Introduction

Narratives and Temporalities of Infrastructure in Canada

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Anthropological Approaches to Infrastructure

Infrastructures lie at the core of numerous social transformations, sociopolitical and economic developments, and creative processes of innovation. They have become significant indicators of an ongoing transition towards preferable futures, symbols of economic growth, technological advancement, and modernization. As Harvey and Knox (2012, 523) argue, infrastructures embody "promises of emancipatory modernity"—such as speed, connectivity, and economic prosperity; they "enchant" the hopes and dreams associated with development. Infrastructures contribute to imaginaries of improved futures, which remain elusive, flawed, and difficult to define (Abram and Weszkalnys 2013). Operating "on the level of fantasy and desire" (Larkin 2013, 333), infrastructures "draw together political and economic forces in complicated ways and often with unexpected effects," implicating "broader dynamics of social change" (Harvey, Jensen, and Morita 2017, 2).

Although infrastructures are inherently future-oriented—serving as vehicles of domination and transformation—they are designed and assembled in ways that sustain contemporary settler states and societies. This process is shaped by power relations, sociopolitical change, and the material organization of everyday life in space and time (Spice 2018). Pasternak and colleagues (2023) demonstrate how infrastructure functions as a tool of settler colonialism. Infrastructures—such as roads, pipelines, and energy grids—not only facilitate economic development but also serve as mechanisms for asserting jurisdiction and reinforcing colonial control over Indigenous lands. The construction of new infrastructures often proceeds without Indigenous consent, enabling resource

extraction while undermining Indigenous governance systems and disrupting relationships with the land. In doing so, infrastructures help sustain particular visions of "settler futures" predicated on modernization, economic growth, territorial control, and ongoing colonial dominance.

Conversely, infrastructures also profoundly shape—and sometimes disrupt—alternative visions for the future articulated by Indigenous communities. Sturm's (2017) analysis in the context of Native North America highlights how infrastructure projects often legitimize settler colonial practices such as land dispossession and cultural erasure by promising ostensibly improved futures. She challenges conventional Western notions of sovereignty, emphasizing instead Indigenous perspectives that prioritize relational governance, community resilience, cultural continuity, and self-determination. Sturm frames settler colonialism as a persistent structure continuously reshaping relationships among Indigenous communities, settlers, and the state while highlighting Indigenous strategies of resistance and reclamation. Her work calls for a re-evaluation of anthropological approaches, urging scholars to move beyond passive observation towards active support initiatives centring Indigenous sovereignty and decolonial futures.

The current anthropological understanding of infrastructure has been informed by and built upon insights and methodologies from other social sciences that study infrastructural phenomena. Consequently, technical or engineering perspectives have been superseded by an emphasis on human engagement and the specific ways humans interact with various infrastructures, thereby moving beyond mere materiality. These anthropological approaches highlight the systemic and political dimensions of infrastructure (Larkin 2013), the sociotechnical relationships individuals form through infrastructure creation and maintenance (Star 1999), the interconnections between archives and infrastructure projects (Rippa 2021), and phenomena such as migrants' mobility conceived as infrastructure (Xiang and Lindquist 2014). Anthropologists also explore how interactions between bodies and materials generate novel sensory experiences and capacities, ultimately conceptualizing people themselves as infrastructure (Simone 2004).

Anthropological scholarship has repeatedly demonstrated the significance of non-physical elements, such as infrastructure standards (Carse and Lewis 2017) or the "promise of infrastructure" (Anand, Gupta, and Appel 2018). Additionally, anthropological and ethnographic research has shown that the planning, creation, and maintenance of infrastructures produce distinct

spatial and ecological consequences across local, regional, and global scales (for example, Harvey and Knox 2015; Ojani 2023; Schweitzer, Povoroznyuk, and Schiesser 2017). These analyses illustrate how the promise of infrastructure remains indeterminate, deeply intertwined with the mediations it facilitates. Infrastructural mediation—understood as actions shaping anthropogenic relationships within extractive environments—is grounded in ecological contexts and the "durational dimensions that infrastructure buildings give rise to—affects, dispositions towards the future, embodied understandings of the way it was" (Ruiz 2021, 161).

Within this context, it is not surprising that infrastructures have become a prominent research focus in anthropology, the humanities, and the social sciences more broadly (Anand, Gupta, and Appel 2018; Buier 2023; Harvey and Knox 2015; Knox and Gambino 2023; Star 1999). Conceptually, "infrastructure" has increasingly served as an analytical lens to examine abstract phenomena such as development, transformation, sustainability, and modernity. However, this expansive application risks turning the term into a mere "buzzword," potentially diminishing its descriptive and analytical precision (for example, Hetherington 2019). In response, this special issue brings together research articles that not only investigate various infrastructures within the Canadian context but also analyze infrastructural phenomena through two interconnected lenses: narratives and temporalities. In doing so, it emphasizes an understanding of infrastructure as processual and relational—what some scholars describe as infrastructuring—foregrounding the social, political, and temporal practices through which infrastructures are made, maintained, contested, and reimagined (Lammer and Thiemann 2024; Star and Ruhleder 1996). This perspective captures the diversity of infrastructures and related phenomena—including colonial legacies, development narratives, and accessibility challenges—demonstrating how infrastructure extends beyond physical structures to encompass broader sociopolitical and ecological systems. It embraces an expansive yet analytically focused definition of "infrastructure."

Narratives, Temporalities, and the Contested Lives of Infrastructure

Narrative and temporal dimensions illuminate how infrastructures are shaped not only by material design but also by the stories told about them and the temporal experiences they generate—revealing tensions, aspirations, and contested meanings across their lifespans. Expanding the scope of narrative theory and practice, Parker (2013, 155) proposed "an Anthropological

Narratology, which would study narratives, but also how people, including researchers, use them in daily life, how they observe them, define them, trace their tracks, for whatever purpose." Narratives not only construct meaningful worlds but also carry disruptive potential. In the context of infrastructure, understanding language, metaphors, and stories that surround socio-technical systems is crucial for analyzing the tensions embedded in their planning, implementation, and afterlives. These narratives do not operate solely in political discourse or institutional settings; they are shaped by, and in turn shape, everyday experiences and expectations, influencing how people make sense of transformation, possibility, and risk.

This narrative dimension is particularly evident when considering not only built infrastructures but also those that are unbuilt, suspended, or speculative. Projects that are never realized still produce effects: they may alter landscapes, generate environmental knowledge, or inspire social mobilization. Infrastructures that exist only in blueprint or memory often remain embedded in local imaginaries, shaping how communities think about territory, development, and futurity. Carse and Kneas (2019) identify several conceptual categories to account for such phenomena: "shadow histories," which point to unrealized projects as traces of paths not taken; "present absences," highlighting how abandoned infrastructures still affect communities and ecologies; and "zombies," referring to projects that linger in planning documents and political discourse long after their momentum has faded. These conceptual tools help capture the ways in which infrastructural futures are not only made through material construction, but also through anticipation, speculation, and abandonment.

The US Pan-Atomic Canal, envisioned during the Cold War as part of "Project Plowshare" to widen the Panama Canal using nuclear explosives, exemplifies this dynamic. Though never constructed, the project generated extensive environmental assessments and shaped long-term understandings of regional ecosystems and geopolitical ambition (Carse and Kneas 2019). Similarly, in Northern British Columbia, the legacies of unbuilt hydroelectric dams and pipelines continue to influence how local communities—and especially Indigenous nations—engage with conservation politics, development narratives, and the politics of territorial sovereignty (Peyton 2017). These cases demonstrate that infrastructural absence does not imply insignificance; on the contrary, such projects exert power precisely through their non-realization, by shaping discourses of futurity and development long after their material

prospects have faded. These unfinished and speculative infrastructures function as promissory notes, encouraging local populations, governments, and industry to imagine and orient themselves towards particular visions of the future. They animate an anticipatory condition in which "under construction" becomes less a transitional phase and more a permanent mode of governance and life. As Zeiderman (2016, 170–171) argues, such anticipatory states represent a subjunctive temporal mode, where contradictions between short-term urgency and long-term planning create new forms of uncertainty and suspension. This temporal instability—where the future seems perpetually just out of reach—conditions how people engage with the infrastructural state and its claims.

Appel, Anand, and Gupta (2018, 18) emphasize that the lifecycle of infrastructure—from design and construction to maintenance, repair, breakdown, and eventual ruination—is always embedded in multiple, overlapping temporalities. Understanding infrastructure as a temporal form reveals how delays, interruptions, and even decay are not failures, but central to how infrastructures produce meaning and social relationships. They illuminate evolving connections between communities, the state, and the environments in which infrastructures are embedded. In some cases, the construction of a new road can instill hope and the sense of forward movement; in others, indefinite postponement generates disillusionment, weariness, or critique (Harvey 2018). By attending to these layered temporalities and the spectral presence of unbuilt infrastructures, anthropologists can better understand how infrastructures mediate political imaginaries, everyday expectations, and the uneven unfolding of modernity.

The adaptability—or interchangeability—of infrastructures also reinforces their role in shaping imaginaries of future change. Pipelines, railways, and power lines may be retooled to support green energy transitions, but such flexibility often masks continuities in extractive logics. As Lammer and Thiemann (2024, 196) note, infrastructures enable or constrain flows of people, goods, and ideas, while also being recast to serve new ends. In the current climate transition, energy infrastructures once central to carbon economies are being rebranded as components of a green future. However, this shift often reactivates colonial patterns of land appropriation and exploitation. Pasternak and colleagues (2023) caution that new mining projects justified by the demand for critical minerals—required for batteries, solar panels, and other green technologies—are being sited on Indigenous territories, reanimating long-standing struggles over sovereignty, consent, and land use.

At the same time, infrastructures themselves are increasingly vulnerable to the effects of climate change. The Canadian Institute for Climate Choices (2021, IV–VI) points out that most of Canada's infrastructures were not designed with climate resilience in mind. Rising temperatures, extreme weather events, and permafrost thaw pose risks not only to physical structures but also to the services they enable. In the Arctic, these shifts have immediate consequences (for example, Gartler et al. 2025). Contributions in this special issue (Gartler and Crate; Little; Schmid) illustrate how changing ice and permafrost conditions, rising sea levels, and shifting seasonal patterns disrupt infrastructure, mobility, and Indigenous land-based practices. Aporta (2009), for example, documents how altered freeze-up and break-up timelines challenge Inuit travel and subsistence activities, while also prompting the integration of traditional knowledge with GPS technologies. These examples show how Indigenous communities are not only affected by infrastructural fragility but also actively engage in its reinterpretation and navigation.

The perceptual dynamics introduced above are closely tied to questions of visibility and invisibility—how infrastructures emerge into view through disruption, resistance, or representation, and fade into the background through routine use or naturalization. Infrastructures are not inherently visible or invisible; their perceptibility shifts depending on social, political, and temporal contexts. As Star (1999) argues, once integrated into everyday life, infrastructures tend to fade from view until they break down or are disrupted. This invisibility can render their underlying politics, funding structures, and design logics opaque. Fischer (2024) refers to this as a process of "neutralization," through which infrastructures are naturalized and perceived as politically neutral elements of the built environment. Once normalized, they can shape choices and behaviours in subtle but powerful ways, generating path dependencies and limiting alternatives. However, infrastructures become visible again when they are refused, repurposed, or resisted. This is particularly evident in the context of Indigenous resistance to imposed projects such as the BC Hydro Site C Dam and the CGL pipeline project in Northeastern British Columbia. These projects have been met with legal challenges, encampments, and sustained opposition from affected communities. As discussed by Amatulli (2023) and Spice (2018), these projects highlight the ongoing contestation of settler infrastructure on Indigenous land and the failure of state and corporate actors to secure Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC). They also reveal how infrastructures are

not only technical systems but also political assemblages—entangled with questions of sovereignty, jurisdiction, and relational futures.

This interplay of visibility and invisibility is also evident in digital infrastructures. Broadband internet systems, often hidden in plain sight—cables, routers, service towers—illustrate how infrastructures become naturalized and taken for granted, yet remain politically and socially consequential. In remote areas, such as Northwestern Ontario, Indigenous communities have both led and appropriated technological infrastructure projects. The Keewaytinook Okimakanak Tribal Council's broadband initiative in the early 2000s, for instance, was developed in collaboration with local, regional, and national partners. However, its uses diverged from the expectations of external funding bodies. While originally framed in terms of development objectives—such as telemedicine, employment, or education—the infrastructure was also used extensively for community-driven purposes, including everyday communication, cultural representation, and the creation of an online platform dedicated to Indigenous interaction (Budka 2015; Budka, Bell, and Fiser 2009). This disconnect between design intentions and local usage highlights the social reconfiguration of infrastructure and the importance of understanding how people actively reshape its meaning and function through everyday engagement.

These acts of everyday appropriation and redefinition are part of a broader continuum of Indigenous engagement with infrastructure—ranging from subtle forms of reinterpretation to overt acts of refusal. While initiatives like community-led broadband projects reflect infrastructural adaptation and creative repurposing, more confrontational strategies such as blockades, encampments, and checkpoints directly challenge the foundations of settler sovereignty and its infrastructural manifestations. Through blockades, encampments and checkpoints, Indigenous people counteract settler sovereignty while strengthening alternative relations with the environment and an alternative vision for the future. Thus, instead of being classified as spaces of negation, these can be spaces of radical possibility to envision something different (Spice 2018). As shown by the actions of the Idle No More movement, Indigenous communities across Canada are able to significantly disrupt the circulation of capital, resources and development projects by shutting down railroads, highways, and bridges (Pasternak et al. 2023). These actions highlight the ongoing conflict between the settler state and the Indigenous peoples in relation to "critical infrastructures" built on stolen land.

Far from being stable or apolitical, infrastructures are marked by transitions, delays, breakdowns, and repairs. Their trajectories are rarely straightforward. As anthropological research has shown, infrastructures are constantly being renegotiated—not only in their technical configurations but also in how they are imagined, inhabited, and contested (Gupta 2018). Maintenance and repair are not simply about keeping systems running; they involve the ongoing negotiation of social and ecological orders (Graham and Thrift 2007; Ramakrishnan, O'Reilly, and Budds 2021). Attending to these temporal and material dimensions reveals how infrastructures simultaneously enable and constrain, as well as reproduce and transform.

The Social Politics of Development and Inequality in Canada

The infrastructures discussed in this special issue include water infrastructures (drinking water systems, water and wastewater treatment), energy infrastructures (solar and wind farms, oil pipelines, and liquefied natural gas facilities), as well as transport infrastructures (roads, seaports, railways, and runways). All contributions focus on the Canadian experience, presenting and analyzing case studies drawing from ethnographic fieldwork conducted across four provinces and two territories: Alberta, British Columbia, Manitoba, Ontario, the Northwest Territories, and Nunavut. Most contributions concentrate on the northernmost regions, highlighting the challenges experienced by people (Indigenous and non-Indigenous) in relation to poor infrastructure such as inadequate roads and airports, unreliable electricity systems, insufficient housing, and old, deficient water pipelines. Clearly, these infrastructure deficiencies pose substantial challenges to the health, well-being, and prosperity of northern communities, particularly Indigenous peoples (Canadian Institute for Climate Choices 2021, XI).

Undeniably, people across Canada depend on the reliability of services provided by various infrastructures. To ensure the movement of people, goods, resources, and telecommunications from coast to coast to coast, infrastructures are critical to Canadian socio-economic well-being. A report published in 2009 suggests that up to half of all productivity growth over the previous 45 years resulted from investment in public infrastructures (Canadian Institute for Climate Choices 2021, 6). Indeed, the Government of Canada (2022, 1) employs the concept of "critical infrastructure" to describe "processes, systems, facilities, technologies, networks, assets and services essential to the health, safety, security or economic well-being of Canadians and the effective functioning of

government." By applying such a definition, the government shapes a powerful narrative around infrastructures, facilitating the re-framing—and eventual transformation—of industrial projects into crucial and "critical" matters of national interest (Spice 2018).

Recent federal initiatives demonstrate how this framing has materialized through new governance architectures and legislative instruments. This is reflected in the establishment of the Major Projects Office of Canada (MPO) in the summer of 2025, created to coordinate and accelerate the assessment and approval of large-scale developments deemed of national significance (Government of Canada 2025). In the same year, Parliament introduced Bill C-5 (*One Canadian Economy Act*), which enacts the *Building Canada Act* and expands federal authority to designate and expedite "national interest" projects (Parliament of Canada 2025). Within this context, pipelines, LNG facilities, new power grids for isolated communities, and improved transport infrastructures—intended to enhance economic opportunities and open new trade routes—have been mobilized to sustain a narrative of better futures achievable only through infrastructure development.

Nowadays, many infrastructures are portrayed using sustainability-related or "green" adjectives to support a "green transition" in which technological advancement plays a key role. While infrastructures enabling resource extraction have received promotion and substantial funding, other fundamental infrastructures—such as housing (including associated facilities, services, and installations for water, sewage, power, communications, and transportation)—have often been neglected (for example, Garneau 2022). This discrepancy creates a critical dichotomy between infrastructures necessary to facilitate the flow of goods, resources, and capital, and those needed to ensure community well-being (Alook et al. 2023). Such a dichotomy is especially pronounced in dispersed and isolated Indigenous communities in northern Canada, where job shortages translate into fewer opportunities for people to remain in and build futures on their homelands.

Supporting development projects that foster socio-economic opportunities while reducing the economic and infrastructural gap—currently characterized by southern populations enjoying better roads, reliable electricity, effective water and sewage systems, and superior housing conditions (Canadian Institute for Climate Choices 2021, 7)—remains central to the current debate regarding infrastructure needs in rural and remote Canada. In this context, infrastructures have also been depicted as mechanisms that promote reconciliation with

Indigenous peoples through both the economic opportunities their realization generates and the sociocultural "advancements" they ostensibly enable (Spice 2018). Thus, infrastructures may be understood as "eventful," deeply embedded in a settler future. Their construction could be seen as an "experiential horizon that their projection of settler infrastructure brought into being," constituting a process of "settler becoming," facilitated by resource frontiers through ongoing meditation that structures lives around infrastructures (Ruiz 2021, 162–163). Infrastructures promise a material transition toward a future deemed inevitable for achieving a vague yet compelling idea of progress. Karuka (2019, 40) describes infrastructures as attempts to exert control over the future.

To realize such an envisioned future, major infrastructure projects have been planned and developed in recent decades across Canada, including the Coastal Gas Link (CGL) pipeline in British Columbia, the Iqaluit deep seaport in Nunavut, the renovation of the Hudson Bay Railway in Manitoba, and the Inuvik–Tuktoyaktuk Highway in the Northwest Territories. Mason (2015) conceptualizes the cycle of promises and expectations built around these development projects as an "events collective." He describes this as a political strategy designed to generate expectations while attracting attention from financial sponsors, thereby influencing agendas towards specific project implementations. This concept aligns with Flyvbjerg's (2017) broader theoretical framework, termed the "iron law of megaprojects". In conceptualizing the allure surrounding infrastructure megaprojects, Flyvbjerg (2017, 3) identifies four dimensions, or "sublimes," which illuminate their appeal across different social and political spheres: the technological, political, economic, and aesthetic sublimes.

The technological sublime describes the fascination and excitement that engineers and planners derive from developing ambitious, large-scale infrastructures that push the limits of innovation and technical achievement—such as constructing the fastest aircraft, the longest bridge, or the tallest building. Frick initially employed this concept to analyze the multi-billion-dollar San Francisco–Oakland Bay Bridge, arguing that the technological sublime significantly influenced the project's design, public reception, and the degree of accountability in its realization (Flyvbjerg 2017). The political sublime captures the gratification that political actors experience from initiating, supporting, and inaugurating grand infrastructure projects. Such megaprojects not only symbolize progress and ambition but also generate widespread public enthusiasm, bolster political reputations, and attract extensive media coverage,

all of which are essential components of political capital and electoral success. The economic sublime highlights the financial attraction that megaprojects hold for businesses, industrial stakeholders, governments, and labour unions. By generating considerable revenues, employment opportunities, and tax income, these projects mobilize diverse actors—financial institutions, investors, developers, consultants, and workers—in pursuit of economic benefits, fostering networks of mutual dependence and profit. Finally, the aesthetic sublime refers to the visual and sensory pleasures associated with the monumental scale and architectural grandeur of infrastructure projects. Designers, planners, and the public frequently take pride and pleasure in the symbolic power, beauty, and perceived cultural prestige embodied in these built forms (Flyvbjerg 2017).

These conceptual lenses provided by Flyvbjerg resonate closely with the anthropological understanding of infrastructure explored in this special issue, particularly in examining how such projects become imbued with narratives of progress, modernity, and collective futures, despite their often contested and ambivalent consequences. Indeed, as the contributions demonstrate, infrastructures do not merely represent visions of progress or pathways towards predetermined futures—they embody competing and frequently irreconcilable conceptions of the future itself. On the one hand, infrastructures articulate and sustain settler futures, characterized by modernization, economic prosperity, technological advancement, and the sociopolitical desires captured in Flyvbjerg's "sublimes." On the other hand, infrastructures shape—and at times disrupt—Indigenous futures, which emphasize relational connections to land, cultural resilience, self-determination, and sovereignty. Today, that contestation is occurring under new institutional constraints: with the MPO and Bill C-5, the federal state is claiming the authority to accelerate, authorize, or override infrastructural futures, thus amplifying asymmetries between settler, corporate, and Indigenous visions. This dynamic interplay underscores the inherently political nature of infrastructures, highlighting the necessity of anthropological inquiry that foregrounds Indigenous perspectives, critically engages dominant developmental narratives, and explores alternative imaginaries of infrastructural possibility.

Comparing Infrastructures

For this special issue on infrastructures in Canada, we invited contributors to explore how infrastructure development is framed and made meaningful through the narratives that promote it. We also asked authors to consider

the materiality of infrastructures as fundamentally entangled with their temporality, viewing them as mediating apparatuses whose planning, construction, and operationalization produce significant effects across spatial and temporal distance—often far removed from where and when they were originally conceived (Feldman 2011). Although all contributions are grounded in the Canadian context, the infrastructures examined vary considerably, encompassing drinking water systems, energy projects, and transportation infrastructures. As such, this special issue offers insights relevant not only to scholars working on Canadian issues but also to broader debates around development, decolonization, and infrastructure elsewhere.

By bringing together and comparing different infrastructural forms, processes, and narratives, this special issue highlights anthropology's potential to fulfill its comparative mandate—an ambition often constrained by the discipline's reliance on single-site ethnographies and chronic funding limitations. While comparison remains foundational to human cognition and anthropological reasoning, its role in contemporary research is debated (for example, Fox and Gingrich 2002; Miller et al. 2017). Sanjek (1998, 193) identified comparison, along with ethnography and contextualization, as one part of the "anthropological triangle." Fox and Gingrich (2002) further distinguish cognitive, implicit/methodological, and explicit/epistemological dimensions of comparative practice. They advocate for "problem-oriented, theory-inspired" approaches that produce insights through reflexive contextual analysis. More recently, Candea (2019) has described comparison as "the impossible method," emphasizing its conceptual tensions. In this spirit, this special issue contributes to current debates by offering contextually grounded and theoretically engaged perspectives on infrastructure in Canada.

Comparison enables us to recognize how infrastructures are embedded within and shaped by enduring colonial and capitalist power structures. Several contributions to this issue address how infrastructures function as tools of domination, as sites of resistance, and as spaces for reimagining futures. Carly Dokis, in collaboration with the Dokis First Nation in Ontario, shows how water infrastructures and governance systems are entangled in ongoing colonial processes that both subjugate Indigenous peoples and blame them for water insecurity on reserves. Her community-based ethnographic approach highlights how infrastructures materialize bureaucratic rationalities while also becoming sites of critique and contestation. Similarly, Susanna Gartler and Susan Crate explore Indigenous relationships to permafrost among Inuvialuit and Gwich'in

land users and knowledge holders in the Northwest Territories. Their findings demonstrate that permafrost is not only an ecological foundation but also an infrastructural one—integral to culture, mobility, and livelihoods—and that its degradation transforms everyday life, revealing locally grounded ways of living with change.

Community-based adaptation and critical engagement with infrastructures are also central to other contributions. Giuseppe Amatulli examines how energy infrastructures in Northern British Columbia articulate material and discursive formations of development, policy, and local governance. His article illustrates how infrastructures are simultaneously technical, social, and political objects—planning devices through which future development is imagined—whose meaning and function shift over time and across different scales. Anna Bettini analyzes the politics of renewable energy transition in Alberta, focusing on the proliferation of solar and wind projects. She examines how the visibility and invisibility of energy infrastructures influence public understanding but also affective and narrative attachments, revealing tensions between environmental ideas and local experiences. Similarly, Kaylia Little's narrative, perception-based study in Iqaluit addresses the critical importance of infrastructural reliability in remote northern communities. Introducing the notions of relative reliability and unreliability, she shows how energy infrastructures are experienced as both fragile and normalized—essential to daily life yet continually negotiated amid uncertain futures.

Transport infrastructures provide a further lens into these dynamics. Katrin Schmid's study of airport runways in Nunavut, inspired by Anna Tsing's concept of friction, explores the disjunctures between residents' aspirations and infrastructural realities. She challenges teleological narratives of infrastructure as straightforward vehicles of improvement and highlights the need to envision Nunavummi-centred futures grounded in local experiences of mobility and constraint. Philipp Budka's article on transport infrastructures in Northern Manitoba similarly highlights the social embeddedness of infrastructural systems. Through the lenses of disruption, entanglement, and change, Budka examines how breakdowns in logistical networks catalyze shifts in ownership, governance, and local agency, illustrating how infrastructures are always situated within broader socio-political and historical fields. Together, these studies demonstrate that infrastructures are lived, contested, and repurposed in ways that defy simple developmentalist logics.

Drawing on these diverse cases, this special issue examines infrastructures not merely as technical objects but as historical, political, and relational processes. Contributors highlight how infrastructure development in Canada has been shaped by Eurocentric standards, technocratic fantasies, and capitalist imperatives, marginalizing Indigenous knowledge and social organization (Murrey 2023). Often defined as embodiments of global standards detached from local contexts, these infrastructures align with capitalist expansion and colonial agendas, reinforcing external norms and priorities (Lammer and Thiemann 2024). To decolonize infrastructure requires challenging these epistemological and material inheritances. As Mignolo (2009) and Chari (2018) argue, it demands a fundamental shift away from the assumption that Western models of development offer universal solutions. Instead, infrastructures should be reconceived as relational and situated practices, rooted in specific social worlds and oriented towards the public good.

This also means recognizing that infrastructures do not have to serve colonial or extractive purposes. As Kipfer (2018) reminds us, resisting infrastructures that enable resource extraction can build solidarities across multiple sites of struggle. Infrastructures can be reimagined as "alimentary infrastructures"—life-giving systems designed for community sustenance rather than capital accumulation (LaDuke and Cowen 2020, 245). This requires not only challenging dominant narratives but also building alternative infrastructures that foster socio-ecological resilience and justice. As Appel (2019) shows, the myths of global infrastructural superiority often mask systemic inequalities and failures attributed to local conditions. Decolonizing infrastructures thus involves reclaiming design, financing, and governance processes to serve collective needs and ecological futures (Pasternak et al. 2023).

This special issue examines infrastructures as dynamic sites of social, political, and material negotiation, aiming to illuminate how they mediate power, possibility, and resistance in Canada today. By comparatively analyzing diverse infrastructures—spanning water, energy, and transportation systems—this issue reframes infrastructures not as neutral or purely technical systems but as entangled in histories of settler colonialism, regional inequality, and capitalist development. Contributors explore how these systems condition social and ecological relations, mediate aspirations, and become key terrains of contestation. From large-scale megaprojects to suspended plans and everyday practices of maintenance and repair, the issue highlights how infrastructures are implicated in struggles over development, sovereignty, and future-making.

While grounded in the Canadian context, the insights offered here resonate beyond, providing analytical tools for understanding how infrastructures shape, and are shaped by, global struggles for justice, decolonization, and Indigenous self-determination. This special issue invites critical reflection on how infrastructures can be reimagined as vital sites for building more just, relational, and sustainable futures, challenging their role as extensions of colonial-capitalist expansion.

As a concluding reflection that deepens these comparative insights, the issue closes with a commentary by Anna Soer, who reflects on these contributions from the perspective of northern and Indigenous experiences of infrastructure. Her synthesis highlights how the articles collectively reveal infrastructures as both instruments of governance and potential forces of transformation. By emphasizing the affective and geographical dimensions that cut across the case studies—from the relational politics of water and permafrost to the emotional geographies of energy and transport—Soer underscores how infrastructures connect governance, emotion, and everyday life. Her remarks reinforce the issue's central argument: that infrastructures are never neutral systems but *forces motrices*, mediating tensions between state rationalities and local agency, between colonial legacies and decolonial possibilities. They invite us to approach infrastructure as both an analytical lens and a political horizon, revealing the narratives through which more just and sustainable futures are imagined.

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