. Canadian prime minister Stephen Harper also invoked the National Dream metaphor to characterize such infrastructural development in the Arctic. See "PM Harper Announces the John G. Diefenbaker Icebreaker Project," 28 August 2008. Transcript: http://pm.gc.ca/eng/news/2008/08/28/prime-minister-harper-announces-john-g-diefenbaker-icebreaker-project

11. See, e.g., the American consulting firm IHS's "Special Report: Oil Sands Economic Benefits," January 2014 (www.ihs.com/oilsandsdialogue); Alan Arcand, Michael Burt, and Todd A. Crawford, "Fuel for Thought: The Economic Benefits of Oil Sands Investment for Canada's Regions," Conference

Board of Canada, 24 October 2012; and publications generated by the Institute for Oil Sands Innovation at the University of Alberta.

12. Eric Newell, "Canada's Oil Sands: It's Time to Awaken the Sleeping Giant." http://speeches.empireclub.org/61089/data?n=31. Newell is currently a special advisor to the provost of the University of Alberta.

13. See www.cenovus.com/news/canadian-ideas-at-work.html

14. See, e.g., activities of the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers in the Energy Framework Initiative; TransCanada press releases (www.transcanada.com/news-releases-article.html?id=1499651); and the Ethical Oil Institute (ethicaloil.org).