

# The common(s) denominator: oil and water on a common river

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In the first two weeks of September 2014, the SeaChange Journey, consisting of a flotilla of hand-made paper mache canoes journeyed the improbable waters of the Hudson River in the US, from Troy to Manhattan, New York weaving together stories of resistance and resilience on a voyage to the People’s Climate March in New York City. The crew adopted the motto, “We All Live Downstream”, attempting to create an activism of resistance against the transportation of fracked crude oil that expanded political space for a discourse around the commons. It was chosen because water is an accessible inroad to a discourse of the commons. It is easy to understand that all waters are connected – they circulate, infiltrate, rain, freeze and flow throughout the ages and throughout our bodies. All rivers flow to the ocean – what we do to the water, we do to ourselves. Looking at the SeaChange Journey as a case study of activism that enacts a frame of water-as-commons, this article will explore how such strategic positioning of “the commons denominator” allows for the framing of local conflicts in a global context, positions the protection of water as a proactive rather than defensive struggle,

and consequently widens political space for participatory and democratic processes of local autonomy.

The SeaChange Journey, inspired by **A Movement Without Demands**, a strategic critique of Occupy-WallStreet, aimed to embody the concept of “water-as-commons” where the commons is recovered as an inspiring tool that has the potential to both encapsulate and articulate social and environmental justice visioning:<sup>1</sup>

*...what if the environmental movement against hydraulic fracturing were to envision a national campaign to declare the groundwaters a commons? This not only would prevent gas companies from putting at risk the lives of millions, but it would immediately empower water management boards elected by local communities with unprecedented powers. How would these governing bodies be constituted and how would they be run? Following this logic, we may also ask similar questions in regard to education, healthcare, and the production of energy.*

**Commons Denominator**  
**(noun):** A theoretical framing that allows for the mutually reinforcing articulation of disparate specific struggles in the Anthropocene through an expansive frame of “the commons”.

**Anthropocene (noun):**  
The current epoch of unprecedented anthropogenic planetary change.

<sup>1</sup> Dean and Deseriis. “A Movement Without Demands?” Possible Futures. January 3, 2012. See also, Architektur, An. “On the Commons: A Public Interview with Massimo De Angelis and Stavros Stavrides.” E-Flux. Web. 2010. And also, De Angelis, “Reflections on Alternatives, commons and communities or building a new world from the bottom up.” The Commoner N. 6. Winter 2003. And also, De Angelis, “The Tragedy of the Capitalist Commons.” Turbulence 2008. web.



Although the commons discourse stems from century-old land struggles, it is extremely suggestive applying this same argumentation to current struggles, articulating “resistance” as protective and caring acts of the commons we are intrinsically a part of: intellectual commons (education, copyleft, low-carbon technology transfer, wikileaks); democratic commons (right to assembly, free-speech, right to protest, right to ideological diversity); social (health care, cultural institutions, public space, internet); and ecological (water, soil, atmosphere, biodiversity). This articulation emboldens a mutually reinforcing rhizomatic structure whereby each front enhances and fertilizes the discourse of the others, rather than framing resistance as an ever-increasing list of often disarticulated struggles against something. By embracing “the commons denominator” in the context of global ecological and economic crisis, the suggestion is a counter-narrative to neoliberalism that can be mutually reinforcing and cumulative, seeding the ground to encourage an inevitable ecological transition towards localised autonomy. Movements around the world have begun to declare, “One struggle many fronts, one front many struggles.”

## Oil and Water on a Two Way River

*Our paper canoes sat low in the water – you could feel each wave like a new land rising beneath you, pulling you up and into some improbable future. For two weeks in September I lived an unlikely paper story: voyaging the two-way waters of the tidal Hudson River with a band of fellow dreamers*

*on canoes we had built from recycled paper. We saw the mist that rose over the river at sunrise and the steam that rose from Indian Point’s nuclear cooling tower; we heard the sound of a stork’s wide wings flapping above our heads and the warning whistle of explosive train-units as they hurtled past traffic intersections we learned the surface of the water and understood in its depths what might be lost: New York State is gambling its entire River: high stakes for another decade of living a dying American dream.*

Our journey began in Troy, New York, chosen for its forgotten history of paperboat making rather than its name’s epic connotations. Our route followed the path of a “virtual pipeline” of crude oil transportation by Global Partners and Buckeye Partners LP, Fortune 500 corporations focusing on oil distribution in the Northeastern US. The crude oil is transported by a series of trains, barges and trucks from the fracked Bakken fields of North Dakota across the country, through Albany and Newburgh, and down past the New York Metropolitan area for refining. Currently 40 times more crude oil is already being transported down the Hudson River than four years ago.<sup>2</sup>

A series of proposals have been filed that would give permissions to build new crude oil transfer stations allowing both fracked crude oil and tar sands from Alberta to be processed in Newburgh/New Windsor and Albany, then loaded onto barges and sent downstream. “The problem we’re facing is that with the tremendous and increasing volume of crude oil being

<sup>2</sup> Gallay, Paul. “Getting Real about Growing Threats to Clean Water.” “Hudson River at Risk: Riverkeeper Annual Report.” 2014.

transported throughout the Hudson Valley, a spill is inevitable," stated Kate Hudson of Riverkeeper, a local river defender organisation. Drinking water for over 250,000 people comes from the Hudson River – water is a right, not a privilege; it is the ecological ground for all life, not an unregulated highway for corporate profits. In December 2012, an oil tanker ran aground, carrying about as much oil as was spilled in the Exxon Valdez disaster, and recently New York State has seen at least four derailments in the span of just three months.<sup>3</sup> A spill anywhere along this "virtual pipeline" would mean disaster for the river. The oil that is not spilled and is burned means disaster for our climate. The result is a lose-lose situation.

On the very first day of the journey, local residents in Albany showed us where the long black trains are parked just yards from the apartments and playgrounds of a low-income African American neighbourhood, a clear demonstration of environmental racism. Railway workers call these "bomb trains" because the crude oil in the railcars are pressurised along the journey, becoming volatile and explosive. An explosion in Albany, like the one in Lac Megantic, Quebec in 2013, could mean up to 5,000 dead. A retired MetroNorth worker told us such a disaster was only a matter of time because austerity measures and privatisation reduced funds for maintenance of this century old rail infrastructure. These time bombs running along underfunded and rotting rail infrastructure are an accident waiting to happen. The under-resourced emergency response teams, also facing cuts, were clear that they would be unable to adequately respond to a rail explosion.



3 Mouawad, Jad (1994). "Bakken Crude, Rolling Through Albany." The New York Times. February 27. [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/28/business/energy-environment/bakken-crude-rolling-through-albany.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/28/business/energy-environment/bakken-crude-rolling-through-albany.html?_r=0)

4 Fallon, Scott. "Oil boom boosts flow along the Hudson, and fears of spill risk." March 30, 2014. NorthJersey.com

*Railway workers call these “bomb trains” because the crude oil in the railcars are pressurised along the journey, becoming volatile and explosive.*

One of the feasts organised by SeaChange followed a presentation about the risks of the bomb trains. A grim presentation was delivered at the Newburgh Boat Club by Riverkeeper. Kayaks and long rowing canoes hung above our heads as images of explosions and charred railcars graced the screen. The presentation was interrupted by the screaming train whistles as they flew past intersections just yards from where we were sitting. Many of those in the audience live with the threat of this danger on a daily basis.

After the presentation we opened the large garage door and spilled out into the sunset riverside, the water was throwing orange light over the blue waves. The picnic tables were laden with a potlatch, and we sat eating and talking together. As dusk melted into night we saw the Aphrodite oil barge, with 9.6 million barrels of crude in her belly, swinging like an ominous pendulum up and down the river at regular intervals; just one part of the 25 million gallons of oil that makes its weekly journey down the Hudson River.<sup>4</sup> The name, Aphrodite: goddess of love, beauty, pleasure, and procreation – scared us in its irony, just as the names of the proposed fracked gas pipelines that cross the Hudson are stolen from the communities who inhabited these lands and to this day protect them: Algonquin and Iroquois. The enclosures of neoliberal imperialism attempts to consume even our history, leaving its own singular mythology in its place.

As we neared the end of the journey, we caught an evening glimpse of Manhattan, its lights shone far in the blue distance like a cubist landscape. For three

days we quietly approached it, our paddles gliding into the shimmering water – the buildings growing slowly in scale until they towered over our small paper boats. We saw not only a city perched on the end of a river, but also a city at the end of a massive and hidden infrastructure. What had been invisible was suddenly all around us, we saw the combustion behind the illuminated and the zooming taxis and bright-light billboards of Times Square. Manhattan no longer seemed like some autonomous beast, rather an ageing boiler that requires constant fuelling.

Inside the skyscrapers, there are businessmen making grave gambles with things that do not belong to them. From their corner offices they privatise profits and collectivise risks – scraping the sky for personal profit. The grandiose myth of this city-that-never-sleeps requires a critical revisioning when understanding the risks required to keep it lit-up. Hurricane Sandy was a wakeup call as it darkened this city-that-never-sleeps. Approached from the water, New York City does not seem so invincible. It hangs low on the water, inviting a rogue wave to take a shortcut from the East River across to the brackish Hudson. The whole downtown was flooded by such waters only two years ago, darkening the skyline like a stain.

## **(There is no) Return to Dry Land**

Soon after the SeaChange voyage arrived in Manhattan we were invited to partake in an Indigenous water ceremony of thanks and welcoming



*All rivers flow to the same singular ocean, what we do to the water, we do to ourselves.*

If you pay close attention on a tidal river, there are moments when you can feel the sea change beneath you. A split second when the river hovers, unmoving, neither ebbing nor flowing. Your boat lingers in a moment, but only for a moment. By the next time your paddle hits the water everything is in motion again, slowly at first, but surely. We are all in this pivotal moment as a global community. Whether we decide to push on against the current that is flowing increasingly against us, or we change course and let the wise currents pull us easily into a future that wants to be. We know this world is changing – chemically, politically, economically, socially, and physically – how we react to those changes is the only thing we still control.

## **Oil and Water Don't Mix**

After the welcoming ceremony was over, a glass bottle full of water from the fracked lands of North Dakota remained. It shattered light like prisms onto the wooden pier; no one knew what to do with this water – there was no protocol in place for pollution. Oil and water do not mix, the water is invaded, violated by the oil, conquered, infected, and envenomed. A single drop of oil may render up to 25 litres of fresh water undrinkable. Pollution is inherently imperialist, a non-consensual invasion of a fluid commons. A single fracking well may produce up to a million gallons of highly contaminated water.<sup>5</sup>

The SeaChange Voyage was conceived to engage with this conceptual understanding of the defence of the expanded Commons. The medium was the message: the boats floated upon the very commons they protected, their free movement mirroring the endlessly moving waters they travelled. Water was chosen as the most tangible and accessible means to embody the fluidity of the social and ecological commons

based on shared access. One does not pollute *their* water, but *our* water, and *all* water. All rivers flow to the same singular ocean, what we do to the water, we do to ourselves. The toxic cocktail of chemicals used in fracking are not merely injected into the ground, but injected into a complex closed-loop cycle, that circulates and nurtures the entire planet, infinitely like the blood pumping through our arteries. The threats that fracking poses to infecting subterranean aquifers holds increasing importance as the impacts of climate change begins to take a stronger hold on our planetary systems. Additionally, each wave of the oncoming crises, each drought and flood, will re-raise the question of access and governance of this most basic resource. Whether we respond with increased enclosures or increased commoning depends upon how successfully we have asserted both our right to access and the necessity of protection embedded in and understanding of relational interdependence.

Three days later the streets of Manhattan were filled with 400,000 people marching against climate change. People trickled into the canyons of Manhattan

5 Clean Water Action: (<http://www.cleanwateraction.org/page/fracking>) [Last access: Month day, 2015]



to form a river of bodies, flowing, chanting, and believing. Birds and butterfly kites on strings danced above migrant and undocumented workers, housing justice organisers held photos of their communities that had been devastated by Superstorm Sandy, union workers cheered from a float with solar panels, domestic workers from the Philippines tired of cleaning up others' messes walked with a giant inflatable mop, scientists marched with a large blackboard explaining "the science is clear". Inside the People's Climate March an unprecedented diversity of issues found a place under the wide umbrella provided by the frame of the climate crisis. From across the nation, and the world, people were pulled together by the gravity of hope.

The day after the People's Climate March, 3,000 people returned to the streets dressed in blue to #FloodWallStreet, where 100 people were arrested in direct action to prevent the economic causes of climate change. The frame "FloodWallStreet" was conceived specifically to make connections between the impacts of climate change (Hurricane Sandy and

rising sea-levels), the financial causes of the climate crisis (Wall Street), and the collectivism of our resistance (hacking the "OccupyWallstreet" meme). The framing of an unpermitted action that linked the cause and effect with the resistance contained an understanding of climate change as a symptom of a politics of dissociation. Instead of gathering outside the United Nations where world leaders were meeting, the organisers shifted the frame to visibilise the corruption of the process by corporate interests rather than making demands of the process itself. By collectively articulating, and organising around, our common stake and responsibility, the focal issue became the processes by which decisions are being made, rather than simply the decisions themselves.

Within a framing of "the commons denominator", even the state violence in response to life-affirming disruptions of destruction may also be articulated as an enclosure of the commons. State repression of protests, evictions of public encampments, censoring, police brutality, and intimidation may be framed as

*A drop of oil falls to the ground during a rainstorm. It hits the wet pavement, infecting the water around it with colour. The colours swirl into the gutter and drop "away".*

incursions into the democratic commons. Ten of those arrested during FloodWallStreet brought a “necessity defence” to court, claiming their illegal actions were necessary because of the urgency of the situation. While Judge Robert Mandelbaum acknowledged that climate change causes “generalised and continuing harm,” he acquitted the defendants instead on the grounds of the 1st amendment based on the right to carry their message directly to its intended recipients.<sup>6</sup> As the Anthropocene – the current epoch of unprecedented anthropogenic planetary change – expands the understanding of a universalised “global front line”, our energies to support imprisoned comrades and fight legal battles in the frame of the democratic commons, can shine the light on abuse of power that further reinforces this cohesive argument. Instead of viewing these actions as dividing movement energies towards defensive legal battles, but rather to see it as an offensive resistance.

## Water Struggles Rising

The “progress” of neoliberalism has shrunk our world. Globalisation of governance imposed by the World Bank, NAFTA, WTO, more recently emissions trading schemes and now the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) have expanded the enclosure of the commons to an unprecedented scale. We have been backed into a corner of neoliberalism’s global enclosure.

In the early months of 2000, the streets of Bolivia were flooded with people committed to protect their rights

to water. Conditions on a World Bank loan required the privatisation of Cochabamba’s water utilities, causing huge rate hikes. The agreement that gave Bechtel, an American Engineering company, the right to wells and even rainwater collection was in danger of falling into foreign private hands. The people resisted the violence provoked by the state and successfully expelled Bechtel. Bolivia’s water struggles are examples of victories for self-governance of water, in addition, the process opened political space for further victories around the commons.

Framing environmental struggles as commons is and has been occurring in many parts of the world. Notably, communities resisting mining in Peru and across Latin America are rejecting the failed promises of prosperity and are reframing their actions as struggles to pro-water under slogans such as “Agua es Vida” (Water is life) or “El agua vale mas que oro” (Water is worth more than gold). In December 2014, during the UNFCCC COP 20 in Lima, Peru, the city centre was plastered not with posters about “climate change” but with handmade posters of a woman with her fist in the air declaring: “We are a river, not just drops,” the graffiti scrawled across the city walls declaring: “Agua Sí, Oro No!” (Water yes, Gold no!), “Agua es vida” (Water is life), “Baua Resiste!” (Resiste Baua), “El agua no se vende” (Water is not for sale). The “Marcha del Agua” (March of Water) in 2012 brought communities in unified resistance together, marching across the country, struggling for local and common rights. By articulating “We are a river, not just drops” the movement identified with the medium it was protecting,

<sup>6</sup> Nathanson, Rebecca. “Climate Change Activists Consider Necessity Defense.” *The New Yorker*. April 11, 2015

acknowledging the fundamental relationship between the two and emphasising the social construction of society. Furthermore, by stating “Water Yes, Gold No!” the movements embedded inside an anti-capitalist critique with a deft articulation of the protection of nature, and further, the dependence upon this protection.

Various movements across Latin America (recently adopted by anti-fracking movements in the UK) are calling themselves “defenders” or “protectors” of water, rather than “activists” or “protesters”. While in some places, the “anti-globalisation” movement accepted the dominant framing imposed upon them as “alternative”, many current movements are beginning to assert authority by articulating their actions as defensive acts of collective caring. In this context, the protection of water is expressed as protecting life in nature, including our own lives. It is thus the incursions into this defined commons that becomes the “anti”: anti-democratic, anti-people, anti-water and anti-life; rather than allowing resistance to be the adversarial actor and framed as “anti” (anti-fracking, anti-pollution, etc.). In this way, movements shift from an adversarial framing that pits them against an “enemy” (“anti-fracking”, “anti-airport”, “Stop Chevron”, etc.). Such dichotomous relationships only reinforce the legitimacy of their position – for to hear two sides of a story makes it seem like there is an even debate. However, if instead of such contrarian framing we adopt an expansive framing around common struggles, our goal changes. This widening frame allows movements to broaden the spectrum of participation and consequently re-structures the debate from *what*

issues are at stake and *what* decisions are being made to *how* these decisions are being made, and *who* is making these decisions.

A commons discourse allows the climate justice movement to frame resistance from a place of compassion; we are angry not at the banker’s passionate greed but rather at his apathy – that one feels so disconnected they can nonchalantly condemn an entire river ecosystem to potential toxic torture. As water, and thus life, is articulated as a collective right, the polluters must confront this discourse by ever more forcefully proclaiming their own rights to *all* water. As seen in Bolivia, neoliberalism seeks an extreme enclosure of the commons so complete that it attempts to reach out and claim even raindrops as they fall to the ground. By asserting the rights to water, rather than just their resistance to privatisation, ecological defence framed around the language of the commons allows movements to embed proposals for alternative systems into their opposition.

## Inspired by a common discourse

The SeaChange Journey was able to unite a diversity of struggles under its slogan “We All Live Downstream.” The project chose a specific issue (transportation of fracked crude oil) as a focus, but chose to organise around the wider frame of commons. This combination of localised struggle in a frame of “the commons denominator” functioned because “[commons and community]... are not elements of a fixed ideology, a dogma that we have to

subscribe to. They provide both an intellectual and political horizon that we can enrich through our practice and thinking in the context of concrete struggles.”<sup>7</sup> Whereas an overtly “anti-fracking” frame may have fallen victim to NIMBYism, which would have focused on the protection of a particular river from a single threat, however, the wider framing around water as a public commons held an intrinsic critique of “Not Here, Not Anywhere.”

Inside this wide frame, the journey brought together a diversity of struggles that took part in organising feasts and gatherings: from local groups advocating for the improvement of local wastewater treatment plants, to groups resisting new electrical infrastructure construction, from communities preparing for sea-level rise on a tidal river, to environmentalists protecting endangered species. Along the SeaChange Voyage still further intersectionalities were found between communities fighting racialised environmental injustice in Albany, with the dangerous symptoms of austerity and neglect in the decaying rail infrastructure, and the lack of disaster response teams, with centenarian and community-based boating associations at risk of losing their boathouses to luxury hotels, and with fisherfolk who cannot eat their catch. Thousands from this diverse myriad of interests found a place inside “the commons denominator”, expanding the scope of access by expanding the articulation of interdependence. The diversity of the struggles involved expanded the understanding of localised water struggles as intrinsic parts of a global issue and helped each participating party to view their own issue as part of a wider struggle.

As we acclimatise to life in the Anthropocene we can see the scale of the symptoms of an imperialist world view all around us, indeed we can no longer see anything else – the very air *through* which we see is itself changed. Facing this common and global symptom, we are faced with the need to heal the root causes of the climate crisis that stretch back further than even the coal fires of the industrial revolution and the enclosure of the commons that preceded it, and are embedded in a worldview of disassociation.<sup>8</sup> Inside this global frame, we can increasingly structure resistance around the root causes the climate crisis. In this process we pivot from a “movement” to a “movement of movements” – articulating and reinforcing a global social commons through our very resistance. The globally-localised and common crisis of climate change has the potential to allow all of us to understand even the structure of our resistance as an articulation of the commons we have lost, and thus our organising, even if delocalised, is itself a solution to rebuilding the social networks associated with collective space. By focusing on the social structure of the commons we expand the traditional place-based commons discourse to be instead focused on the inter-relationality of social relations (human, non-human, and resources) connected to space. When this understanding is placed inside the frame of the climate crisis, the shared commons becomes global and humans as internal constituents, rather than external actors.

<sup>7</sup> Merchant, Caroline. (1990). *Death of Nature. Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution*. New York: HarperCol

<sup>8</sup> Lingbaugh, Peter and Rediker, Marcus. *The Many Headed Hydra*. Beacon Press, Boston. 2000

frame for social movements in the Anthropocene. The scale of the climate crisis provides a narrative frame that is all-inclusive, for indeed, all of our world rests inside this same thin atmosphere. By articulating this expansive frame around its relational inter-dependence “the commons denominator” has the ability to frame the processes that allow for, and physically defend, pollution as incursions into the democratic commons while demonstrate how the act of polluting is a non-consensual incursion, generated by a dissociation and disconnect into a public domain. Furthermore, social organisation around such frames functions to reinforce the social commons, and allows resistance to function as a solution through the diverse community

it creates. Thus, such a frame embodies an alternative proposition *inside and intrinsic to* a discourse of resistance. Just as the medium upon which the fragile boats of the SeaChange flotilla travelled was itself the message, so the social struggles, organising, and resistance may themselves become the container to grow inter-relational commons.

Each day upon the SeaChange Journey the voyagers wrote a new stanza of a song that documented the travels and relationships, the song grew longer each day. The song helped us to paddle in unison and hold true to the course, and for the joy of being in small and fragile paper vessels in a rough and changing world, on an uncertain river in uncertain times.

*“All waters are connected  
Our struggles are one and the same.  
We rise faster than oceans,  
For these are epic days.”*

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