Gender

Sheena Wilson

In January 2014, Tenelle Star—a 13-year-old student from Balcarres, Saskatchewan, and a member of the Star Blanket Cree Nation in Treaty Four territory—made headlines in Canada when school officials ordered her to remove her hoodie and, later, to wear it inside out (Subdhan 2014). On the front, the hoodie read, "Got Land?" and on the back, "Thank an Indian."

That same month, MEDIA controversy also surrounded hearings about the proposed Enbridge Northern Gateway Pipeline, which would carry tar sands oil from Alberta to ports in British Columbia. Tom Isaac, lawyer and Indigenous rights consultant for Enbridge, declared on CBC Calgary's *The 180 with Jim Brown* (2014), "Certainly from my vantage point I don't see an inherent weakness in [the pipeline review] process. . . . What the courts have actually said . . . is that the balancing act between societal interests, on the one hand, and Indigenous interests, on the other, are to be decided by government." Isaac's binary—societal versus Indigenous interests—raises questions about how he (or the courts, governments, and industry) defines "society." Where does society end, and where do Indigenous interests begin? Where does Tenelle Star fit in Issac's definition of *society*? Or women in general? And where do race and class intersect with these discourses of power, particularly in relation to natural resources, oil, and the interests that purport to develop them?

These questions became urgent in light of the Canadian government's 2012 labeling of certain environmental and First Nations groups as radical extremists and its creation of a

174

counterterrorism unit to protect Alberta's natural resources and INFRASTRUCTURE, at the same time as it funded a forty-million-dollar ad campaign promoting the oil sands and Canadian resource development (Tait 2012; Canadian Press 2013b; Cheadle 2013).

As they consolidate neocolonial and neoliberal petro-agendas, these political and media discourses shape public opinion and foreign policy. Built upon restrictive conceptions of women and Western feminism, they have ramifications for women and for ethnocultural communities and other marginalized groups in Canada and other petrocultures around the world. Such strategies sustain Big Oil's environmental destruction and obfuscate activists' efforts in gendered ways by silencing and rhetorically banishing women leaders and by depicting men of color as "petro-terrorist-gang-members"—a process identified by Heather M. Turcotte in US media representations of Niger Delta resistance (2011a, 216). Class is also used as a rhetorical management strategy to neutralize resistance. Tropes of model citizen-consumer and/or model citizen-entrepreneur offer access to (middle) class identity—a seemingly positive escape from the negative feedback of racialized and gendered discourses, but one that nevertheless nullifies petro-resistance in the short term and, in the long term, maintains existing inequities.

Take, for example, Canadian mainstream media representations of the Idle No More movement started by four female activists in November 2012, and Chief Theresa Spence's forty-four-day hunger strike that began in December 2012. Media coverage of these protests reinforced traditional IDENTITY tropes that perpetuate inequity and injustice. Spence and Idle No More were protesting omnibus bills C-38 and C-45 and aspects of Section 35 of the Canadian Constitution, which weaken environmental protection and Indigenous land rights, allow the expansion of large-scale oil production, and pave the way for associated projects like PIPELINES. However, Spence's demands were never explained by the mainstream media, which focused instead on her health and whether her actions actually constituted a hunger strike, since she consumed tea and fish broth (Campion-Smith 2013; Javed 2013; Hopper 2013; Kay 2013). These accounts depoliticized her intentions and her struggle. The slippage from tactics to semantics brought her ethics into question; she even faced allegations of financial corruption, with media reports perpetuating racist, sexist, and classist stereotypes (Levant 2013b; Press 2013; Taylor 2013). Media accounts publicized exhortations that she refocus her energies on her family and COMMUNITY; they rhetorically banished her to the private, domestic sphere by reinvoking her status as mother-grandmother, while providing space for male Indigenous leaders to declare, "It's time for the men to step up" (Campion-Smith 2013). Such practices rationalize women "as unpolitical and external to the political economy" (Turcotte 2011a, 208). They reinforce extreme notions of conventional gender roles and elide the leadership of Indigenous women activists. At the same time, Indigenous men and their leadership strategies were described as "tactical," "aggressive," "extreme," and "angry" (D. Ross 2013).

Media coverage also undermined the Idle No More movement by linking it to violence—both violence initiated by "aggressive elements within the existing [A]boriginal leadership structure" and that enacted against Indigenous people yet depicted in a way that blames the victims for eliciting racist responses (D. Ross 2013; Barrera 2013). The gang

rape of an Indigenous woman in Thunder Bay, Ontario, for instance, was alleged to have been retaliation against Idle No More. These reports insinuate that violence is endemic to resistance efforts; they replicate the intention of the aggressors, who aim to discourage Indigenous youth and their communities from activism.

This rhetorical strategy spectacularizes and markets violence as a reaction to Idle No More rather than as a persistent legacy of the colonial logic, human rights abuses, and gender-sexual violence upon which petro-states are founded. Furthermore, these racialized, gendered representations of Indigenous resistance contrast starkly with sanctioned forms of consumerist resistance marketed predominantly to middle- and upper-class (and generally white) women. In mainstream popular media, women's relationships to environmentalism tend to be reduced to trivial issues and fashion advice (see Planet Green 2014).

Mainstream media reports on Tenelle Star's hoodie protest repeat many of these patterns. Indigenous press sources described Star and her mother as conscientious protestors and members of a larger community movement concerned with protecting land and treaty rights, which pose obstacles to ongoing industrial oil projects. In the mainstream press, Star became a damsel in distress through repeated mentions of the pink hue of her sweatshirt and her confused response to the controversy. She was chastised as being "rude" and "cheeky" ("First Nation Teen" 2014)—things a young woman should never be. Just as Theresa Spence's body and diet, the validity of her hunger strike, and her status as an older female figure were invoked to depoliticize her, references to Star's gender and youth undermine her as figure of resistance.

Star vanished from the mainstream mediasphere in late January 2014; some of the last reports about her noted that her family was advised by police to deactivate her Facebook account because she had become the victim of racist cyber attacks. Vigilante reaction and the state's paternalist concern converged to silence Star and cut short her protest. The mainstream media predictably conflates race, gender, and issues of security: Star is figured as a victim of violence who can be best protected by withdrawing from petro-protest. The authorities and the media fail to link this instance of racially motivated violence to a history of violence against Indigenous women endemic to the Canadian petro-nation's colonial legacy.

From the hallways of high schools to the runways of high fashion,[1] in popular culture and late monopoly capitalism, women's images—and women as a concept—are systemically co-opted to serve national and international petro-politics. Consider the fictions of Ezra Levant's *Ethical Oil*, which contrast rigid notions of female gender norms in CANADA with other petro-states in order to justify exploitation of Canadian oil reserves. Consider also the ironies of BP's early-millennial "Beyond Oil" campaign, which uses women's bodies and female identity tropes steeped in a history of patriarchy to rebrand the company as an ENERGY innovator (see Wilson 2014). These gendered constructions intended to undermine women and their political agency are intricately connected to other marginalizing discourses at the intersections of race, class, and petro-politics.

1. For example, the "Water & Oil" cover shoot in *Vogue Italia* (Meisel 2010).

Whether the discussion is of pipelines or wind turbines, understanding how women's resistance to petro-politics is strategically managed, subverted, and neutralized by mainstream power discourses provides insight into how the inequalities of our current "society" (as understood by Enbridge consultant Tom Isaac) are sustained. After all, it is not oil that places "society" and its needs in opposition to Indigenous or women's interests or the interests of the un- or underemployed. It is not oil that designates certain people as model neoliberal entrepreneurs or consumer-citizens in binary opposition to enemy Others: environmentalists and petro-terrorists. It is not oil that co-opts middle- and upper-class consumers through falsely progressive discourses that sell the promise of alternatives. Oil merely fuels those interests. Critical petro-intersectionality provides a lens through which to trace and detangle the webs of relations and to expose how the inequities of race, class, and gender are not only perpetuated in our current petroculture but also actively deployed as rhetorical strategies to literally and figuratively buoy and sustain existing power sources: oil and the neoliberal petro-state.

See also: Aboriginal, America, Canada, embodiment, identity, media, petro-violence.