

**PRIORITISING INDIGENOUS REPRESENTATIONS OF  
GEOPOWER: THE CASE OF TULITA, NORTHWEST  
TERRITORIES, CANADA.**

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## ABSTRACT

Recent calls from progressive, subaltern and postcolonial geopoliticians to move geopolitical scholarship away from its Western ontological bases have argued that more ethnographic studies centred on peripheral and dispossessed geographies need to be undertaken in order to integrate peripheralised agents and agencies in dominant ontologies of geopolitics. This thesis follows these calls. Through empirical data collected during a period of five months of fieldwork undertaken between October 2014 and March 2015, it investigates the ways through which an Indigenous community of the Canadian Arctic, Tulita (located in the Northwest Territories' Sahtu region) represents geopower. It suggests a semiotic reading of these representations in order to take the agency of other-than/more-than-human beings into account. In doing so, it identifies the ontological bases through which geopolitics can be *indigenised*. Drawing from Dene animist ontologies, it indeed introduces the notion of a place-contingent *speculative geopolitics*. Two overarching argumentative lines are pursued. First, this thesis contends that geopower operates through metamorphic refashionings of the material forms of, and signs associated with, space and place. Second, it infers from this that through this transformational process, geopower is able to create the conditions for *alienating* but also *transcending* experiences and meanings of place to emerge. It argues that this movement between conflictual and progressive understandings is dialectical in nature. In addition to its conceptual suggestions, this thesis makes three empirical contributions. First, it confirms that settler geopolitical narratives of sovereignty assertion in the North cannot be disentangled from capitalist and industrial political-economic processes. Second, it shows that these processes, and the geopolitical visions that subtend them, are materialised in space via the extension of

the urban fabric into Indigenous lands. Third, it demonstrates that by assembling space ontologically in particular ways, geopower establishes (and entrenches) a geopolitical distinction between living/sovereign (or governmentalised) spaces and nonliving/bare spaces (or spaces of nothingness).

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

NC	Northwest Company
HBC	Hudson's Bay Company
NWT	Northwest Territories
MVP	Mackenzie Valley Pipeline
SDMCLCA	Sahtu Dene and Métis Comprehensive Land Claims Agreement
GNWT	Government of the Northwest Territories
SLWB	Sahtu Land and Water Board
IANDC	Indian Affairs and Northern Development Canada
SLUP	Sahtu Land Use Plan
GUZ	General Use Zones
SMZ	Special Management Zones
CZ	Conservation Zones
PCI	Proposed Conservation Initiatives
SLUPB	Sahtu Land Use Planning Board
SRRB	Sahtu Renewable Resources Board
SLWB	Sahtu Land and Water Board
NEB	National Energy Board
MVEIRB	Mackenzie Valley Environmental Impact Review Board
ARI	Aurora Research Institute
ACUNS	Association of Canadian Universities for Northern Studies
IASSA	International Arctic Social Science Association
MVFLP	Mackenzie Valley Fibre Link Project

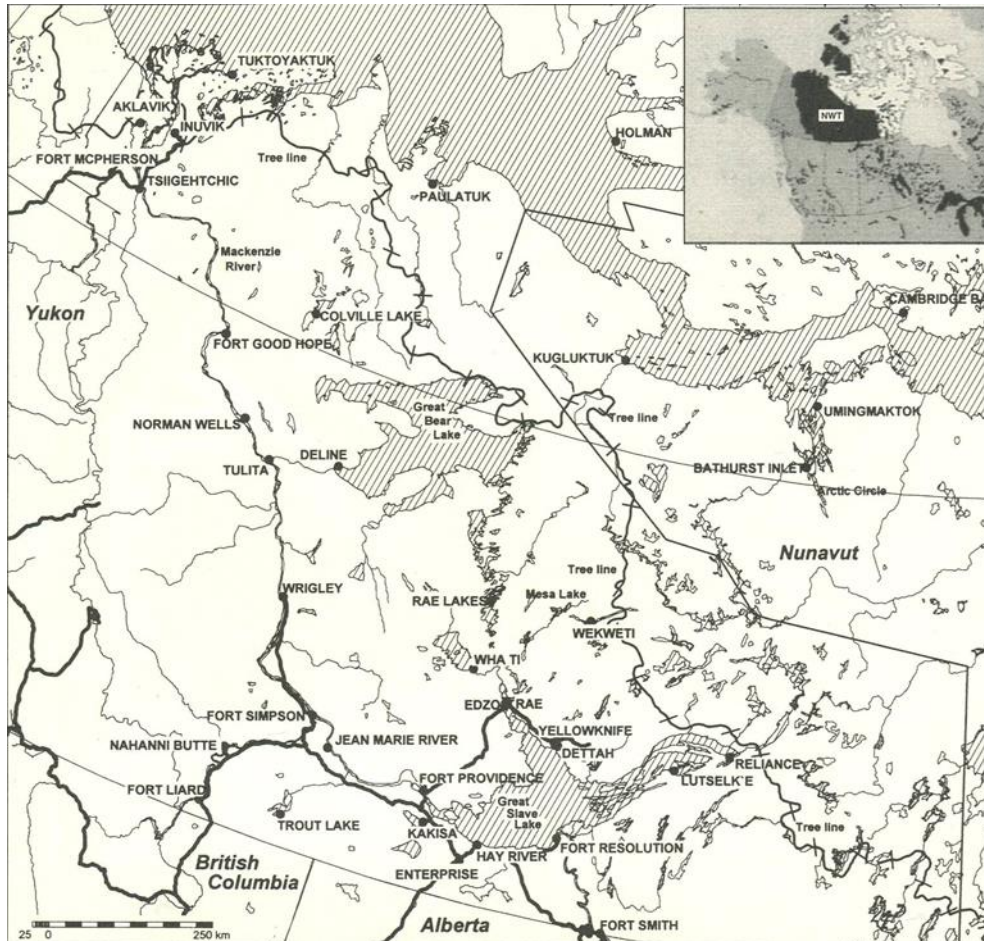
GOC	Government of Canada
CBC	Canada Broadcasting Corporation
CRI	Community Readiness Initiative
CR	Canadian Rangers
CNDA	Canadian Northern Development Agency
ENR	Environment and Natural Resources department (GNWT)
RCMP	Royal Canadian Mounted Police
MRC	Mackay Range Development Corporation
A/IBA	Access / Impacts Benefits Agreements
ITI	Industry, Tourism and Investment department (GNWT)
NWTHC	Northwest Territories Housing Corporation (GNWT)

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**Figure 1**

Map of the Northwest Territories (Helm, 2000:xxii)  
 Courtesy of the Prince of Wales Northern Heritage Centre.  
 Originally published with the title “Northwest Territories, 1999”.



**Photograph 1**

Tulita's historical residential area viewed from Blueberry Hill Drive overlooking the southern end of Bear Rock Drive, November 2014 (source: author)

## INTRODUCTION

### **Setting the scene: From Hyperborea to the “scramble for the Arctic”**

On his way towards the “Hyperborean Sea [Arctic Ocean]”, Alexander Mackenzie became the first occidental explorer to encounter a group of Sahtu Dene. First contact took place somewhere near what became Fort Franklin, later renamed Délı̄ne by its Sahtuotine inhabitants<sup>1</sup>. The event happened in the early morning of 5 July 1789 and at the time, Mackenzie did not think much of his meeting with these “natives”, only that they appeared frightfully afraid of outsiders and desperately starved and exhausted (Mackenzie, 1911).

His 1789 exploration campaign, like most expeditions of this kind at the time, was funded by the Northwest Company (NC). The NC specialised in the trading of animal fur and at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, it was already in intense competition with the Hudson’s Bay Company. It had to find new fur-rich territories to ensure its survival. Mackenzie’s expedition was therefore also a commercial endeavour that participated in the struggle that took place across the Canadian far North between the NC and its competitors.

However, Mackenzie’s journey, and those of his successors had a far more important geopolitical legacy. They gave birth to a new geographical narrative called Canada, an relatedly to the idea of a *Canadian North*. This narrative not only replaced those of the

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<sup>1</sup> ‘People of the Great Bear Lake’.

tribes Indigenous<sup>2</sup> to this region but also forced upon them, and the wider Arctic region, a different history (Cameron, 2015). For example, in *How the Mackenzie River Was Made*, John Tetso, a Slavey Dene from the area of Fort Smith recounted a creation myth pertaining to the Deh Cho river (the Dene name for the Mackenzie river). He explained that long after):

“The great Master... made a big river for us to drink from, to fish in, and travel on... White men started to come into the country, discovering lakes and rivers, and naming them. One such white man came and got the river named after him. (Tetso, [1967] 2003: 22-23).”

As can be inferred from the above quotation, stories of discoveries and exploration like Mackenzie’s also helped solidify Canada’s racial identity (Cameron, 2015; Baldwin et al., 2011). Journals of intrepid white men venturing into the far reaches of the cold North indeed became a structuring part of the country’s national history (Cameron, 2015). It is also through expeditions like Mackenzie’s that the colonisation of the middle and high Arctic began to take concrete shape, and with it, the exploitation of its natural resources (Kulchyski, 2005a; Cameron, 2015).

From a geopolitical perspective, it can thus also be said that since first contact, the nature of the relationship between the Occident and Indigenous peoples living in the

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<sup>2</sup> I understand *Indigenous* as peoples who share a “descent from original inhabitants of a region prior to the arrival of settlers who have since become the dominant population”, as well as “political marginality resulting in poverty, limited access to services and absence of protections against unwanted development”, a “deeper attachment to the land in which they live” and to their cultural identities, “distinct from a dominant population” (Anaya, 1996, quoted in Niezen, 2003:19-20). Here, I also follow Mi’kmawa scholar Marie Battiste in acknowledging that terms like Indigenous, Natives, Indians, Aboriginal and First Nations “are not terms that the [Indigenous] People call themselves for most have their own terms” and that as such there are tensions around their use (Battiste, 2013:13-14). Here, it is not my intent to offend, nor is it to debate the merits of using one over the other. I am merely using them for lack of better ways to describe a common experience. Furthermore, since it has become a “common protocol to capitalise Aboriginal as it is a nationality much in the same way as other groups are respected with capitalising”, I choose to do the same for Indigenous (Battiste, 2013:13-14).

Northwest Territories (NWT) has been primarily marked by what Immanuel Wallerstein described as “geopolitical cycles of hegemony” (2009:19)<sup>3</sup>. Recent debates as regards to a potential new international scramble for the Arctic’s resources (Craciun, 2009; Sale and Potapov, 2010; Dodds and Nuttall, 2016; Carlson et al., 2013; see also: Dodds, 2010a,b; Anderson A, 2009) are arguably only the latest examples of this long-term historical trend. In parallel, or perhaps sustained by these grand cycles, the commodification of the Circumpolar North’s natures and peoples continues unabated (Nuttall, 2015:107; Cameron and Levitan, 2014; See also: Heynen and Robins, 2005; Hébert, 2015; Bridge, 2017).

It can thus be argued, following postcolonial literary scholar Graham Huggan, that: “the language of geopolitics constructs the Arctic... The Arctic –however defined- [to] some extent still is, a colonised region” (Huggan, 2016, pp. 4-5). Yet, as also reminded by Huggan, “[although] not all areas of the Arctic have been formally colonised... Those that have, have not been colonised in the same way” (ibid). However, the variegated nature of these Indigenous Arctics remains desperately ignored in the currently predominant geopolitical parlance (Powell, 2008; 2010; Powell and Dodds, 2014:10; Dittmer and Larsen, 2010), which tends to favour Western concepts over, say Dene<sup>4</sup> *Inko’n* or Inuit *Sillap* (i.e.: medicine power).

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<sup>3</sup> Cycles of domination over the global geopolitical scene correlated to phases of growth and depression in the capitalist world-economy (Dezzani and Flint, 2015; Brutschina and Schubert, 2016).

<sup>4</sup> I understand *Dene* as a group of Indigenous peoples whose languages share basic similarities and who “make their homes in the drainage basin of the Mackenzie river” (Abel, 2005:xv). In the context of this thesis, *Dene* thus encompasses the following bands: the Gwich’in, Sahtu Dene and Hare (of which the Kasho’gotine, Shutah’gotine, Kaalo’gotine, Sahtu’gotine, are composing groups), Dogrib, Slavey, Chipewyan.

## **Geographies of Sub-Arctic Indigenous peoples: multiple natures, multiple indigeneities**

Arctic<sup>5</sup> Indigenous geographies go beyond the drawing of boundaries along geomorphological features, climate and more generally, biophysical entities. They touch upon the metaphysics of one's being-in-the-world, the very essence of what it entails to be in a place, to know a place, to dwell in it. From an Indigenous perspective, it can thus be argued that there are as many experienced geographies of the Arctic, as many geopolitical Arctics, as there are different conceptions of Indigeneity.

For instance, the nomadic essence of traditional Athapaskan modes of dwelling remains an unsettling element for any attempt to convey their systems of spatialisation through *fixed* orthodox geopolitical terms. Indeed, traditional Athapaskan knowledges and practices draw political frontiers according to magical abilities, spiritual liminality, corporeality and experiential becomings and at the sub-group and group scales, along hunting/trapping/foraging grounds and cultural-linguistic differences (Helm MacNeish, 1956; Vanstone, 1974:44-47). These are by essence dependent on spatial-ecological particularities (such as the availability of renewable resources or local climatic, geomorphological and geological conditions).

In fact, as convincingly argued by Canadian anthropologist Julie Cruikshank, by continuously reshaping narratives about the relationships between human, more-than-

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<sup>5</sup> Dominant understandings of the Arctic refer to lands located north of the tree line (69°N) and those below this demarcation, down to the southern biophysical limit of the boreal forest, are part of the Subarctic region (Sugden, 1982; Nuttall and Callaghan, 2000; Gardner, 1981).

human and other-than-human <sup>6</sup> actors (which include the specific material configurations of a living terrain), Indigenous “oral traditions [have the] potential to subvert imposed boundaries”, including those established through official accounts produced by the state or its agents (2014:235; see also Cruikshank, 2012). In this sense, since these oral traditions tend to rely on dynamic and flexible views that vary according to encounters and experiences with the beings of supernature, their resulting geographies “demand openness to ontological pluralism and multinatures” (Coombes et al., 2014:849), and also to their entanglement with the phenomenological (and relatedly, linguistic) contingencies of place (Thornton, 2008; 2011; Basso, 1996; Mark et al., 2011).

After all, until the advent of the fur trade, Arctic Indigenous Athapaskan traditions did not conceive the earth as an infinite source of inanimate raw materials, nor did they divide it into states, that is sovereign, fixed territorial-political units with clearly identified governments (Vanstone, 1974:43-54; Osgood, 1936:3; Helm MacNeish, 1956). Indigenous Athapaskan ways of knowing view animals, rivers, mountains, lakes or caves as being as much part of human society and politics as they are of immaterial *spirit spaces* (Ridington and Ridington, 2006; Smith DM, 1973; 1998). In Athapaskan traditions, political power derives from physical (via trading, hunting and trapping skills), psychical (through dreams or visions), magical (as medicine power) and spiritual (gifted by spirit animals and peoples) abilities (Helm MacNeish, 1956; Ridington, 1988a; Vanstone, 1974:47-51; 59-69; Smith DM, 2002). The capacity to shift from one form (animal or human) to another is believed to be accessible to all beings irrespective of their geo-corporeal or chrono-corporeal shapes (Vanstone,

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<sup>6</sup> I use other-than-human/more-than-human beings and beings of supernature/Denendeh interchangeably.

1974:63-65). As such, any attempts to investigate Indigeneity (and *inter alia*, Indigenous geographies) from an orthodox geopolitical perspective without seeking at the same time to open geopolitical theory's ontological bases to Indigenous ways of thinking could potentially generate epistemic forms of violence.

### **Canada's Northern orientalism as internal colonialism**

Since, as convincingly suggested by Mohawk anthropologist Audra Simpson, "to speak of Indigeneity is to speak of colonialism and anthropology" (2007:67; See also Radcliffe, 2015), it is possible to argue that the question of Indigeneity also harks back to the political processes through which dominant knowledges about Indigenous peoples are shaped in the West<sup>7</sup>. The question of defining Indigeneity is, in this sense, also related to the issue of representation of subaltern geographies and, as such, to epistemic forms of violence committed against Indigenous peoples (Spivak, 1996). In fact, the very idea of a Canadian *North* can be viewed as a form of internal Orientalism, which:

"Disciplined the diverse and fluid experiences of Indigeneity under fixed labels... [According to this narrative] "authentic Indians" live only in the North and in fact are the North insofar as they are literally seen to embody its dual qualities of savagery-starkness and romantic appeal... The North is Indigenous and therefore a stable referent counterpoised [Against] the myriad changes that characterise the modern urban south." (Dittmer and Larsen, 2010:56)

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<sup>7</sup> I use West/Eurocanada/Occident, Western/EuroCanadian/Occidental interchangeably. These terms are intended to be understood in relation to the dominant postcolonial geopolitical order through which categories like *marginal*, *subaltern*, *Other*, are viewed as such (Coronil, 1996). *Occident* thus refers to the Other's "condition of possibility, its dark side (as in a mirror)" (Coronil, 1996:56). To the extent that Canada is a settler colony, I view it as being part of the wider category Occident/West.

Edward Said explained that ([1978] 1995:25) “Orientalism is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between the Orient and (most of the time) the Occident.”. Thus, surely the distinction between an immutable, wild Indigenous *North* and a modern urban *South* that continues to some extent to structure Canada’s national identity (Dittmer and Larsen, 2010), relies on more than purely discursive or symbolic artefacts. For instance, if geopolitical processes -and the taxonomies that underpin them- cannot be disentangled from the geographical invention of the Arctic by the West, then as noted previously, so is the case for the extraction of natural resources and *inter alia*, industrial processes more generally. This is particularly true for North-American Indigenous peoples whose Indigeneities can also be considered irremediably tied to the “materiality of historical and political experiences” (McNeish, 2015:295), in particular, nation building and access to resources (Lloyd Lee, 2006:79). This contention can be extended to the notions of sovereignty and territory. Use of these ideational frameworks by Indigenous elites in the process-formation of Indigenous political identities and decolonial struggles remains indeed “conceptualised along the state formation spectrum, itself a European derived concept” (Alfred, 2009a:12; see also Shaw K, 2008; Miggelbrink et al., 2013). As such, whilst being subservient to emancipatory goals, they also act as assimilative systems (Alfred, 2009a; Igoe, 2005; Niezen, 2000; 2005; Coulthard, 2014a).

An example of the interweaving of these different phenomena in the Sahtu region is the concept of *Denendeh*. In 1976, the Dene Nation, an organisation created in 1969 to represent the political interests of all Northern Athapaskan First Nations (originally named the Indian Brotherhood of the Northwest Territories), called for the creation of *Denendeh*. This call followed from an attempt by a consortium of resource exploitation

companies supported by the Canadian government to build a gas pipeline across Dene traditional lands. In 1976, a public inquiry led by Justice Thomas Berger gave the Dene the opportunity to be heard at a national decision-making level for the first time. *Denendeh* was a direct response to this project. It was envisioned as a geopolitical entity encompassing a large portion of what is now the Northwest Territories. This entity was to be governed by a self-determined Dene nation but would remain part of “the country of Canada” (Dene Nation, 1977:21). It spanned “over one million square kilometres from the mouth of the Mackenzie River [southward] to the northern tip of the provinces, and east to Hudson Bay” (Coulthard, 2009:77). Conceptually, *Denendeh* was the geopolitical result of an original mixture of third world decolonial ideals and traditional Dene modes of knowing and being. For instance, some of the principles that underlied this notion, originated in Dene elites being educated in, and thus being able to use, Western ways of thinking for their own politically emancipatory purposes. For example, a Dene elder, former member of the NWT’s legislative assembly from one of the four Dene communities of the Sahtu region who was involved in the Mackenzie Valley Pipeline inquiry in 1976, explained to me (identified as DEF<sup>8</sup>):

‘I was advised to [go to university]. My marks were good enough. The decision was not really mine...But I went.... I was a science student for a couple of years and then I switched for general arts. Took a lot of anthropology types courses, psychology courses... For me it was kind of a continuation of a colonial education syndrome... I think that’s what it was... What I got out of it ... It was my first time around white people, white kids the same age, 17, 18, 19, like that. I got used to being around them. I don’t regret going... The courses I took I think were helpful, I learned to write, disciplined myself well, this helped me even in my job today, in my twenties I worked on the Mackenzie Valley pipeline inquiry, with Thomas Berger, I worked with elders, translating because I was bilingual, then I was a MLA, member of the legislative assembly at one point later on in my thirties. It started forty years ago in the 60s, when I first started in university, the environmental movement was starting. There was starting to

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<sup>8</sup> I have given identifying codes to my interviewees in order to anonymise their responses and to ensure confidentiality, I detail my methodology in chapter 4.

be environmental courses, the very first ones, David Suzuki was just started to be known and he was an activist, that was in the early seventies, the consciousness was starting, and us young students we were starting to learn... That was part of my learning as a young man, part of what I grew up.'

(Semi-structured, recorded interview with DEF, Yellowknife, 26/03/2015)

In 1977, the Dene Nation published *No Last Frontier* (1977). This 44-page long document detailed the manner in which *Denendeh* was to be organised and governed.

It shows that this geopolitical project placed traditional Dene ontologies at its heart:

“We, the Dene... developed our own values and our own understanding of the world. We developed our own languages and our own laws; our actions were based on our understanding of the world.”

“We, the Dene, are not seeking sovereignty... What we envisage is a new political entity, a Dene territory governed provincially by a Dene government and Federally by the Canadian government.”

“The colonial development of non-renewable resources has made it extremely difficult for us to maintain our traditional land-based activities... Clearly, we must develop our own economy [which] would not only encourage continued renewable resource activities, such as hunting, fishing, and trapping but would include community-scale activities designed to meet our needs in a more self-reliant fashion. True Dene development will entail political control, an adequate resource base, and continuity with our past. It will be based on our own experience and values. In accordance with our emphasis on sharing, Dene development will not permit a few to gain at the expense of the whole community... As such, we believe the conditions that govern the development of individuals will determine the conditions for the development of the whole Dene community.” (Dene Nation, 1977:17; 6-7; 27-29).

However, it also made strategic use of Western geopolitical concepts, such as the idea of a nation bound to a territory and the creation of a government administrating that territory (Elden, 2013b). Central to this vision was the universal right to self-determination of colonised peoples, as featured in Article 1 of the United Nations International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1967). This is how this vision was put in *No Last Frontier*:

“We must govern ourselves through our own exclusive institutions... This is why recognition, not extinguishment, of rights in the form of an exclusive Dene jurisdiction or government is the first principle of our position ... Our struggle, like oppressed and colonised people everywhere, is the assertion of the right to recognition and self-determination as a people. Our demands are the recognition and protection of those important human rights which have been secured by other peoples. We are a nation of the fourth world, the world of aboriginal peoples within the framework of independent, nation states.” (Dene Nation, 1977:22).

*Denendeh's* conception of Indigeneity can be viewed as a “hybrid” (Bhabha, 2004; see also Routledge, 1996) product of EuroCanadian and Indigenous ways of knowing and being. In this sense, Dene geographies are arguably the product of multiple perceptions of Indigeneity, not least from within communities (and their different living milieus) but also interrelatedly, from without, thanks to colonial, industrial and more broadly capitalist<sup>9</sup> histories, and relations of production/exchange.

### **Definitions: geopolitics as an ontological force**

This thesis takes stock of this complexity and thus proposes an understanding of geopolitics that sits at the intersection between the historical, representational, embodied and material. It conceptualises geopolitics as the *politics of space* (Elden, 2013a), where, politics is interpreted, after Foucault's work on power -for whom resistance and domination are two *practical* sides of the knowledge/power networks that characterise all social relations- as the struggle for control over an entity and over

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<sup>9</sup> Due to the variegated but often interrelated forms taken by capitalism in the Canadian Indigenous north (through colonisation, industrialisation, state-interventionist forms of welfare management and more recently market-led neoliberal types of resource-based development strategies), I will henceforth use the term capitalist (or capitalism) to refer to a civilisational model that hinges on the ontological “separation of Humanity and Nature” (Moore, 2017:600-601). This model is here viewed as being opposed to the Canadian northern Indigenous subsistence hunting, trapping and foraging mode of production that proceeds, traditionally, from opposite ontological assumptions (Kulchyski, 2005a). It is not my intent to deny that hybrid appropriations of capitalism among Indigenous communities also exist (Indigenous forms of capitalism so to speak, see Buntjen, 2011). I seek to point out that even these re-appropriations aim to enable traditional land-use practices and knowledges to continue.

the social production of knowledges about that entity (Foucault, 2002a:86-87; 349-365). Space is equally viewed as being the product of social relations. This is because, in a Lefebvrian sense (1991), the way space is produced “is always mediated through concepts and conventions” (Schmid, 2014:96). It is also because these concepts and conventions -or representations- are practiced on a daily basis, whilst at the same time being transcended through actually lived experiences (ibid:95-97).

Within this conceptual framework, “the construction of a collective infrastructure”, (Foucault, 1991:239) that is, the manner in which houses are built, as well as the architectural and urban fabric within which they are set, all “occupy a place of considerable importance” in the “techniques of government”, and thus in the geopolitical solidification of a state’s authority over a population (ibid). In *Space, Knowledge and Power* (1991), Foucault argues that they do so by ensuring “a certain allocation of people in space, a canalization of their circulation, as well as the coding of their reciprocal relations.” (ibid:253). For example, as I show in chapter 6, housing units built by the Federal government and later the Government of the Northwest Territories (GNWT) from the 1960s onwards, influence the spatial structures of Tulita’s residents’ social interactions.

Following political geographers Reuben Rose-Redwood (2006) and Geraid Ó Tuathail (1996), I thus understand *geopower* as the geographical knowledges, technologies, and forms of ordering space that enable the functioning of these processes of allocation of people. However, as convincingly shown by cultural geographer Stephanie Clare’s reading (2013) of Frantz Fanon’s *Wretched of the Earth*, in a postcolonial and colonial context, geopower can also be viewed, in a more general sense, as the ability to *shape*

the earth. This view is also shared by geographers Nigel Clark and Kathryn Yusoff (following Elizabeth Grosz). For them, geopower is, in a geological sense, “the energising, excessive and differential forces of earth and cosmos” that constitute “the very condition of existence of political life” (Clark and Yusoff, 2017:17; see also Grosz et al., 2017). However, this interpretation does not recognise that geopower is also intertwined with the actions of geopolitical agents over space, such as state and non-state actors but also ideologies, modes of production, modes of consumption/exchange, and in a general sense, modes of being. For this reason, whilst I posit geopower’s material role in shaping space, I also follow Ó Tuathail (1996), in conceiving geopower to be subservient primarily to geopolitics (rather than to tellurgic or geological forces), that is, to the agency of political structures and processes. One way of conceptualising this relationship is by viewing geopower as an ontological force, a structural and processual agent capable of fashioning -or ensuring- the reproduction of certain ways of being via specific modes of being in space (i.e.: spatiality).

### **Ontologies, space and infrastructural transformations**

In *Geontologies, A Requiem to Late Liberalism* (2016), anthropologist Elizabeth Povinelli provides a similar conceptualisation. She argues that the interplay of geopower and settler liberal forms of governance operates as an ontological force in Indigenous spaces (ibid). This force, which she calls geontopower, has concrete agency over space and peoples, since it manages:

“Existents through the separation of that which has and is imbued with the dynamics of life (birth, growth, finitude, agency, intentionality, self-authored, or at least change) and that which settler liberalism treats as absolutely not.” (ibid:20).

Because the latter (life) includes sacred places, matter and objects, in Indigenous spaces, geontopower remains subservient to industrial and paracolonial political and economic agents. Indeed, since geontopower derives from “Western ontologies”, which Povinelli equates to “covert biontologies” in that they inherently rely on Western metaphysics “as a measure of all forms of existence” (ibid:5), it excludes from the category of the living, all geological or meteorological forms of existence. For this reason, she argues that geontopower cannot be disentangled from industrial capitalism (ibid:20). Whilst Povinelli’s conceptual framework originates in her work with Aboriginals groups of the Australian Northern Territories, they resonate with the histories of colonial, industrial and capitalist-led transformations experienced by Indigenous communities across Canada (Coulthard, 2015). Her analyses indeed give further ground to the possibility that in the Canadian Indigenous North, the manner in which spaces are produced (and reproduced) is tied to the *materialities* -and their ontologies- of settler capitalist modes of governance and production. Infrastructures are the symptomatic examples of these ontological materialities. For instance, for geographer Andrew Barry, industrial materialities generate their own ontologies (2001), that is, specific ways of being and thinking, precisely because they generate specific political-economic activities that enable them to exist, function and be circulated.

One epitomising example of the ontological action of infrastructures in the Canadian Indigenous North is the MVP. For instance, referring to the results of the MVP’s public inquiry, Thomas Berger (1977) noted that a sort of matter-bound inevitability accompanied the expansion of industrial activities into Indigenous spaces. In 1977, Berger indeed foresaw that infrastructural development mega-projects like the MVP

would enable and sustain the expansion of the industrial world, its values and modes of being, or simply put, its ontologies into Indigenous spaces. This, he argued, came through particular ecological, social and political-economic pathologies, characteristic of the “industrial system”:

“In an industrial economy there is virtually no alternative to a livelihood based on wage employment.”

“The evidence is clear: the more the industrial frontier displaces the homeland in the North, the greater the incidence of social pathology will be.”

“The expenditure of money, the hiring of social workers, doctors, nurses, even police... [will] mean an advance of the industrial system to the frontier that will not be orderly and beneficial, but sudden, massive and overwhelming.”

“The advance of the industrial system would determine the course of events, no matter what Parliament, the courts, this Inquiry or anyone else may say.” (Berger, 1977:xx; xxii; xxv).

There is also ground to consider this industrial-infrastructure growth as part of global processes of urbanisation. For instance, in *Implosions/Explosions: Towards a Study of Planetary Urbanization* (2014), urban geographer Neil Brenner cogently argues that “the wide-ranging operations and impacts of urbanisation processes” include:

“Zones of resource extraction, agro-industrial enclosure, logistics and communications infrastructure, tourism and waste-disposal, which often traverse peripheral, remote and apparently “rural” or “natural” locations.” (ibid: 2014:20)

In this sense, it is possible to argue that in the Canadian Indigenous Northern context, the nature of the infrastructural growth that has accompanied industrial-capitalist development is also linked to the explosion of Western rationalising urban forms of

spatial organisation across the globe. It highlights in this sense the continuous geopolitical expansion of settler modes of being in the Arctic.

Indeed, from a geopolitical perspective, a link can be established between urban-infrastructural configurations and structural forms of violence against subaltern and marginal populations. This link is demonstrated in the literature on urban and feminist geopolitics. For instance, urban geopoliticians argue that a relationship exists between the material agencies of urban and land planning policies (e.g. housing or transportation), and the spatial forms of inequality and injustice that accompany the capitalist system (Marcuse and van Kempen, 2002; Rokem et al., 2017; Soja, 2009). They also reveal that urban forms -the built, architectural and infrastructural environment that constitute their fabric- are intimately related to the *experiential* landscapes of embodied ordinary, routine and banal practices of resistance and consent to state-led strategies of spatial control (Fregonese, 2018; Rokem et al., 2017; see also Adey, 2008; Kraftl, 2010; Mould, 2016; Rech 2015). Urban geopolitics' focus on the everyday can be put in parallel with feminist geopolitics' contention that the intimate and the personal are also geopolitical (Cowen and Story, 2016:343).

### **Research questions**

Drawing from these insights, the object of analysis for this thesis is the way a specific form of geopower -that is one that is tied to the geopolitical deployment of settler capitalist materialities in the Canadian Indigenous North- appears in the spaces of the everyday of a Dene settlement. By spaces of the everyday, I understand the interactions between the built environment and the routine practices that make up the fabric of the

quotidian, banal and ordinary. I investigate these interactions through an ethnographic focus on a single Indigenous community of the Canadian NWT called Tulita.

More specifically, the questions investigated in this thesis are: how are settler capitalist forms of geopower experienced, represented and transcended (resisted, countered, transformed) in the everyday spaces of an Indigenous community located in the Canadian North? What can be learned from these particular experiences that can help shift geopolitical theory towards ontological bases that are more inclusive of, and empowering for, subaltern spaces and beings?

### **Research approach and lines of inquiry**

For political geographers, ethnography offers a convincing method to gain a “solid understanding” of the geopolitical connections between “individual actors and larger trends” (Allen, 2009, no pagination, quoted in Rech, 2015:541). It is also ideally armed “to understand how place-based actors experience, contextualise” and embody geopolitical phenomena (Nicley, 2009:19, 22; see also Megoran, 2006:625). For these reasons, ethnography is used in this thesis to investigate the workings of geopower in Tulita.

My interest in Tulita lies in its particular geographical and social configuration. This settlement is one of the four Dene communities of the Sahtu region of the Canadian NWT (see figure 5). It is located at the conjunction between the Dehcho/Mackenzie and Sahtu Dé/Great Bear rivers. It has no year-round connection with the rest of the Canada and hence lies at the geographic periphery of the country’s polity. Yet, this area

of the Mackenzie Valley has experienced several resource and industrial development phases since the advent of the fur trade. The proximity of Norman Wells, the ‘oil hub’ of the NWT, has also strongly influenced Tulita’s level of involvement in the process of industrialisation of Canada’s North. In fact, from a political-economic perspective, life in Tulita remains tied to global processes of commodity production and exchange, and territorial strategies of economic development (see Dombrowski, 2001). The community’s geopolitical situation can as such be viewed as being one of subalternity, that is “an ambivalent position with respect to dominant [Western] geopolitical representation and practice” (Sharp J, 2011:298). The question then becomes one of empirical focus.

The key is in departing from what is entailed by *representation*. In his ethnographic work on the Ecuadorian Runa village of Avila, *How Forests Think* (2013), anthropologist Eduardo Kohn convincingly explains that if we admit, as Indigenous peoples do, that non-human and more-than-human beings are also able to represent us (humans), then:

“Encounters with other kinds of beings force us to recognise the fact that seeing, representing, and perhaps knowing, even thinking, are not exclusively human affairs.” (ibid:1).

As such, “representation is actually something more than conventional, linguistic, and symbolic.” (ibid:8). For Kohn, what is shared across species is the ability to utilise and understand signs (ibid:9). Kohn (2013) follows Charles Peirce’s triadic categorisation by arguing that signs function through not only the capacity for symbolic representation but also through iconic and indexical associations. Indices and icons are accessible to humans and living non-humans. Kohn’s originality is to argue that all three semiotic

functions operate through absences (ibid:212). In other words, what a sign conveys is also what it does not imply in the present, it is the result of layers of semiotic processes that are neglected (and negated) at a specific moment in time for the purpose of communication (ibid). Simply put, a sign also betrays what is not there. It is a dynamic that always stands “for something in relation to a somebody” insofar as it makes present one of several possible futures (which are thus lost as excesses) (ibid:75).

However, Kohn’s understanding of semiosis does not give agency to forms of nonlife (Descola, 2017). This is problematic since, as noted by Thornton (2008), Basso (1996), Cruikshank (2012) and Povinelli (2016) nonliving matter, like rocks, mountains or hills, but also places themselves, do play a critical role in *animating* Indigenous lives. What his approach nevertheless offers is first a *general* system through which inter-being communication can be analysed, that is beyond ontologies and the epistemological barriers they create. Second, it also suggests a way to conceptualise semiosis in an Indigenous context via an analysis of the *possible* beyonds, surpluses and absences, significations convey. Furthermore, in this conceptualisation, time and space have semiotic agency: they produce beings that bear on the way the present is interpreted in relation to possible behaviours.

However, the analytical endeavour of this thesis also needs to be in line with its understanding of geopower, that is, that geopower sustains a specific mode of spatialisation of capitalism in the Canadian Indigenous North. From this political-economic standpoint, Kohn’s approach can be complemented through sociologist Maurizio Lazzarato’s *Signs and Machines* (2014; see also Tomšič, 2015). Lazzarato argues that in capitalism, *things* act like nonverbal discourses, they are “iconic signs”

that “communicate or express [models] of behaviour which possess [the] self-evidence of physical presence” (ibid:127-128). Thus, by *things*, Lazzarato understands not only material objects (such as buildings, cars or clothes), but also the forms taken by for example images, colours, movements, velocities, sounds, or gestures (ibid:127). Lazzarato also contends that when associated together, *things* can form apparatuses of “asignifying” semioses, which operate as functions rather than representations, thus bypassing the workings of consciousness in generating certain kinds of subjectivity. Examples include the techno-scientific operations of industry and their “diagrams, programs, budgets, management indicators, accounting figures”, which lead workers to follow managerial orders without the direct involvement of speech (Lazzarato, 2014:129, 115).

Following Kohn (2013) and Lazzarato (2014), my ethnographic investigation of representations of geopower in Tulita focuses on the semiosis of the infrastructural, architectural, and thus of the spatial fabric of life in this settlement. Furthermore, since the Tulita Dene believe that non-human and more-than-human beings have the ability to inter-act semiotically with them, it is necessary to posit their agency (see Cruikshank, 2014; Goulet, 1998). Thus, in the interpretation of Dene animism followed in this thesis, *signs are beings insofar as beings produce signs*<sup>10</sup>. This entails first that in the process of their inter-*actions*, beings produce but they also amplify, silence or transform signs that are already there. Second, it means that there is a contingent character to this immanence<sup>11</sup>. Third, it implies that these interactions are themselves *metamorphic*.

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<sup>10</sup> In other words, the very recognition of a *signification* in an entity by Ego, endow that entity with the power of interaction (and reciprocity).

<sup>11</sup> By contingent, I understand these aspects of all individual experiences that are “dependent upon or subject to the conditions” (ODEE, 1966:209) of living in a specific environment.

Consequently, Lazaratto's *things* as well as all other forms of materiality produced through the operations of geopower can also be viewed as agential beings in their own right (I call these *beings of geopower*<sup>12</sup>), precisely because they also act as signs. Indeed, these beings not only represent specific behavioural possibilities, but they also make other behavioural associations absent (Kohn, 2013:212). Furthermore, to the extent that what is ignored can only be viewed as such insofar as it appears *in opposition* to, or *in excess* of what is noticed, the beings of geopower can arguably be revealed through traces of subjectification and transformation of, and resistance to, meanings.

## Arguments

I pursue three inter-related arguments. First, I contend that in Tulita, geopower operates, by way of its variegated materialities, as a metamorphic apparatus. It transforms, at the level of the everyday, the spatial configurations of the exchanges that take place between, and within, beings. According to the *Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology* (ODEE), contemporary uses of the term metamorphosis stem from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (1986), a series of mytho-poetic epic tales "dealing with changes of shape" (ODEE, 1966:572). Shape, for Ovid, is almost exclusively external, *material* (Kenney, 1986: xvi).

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<sup>12</sup> I take this expression from Latour's "beings of metamorphosis" (2013:181). I discuss it in the next subsection. I use the terms 'being', 'people' and 'person' interchangeably to designate "diverse types of actants or of subjective agents, human and non-human -gods, animals, the dead, plants, meteorological phenomena, very often objects and artefacts too- [all] equipped with [a] similar 'soul'." (Viveiros de Castro, 2009:21, quoted in Brightman et al., 2012:18). Here a soul is the quality of seeing oneself as a person. A person is endowed with intentionality, and "constituted by social relations and exist under the double pronominal mode of the reflexive and the reciprocal, that is to say the collective." (ibid; see also Hallowell, 1960).

By contrast, in *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence, An Anthropology of the Moderns* (2013), sociologist Bruno Latour argues that, in modernity, the “beings of metamorphosis” belong to an “inner world” separated from the outside by psychological processes and structures (2013). For him, metamorphosis precedes concrete shape itself. It is “a phenomenon that is antecedent to all the shapes that will be given to agents.” (2013:15). Latour’s “beings of metamorphosis” (2013:181), continuously re-define what one considers to be herself:

“Whether we are dreaming or awake, from simple anger to the monstrous crimes we sense we are capable of committing, from “black looks” to stormy passions, there is no one among us who is not in constant touch with these transformational beings.” (ibid:196).

In other words, for Latour, metamorphosis corresponds to the ontological processes (i.e. the “beings of”) through which a separation between an inner and outer world takes place (ibid). Metamorphosis thus enacts an *alienation* from (being) oneself and initiates a transformation towards (being) a different self, but from within the same body. By opposition, in Indigenous thought, metamorphosis is the bodily transformation through which the unity of personhood is achieved (Viveiros de Castro, 2005). It is indeed through metamorphosis that the paradox of a universal partaking in a *common* semiosis by a *multiplicity* of animal and human bodies is resolved (ibid).

Particularly relevant for this thesis, is the idea that both phenomena can be viewed as operating through a process of spatialisation. Whilst for the latter, it involves an exteriorisation of the self vis-à-vis the immediate spatiality of everyday practices, for the former, it proceeds via an interiorisation (incorporation) of a lived environment. For this reason, by altering the Tulita’s lived environment, geopower alters (metamorphoses) the modes of beings of its residents. In *Abyssmal* (2007), Gunnar

Olsson expresses a similar idea when he argues that the semiotic ordering of space is ontologically transformative -or metamorphic.

I thus pursue a second contention: that if geopower functions, via metamorphosis, like a regime of ontological transformation, then in Tulita it also operates on non-humans and more-than-humans in the same way. By this I simply mean that animals, spirits, rocks or rivers are *inter alia* metamorphosed by geopower, since they also, like humans, interact with semiotic planes that are foreign to the place from which they emerged endogenously. However, this does not necessarily imply total subjection nor complete alteration, but it does imply continual transformation.

One way of representing the way these more-than and non-human beings pre-exist as immanent spatial-semiotic regimes is by viewing them through what Viveiros De Castro has termed “supernature”, which:

“Apart from its use [in] defining a third type of intentional beings occurring in Indigenous cosmologies, which are neither human nor animal (I am referring to ‘spirits’) [may] serve to designate a specific relational context and particular phenomenological quality.” (Viveiros De Castro, 2005:63).

For Viveiros de Castro, *supernature* is the Amerindian “form of the Other as Subject” (ibid:64), the suprastructural agential context that orders the manner in which interactions between human and non-human (including more-than-human) beings take place. In the Amerindian case, supernatural encounters signify the recurring presence of the forest (ibid). In Tulita, it indicates the power of the beings of the bush world. For this reason, I will argue that these supernatural beings precede, and are thus metamorphosed by the beings of geopower alongside (and because of) the humans they

interact with. In this sense, my use of the concept of supernatural aims to signal, and amplify, the fact that the beings of geopower rely on (and convey) a different earth/nature/land than the ones tied to settler capitalist processes of spatial ordering.

This leads me to the third argument pursued in this thesis. This contention is that the interactions between the beings of geopower and those of supernatural can be viewed in their spatial totality in the particular context of Tulita, as dialectical. This is because, as I will show, the different forms taken by these two ‘classes’ of beings often appear entangled in the same temporal *telos* (a logic which however does not apply in the spatial realm, a crucial point of my chain of argument). In other words, whilst they are clearly distinguished through their specific spatialities in the lived present, they belong for the Tulita Dene, to common *dream-visions* of the future. Second, and consequently, a dialectical view is relevant also because these interactions produce transcending spatial practices and objects, giving birth to emancipatory forms of beings, that is beings that provide solutions to pre-existing conflicts. I follow in this Henri Lefebvre’s interpretation of dialectics (1968]2009). In *Dialectical Materialism* ([1968]2009), Lefebvre argues that a dialectical movement proceeds through the development of a “Third Term”, understood as:

“The practical solution to the problems posed by life, to the conflicts and contradictions to which the praxis gives birth and which are experienced practically. The transcending is located within the movement of action... Wherever there is a conflict there may [appear] a solution which transforms the opposed terms and puts an end to the conflict by transcending them.” (ibid:93).

In arguing for this dialectical interpretation, I do not intend to present a dichotomous view of life in Tulita -as if everyone in the community was torn between tradition and modernity. I do not seek to deny the socio-historical dynamicity of the Tulita Dene’s

relations with their environment. Some of my acquaintances indeed appeared to define themselves in relation to both modes of production rather than in opposition to one or another. However, as noted by anthropologist Paul Nadasdy in the case of the Kluane people of the Yukon (2003), despite the changes wrought to animal-human relations by more than a century of colonisation and industrial and neoliberal development, for my acquaintances (young and old), the central idea underlying their understanding of the reciprocal nature of their relationships with supernature's non-human and more-than-human beings is still the same<sup>13</sup>. On the other hand, and as also noted by Nadasdy and others (Viveiros de Castro, 2005), this relationship does not exist as such in dominant Western understandings of nature. Yet, it is precisely this view that is conveyed by the beings of geopower. Thus, my suggestion to view the spatial interactions between these two semiotic orders -dominant in Tulita- through a dialectical lens also serves to shed an analytical light on their transformative (in a dynamic, liberatory sense) implications<sup>14</sup>.

## **Aims and contributions**

### *Why Geopower?*

From an historical point of view, the topic investigated in this thesis is of particular relevance. For instance, it can be inferred from the wealth of recent academic

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<sup>13</sup> As I will show, this however, does not mean that this understanding is *practiced* as such by everyone in the community. Yet, the simple fact that moving away from it is viewed as a bad practice, necessarily implies that it indeed remains present.

<sup>14</sup> Belief in this transformative capacity also subtends recent calls by Indigenous scholars to view the resurgence of traditional practices and knowledges as an emancipatory and empowering response to settler-imposed changes (and to serve as transformative pathways for heritage values to be re-appropriated as forms of destiny) (Coulthard, 2014a; Simpson L, 2011; see also Anderson RB et al., 2015; Thornton, 2008).

publications dedicated to (or making of use of) the concept of geopower (Povinelli, 2016; Clark et al., 2017a; Clark, 2014; Grosz, 2012; Elden, 2014) that the necessity to analyse and reveal the forms of power that operate in the specific context of the current late liberal era (and relatedly of the Anthropocene/capitalocene) has become ubiquitous. This idea is further substantiated in Povinelli's *Geontologies* (2016) where she argues that late liberal forms of governance are slowly moving from a mode of power that predominantly functions through biopower to one that operates via geontopower<sup>15</sup>. One could argue that this shift was already anticipated by Foucault, who foresaw the development of a type of "control over relations between the human race, or human beings insofar as they are a species, insofar as they are living beings, and their environment, the milieu in which they live" (Foucault, 2003:24; see also Rose-Redwood, 2006; Clare, 2011).

### *Empirical contribution*

From an empirical standpoint, this thesis shows that the ordering of space plays a supporting role in the functioning of settler capitalism in Indigenous communities as it is via this process that global structures of uneven capitalist modes of material ordering are tied into the fabric of everyday life in the settlement. As I will demonstrate, and as skillfully suggested by Kirk Dombrowski (2001: xv), quoting Gerald Sider (1993), it is as if residents in Tulita "find themselves 'within and against' the systems of domination that surround them", that is in a double-bind socio-economic system. In this sense, and as in Drombrowski's *Against Culture* (2001), my principal empirical contribution is not

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<sup>15</sup> Similarly, Rose-Redwood argues that geopower precedes and thus allows biopower to function successfully (2006).

to provide a description of a people for ethnological purposes but rather to investigate a problem -the functioning of geopower- as it appears in the everyday lives of Tulita's Dene residents.

### *Conceptual contributions*

At a conceptual level, this thesis also makes three important contributions. First, it follows Indigenous and postcolonial geographers' calls to take Indigenous ways of being seriously (Cameron et al., 2014) by positing that non-human and more-than-human beings have semiotic agency in the operations of geopower. My aim in doing so is to propose an *indigenised* interpretation of geopolitics. By this I follow Indigenous scholar Daniel Wildcat (2001:vii) and mean "the act" of analysing the manner in which geopower appears to the Tulita Dene on the basis of their metaphysics, that is the manner in which they construct their reality (and what beings have agency in this reality). One implication of this endeavour is that this thesis attempts to move geopolitics' ontological bases away from its Western atomist foundations. It does so by considering the ability of "other semiotically mediated and unmediated sensoria" (Povinelli, 2016:124) to unsettle dominant geopolitical orders. What do the Dene tell us animals, spirits, water, rocks, lakes, land, the sky and the moon have to say about geopower in Tulita?<sup>16</sup>

The second conceptual contribution of this thesis is that it opens the possibility of viewing geopower's beings as possessing an ontological *telos* (an intentionality

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<sup>16</sup> Northern Slavey dialects do not have direct translations for the word geopower. Terms like land, power or earth tend to relate to holistic experience-based knowledges of place and place-based beings.

embedded in their existence) *beyond* their stemming from/belonging to the manifold geopower (i.e: a *thing* having multiple beings-forms)<sup>17</sup>. For example, if oil -one of the strategic materialities of the capitalist geopolitical project in the Canadian Indigenous North- is considered a semiotic agent, and is as such a manifold being, does this imply that it *can*, or rather that it *will*, seek to orientate other beings towards a particular end-point? Making use of an Indigenous agential ontology in such a way arguably enables the analyst to view the politically and socio-environmentally destructive side effects of oil through an animist perspective. One can indeed speculate that at a general level, oil's industrial beings *want* to be continuously searched, commodified, extracted and consumed so that it is able to exert power over the production of human infrastructural forms. In doing so, it also gives strategic power to the beings of Denendeh (i.e. to say: if you want my oil, you will have to speak with me first!).

*Towards a speculative geopolitics: empowering other-than/more-than-human beings*

In this sense, this thesis aims to outline a type of place-contingent, *speculative geopolitics*<sup>18</sup> whose ontological bases -drawn from Dene animism- go beyond an

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<sup>17</sup> Again, I follow Kohn (2013) for whom the innovation in this position lies in the fact that it begins from the possibility that “thinking is not necessarily circumscribed by language, the symbolic, or the human. This involves reconsidering who in this world represents, as well as what it is that counts as representation. [We] humans are not the only ones who do things for the sake of a future by re-presenting it in the present. [There] is agency in the living world that extends beyond the human.” (ibid, 41-42). By opposition, Latourian actor-network theory and what Kohn refers to as “Deleuzian approaches” attempt to develop “natures-cultures mixture” by “erasing the divide between the human mind and the rest of the world, or alternatively striving for some symmetrical mixing between mind and matter.” (ibid:40-41). However, for him, these approaches “only perpetuate Cartesian dualism because the atomic elements remain either human mind or unfeeling matter”. Furthermore, by “reducing agency to cause and effect - to ‘affect’ - [they] side-step the fact that it is human and nonhuman ways of ‘thinking’ that confer agency.” (ibid:40, 42).

<sup>18</sup> Speculative in the sense of positing that “an absolute” exists outside of human thought (Meillassoux, 2012:2).

interpretation of other-/more-than-human beings as objects, or as material actants within networks of meaning as in actor-network theory. By *speculative*, I indeed imply, following speculative realists, an understanding of reality which asserts:

“The independence of the world, and of things in the world, from our own conceptualizations of them... ‘Man’ is *not* the measure of all things. This is why speculation is necessary. We *must* speculate, to escape from our inveterate anthropocentrism and take seriously the existence of a fundamentally alien, nonhuman world.” (Shaviro, 2014:40-41)<sup>19</sup>.

Thus, in this speculative geopolitics, other-/more-than-human beings are agential subjects endowed with intentionality. Furthermore, since the nature of this intentionality -or rather, in an Indigenous sense, the super-nature of the being holding this intentionality- can never be fully guessed, it forces the speculative analyst to always think in terms of care and responsibility.

Whilst such a speculative view can be applied to all kinds of beings, it must be grounded in (and is thus contingent on), as Indigenous metaphysics is, an experiential comprehension of the dominant culture of a particular place (i.e.: existing relations of power, geophysical and meteorological configuration of the environment, availability of animals, plants, rocks, water and so on...). For this reason, in this thesis, I am concentrating on those beings that were *experientially* present in the everyday spaces of the Tulita Dene during the period of my stay in the community. This approach also raises the issue of the transmission of (and resistance to) power from one being to another. Is a being’s influence -like that of oil in the example above- over the lives of

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<sup>19</sup> An argument can also be made that speculation extends anthropocentrism. However, the point here is to attempt to think *beyond*, rather than outside (as that would be impossible), the human.

the Tulita Dene complete, *total*? As I will show, my answer is that this relationship should be viewed as a dynamic process, or as I intend to argue, as dialectical.

The third conceptual contribution of this thesis is that it attempts to follow progressive geopolitics' call to "be attentive to the possibilities of progressive change" (Kearns, 2008:1601) by considering "the scope of the non-force" (Kearns, 2009:266) alongside more conventional agents and agencies. By non-force, I understand, in the context of this research, other-/more-than-human beings. For instance, political geographer Gerry Kearns, argues that progressive<sup>20</sup> geopolitics calls for a focus on:

"Ontological, rather than epistemological matters. [Since] the naturalizing of capitalism, imperialism, and racism operates precisely by closing down our imaginations, causing us to accept a very particular and limited account of reality." (ibid, 2011:56)

My attempt to develop an Indigenised interpretation of geopolitics aims precisely to open our imaginations to the agency, and thus the transformative capacity, that different more-than/non-human beings<sup>20</sup> can have on geopolitical theory.

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<sup>20</sup> In this thesis, I separate the notion of *progress* (arguably based on the Western metaphysical link established by Kant ([1797]1998), Hegel ([1807]1976), and Marx ([1859]2000) between Reason, History and Material transformation) from what being *progressive* entails. Whilst I posit the former to be a colonial trope, precisely because it originates in, and tends to further the assumption that, Western metaphysics is superior to other metaphysical systems (Spivak, 1999; Buck-Morss, 2000; Povinelli, 2016; Karatani, 1995), I argue, following Kearns (2009; see also Harvey, 2000) that a progressive framework seeks social emancipation, empowerment, political-economic inclusion and development and eco-societal well-being for *all* components of humanity (I include in this non-human beings). I contend that this requires bringing peripheralised categories into Western dominant metaphysical systems so as to *unsettle* them (I follow in this Dussel, [1985]2003, see also Ciccariello-Maher, 2017). However, it also requires *transcending* (and in a sense, going *beyond*) these metaphysical hierarchies, systems and categories (Dussel, 2003).

## Limits: being an outsider

In his introduction to *Writing Culture*, anthropologist James Clifford (1986:7) cogently argues that “ethnographic truths” are “inherently partial” and that “power and history work through them”. As will become clear, this thesis is also the result of *partial* ethnographic entanglements with the lives of the Tulita Dene and Métis. Crucially, because of my position as an outsider<sup>21</sup>, my presence in Tulita perturbed the political processes of the community at the same time as it provided me with unique entry points through which to participate in its socio-economic life.

Many among my acquaintances (but not all) viewed themselves as marginalised members of Tulita’s society. My access to them -partly the result of the fact that I was not myself in a privileged position- meant that I was able to observe practices and listen to voices that expressed dissenting experiences, that is frustrations against peoples and institutions, but also against past, present or future events, phenomena and processes. As an outsider, I was indeed more readily provided information and was able to take part in activities that indicated the presence of these frustrations in the intimate,

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<sup>21</sup> By *outsider*, I mean that during my period of fieldwork in Tulita, I was perceived as someone who did not belong. I was for example once compared to a bushman-like figure (or nahani) by an acquaintance. My identity, role, origins, and perhaps even ontological nature (in chapter 6, I relate the example of my encounter with a wolverine and how one of my acquaintances interpreted this encounter) were the objects of speculations. This speculative entanglement with Tulita’s residents’ lifeworlds was also informed by the extra-ordinary events and beings (as in dreams, a point explored in chapter 1) I encountered whilst in Tulita, some of which I experienced with, or reported to, my Dene and Métis acquaintances. This outsider’s role/identity included being viewed at times as a foreigner, a member of an exotic ethnic minority (and thus unable to deal with the harsh cold of Northern winters, or too different physically to be associated with already *known* non-Indigenous groups -Canadian and non-Canadian-, Métis, and Dene researchers/consultants/government workers or employees of resource development firms), a French national (thus closer culturally to a Québécois), or a British national. Most of the time however, it involved being perceived as a young inexperienced graduate student from a major non-Canadian academic institution, too isolated (i.e. with no local socio-financial networks of support) and distant (geographically, culturally and socially) from the realities of Northern Canadian Indigenous communities to reproduce the “rules of the game” of local epistemic communities successfully – Bourdieu’s “social fields” (1977).

everyday spaces of their lives. At a structural level, they revealed that some viewed the settlement's socio-political and economic institutions as being dysfunctional.

For some in the community, my access to these dissenting voices was problematic. Indeed, because of the potentially *unsettling* nature (for local existing structures of power) of my interactions with different social strata in the settlement, my being there was also the object of speculations (I discuss the role of gossip in the solidification of social meanings about human and other-than/more-than-human beings and events in Dene communities in chapter 1). At an ontological level, I represented the agential irruption of an uncanny personhood (i.e. simultaneously disruptive, as an outsider, and familiar, as a doctoral researcher -a character already present in Tulita Dene semiotic taxonomy as a bearer of epistemic coloniality<sup>22</sup>) in the settlement's human and other-than-human geopolitical orders<sup>23</sup>. In this sense, my very presence, and my research project (along with the ontological possibilities it opened) generated new ordinary and extra-ordinary events in the community's everyday life. It also allowed me to observe how forms of *resistance*<sup>24</sup> but also *participation* to my attempt to articulate Dene forms

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<sup>22</sup> For instance, at the time of my stay in Tulita, there were two other non-Indigenous doctoral students doing fieldwork in the community. The fact that before my arrival, I was confused with one of them (in an exchange of emails with the community's authorities) illustrates the argument made here that for the Tulita Dene and Métis, all graduate students coming to Tulita to do fieldwork research belonged to the *same* settler regime of power/signs (i.e. where EuroCanadian/Western academia is *ontologically* connected to experiences of knowledge extraction). Indeed, I observed that many in the settlement viewed them through an anticolonial prism, as colonising agents. For instance, one of these graduate students was robbed, for the second time in less than 6 months, during the four months I spent in the community. Yet, Dene and Métis residents knew with great precision *who stayed where and for how long* and whether a house was occupied by a (wealthy) non-Indigenous person (or individuals), or whether it belonged to members of a powerful local family. As I surmised, in addition to these political-economic parameters, the choice to rob a non-Indigenous household appeared to be driven by anticolonial resentment (see for instance a discussion of 'white' government houses in chapter 6). This resentment seemed to inform how many in the settlement perceived outsiders, including me. It thus impacted my fieldwork (I give examples of how I too was perceived as *as a being of geopower*-throughout the remainder of this thesis).

<sup>23</sup> In chapter 1, I analyse this point using the Dene symbolic figure of the nahani, or bushman.

<sup>24</sup> Difficulties I encountered in my attempt to use GPS devices to map the movements of my acquaintances (attempts which were arguably understood by my acquaintances as forms of geo-coding of Dene spaces) provide an example of this resistance. I discuss it in chapter 4.

of geopower emerged, because of political tensions and competitions (through which fears of appropriation of knowledge were used to either support or disrupt my project) on the one hand and belief that I could help bring the voices of marginalised individuals to the fore on the other hand.

Being an outsider had three inter-related effects in the constitution of the ethnographic narrative on which this thesis relies. First, it created a power-laden mode of inter-subjective interaction, a framework of assumptions, behaviours, beliefs, social relations, used by my acquaintances to communicate with, and represent me (and vice-versa). Second, and consequently, it subtended the nature (and the extent) of the empirical observations I collected. Third, it informed my translation of these empirical observations in analytical terms, particularly in choosing how to report them and for what aims.

In practice, this meant that I have given particular attention to the representations my observations could convey about the community and its residents, that is *beyond* the analytical function they play in this thesis (in other words, in the politics implied in its interpretation, see Clifford, 1986)<sup>25</sup>. Because of my access to peripheralised members of the community and to the intimate details of the socio-political and economic issues they related to me, I have followed a socially progressive agenda in my ethnographic analysis. As noted previously, by *progressive*, I not only mean, following Kearns

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<sup>25</sup> In Chapter 4, I argue that because of the socio-political and economic issues I have observed whilst in Tulita, the information I have collected there can be considered *sensitive*. I include in this details about individuals' lives. Whilst I discuss the structural aspect of the analytical implications of these observations in this thesis, I have thus chosen to ignore personal information communicated to me by individuals, even more so when this information came from individuals who were in vulnerable situations (alcohol/substance users, residents with health issues, and residents who were in a precarious position vis-à-vis institutions of power in the settlement).

(2008), a belief that the geopolitical aim of progress is to further social emancipation for all, but also, and relatedly in the context of this thesis, that it is necessary to *unsettle* (settler) structures of geopower (following Cameron, 2015) and finally, that Dene rules of respect and care can contribute to achieving these objectives (the manner in which I have done so is explained further in chapter 4).

For these reasons, my ethnographic account of representations of geopower in Tulita is partial, not least because of the inter-subjective, power-laden character of my entanglement with the lives of the Tulita Dene and Métis, but also because of the politics of interpretation/representation entailed by the production of a coherent ethnographic narrative out of a multitude, and at times competing, voices and experiences. In chapter 4, I delineate the strategies I have used to mitigate the effects of this issue on the analytical endeavour undertaken in this thesis (e.g. use of secondary data, anonymisation of sources, formatting of observations in a manner that ensures respect, care and confidentiality, and relatedly, choice of *what to voice* and *how*). This dissertation is thus the result of multiple iterations, each written with the belief that ways could be devised to give greater care, and respect to the people of Tulita.

### **Structure of the thesis**

This thesis is organised as follows. Chapter one investigates Dene animism<sup>26</sup> from the perspective of the anthropological literature on the role of dreams, the dream world,

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<sup>26</sup> By animism, I follow anthropologist Philippe Descola and understand: “the belief that some non-humans are endowed with a spiritual faculty akin to the one humans possess, allowing the latter to establish with these entities some sort of personal relations, whether of protection, of seduction, of friendship, of hostility, of alliance or of reciprocity... These entities are not only granted anthropomorphic attributes -intentionality, emotions, the ability to appear in human guise under certain

and their imbrication with more-than and other-than-human beings in Northern Athapaskan cultures. It argues that the agential function of non-human beings in Dene society and politics stems from the speculative power they are afforded. I thus suggest that Dene ontologies mediate geopower primarily through the production and transformation of signs, a process which I propose to describe as metamorphic exchange. The meanings I attach to *metamorphosis*, *being* and *sign* are also further specified in light of this approach.

Chapter two focuses on the political-economic and historical context of everyday life in the community of Tulita, the Sahtu region and of the NWT's Indigenous groups more generally. It argues that settler colonial processes of industrial and capitalist development have structured life in the Indigenous NWT since the period of contact culture. This structure subtends the normative and governance architecture created by the Sahtu Dene and Métis Comprehensive Land Claims Agreement (SDMCLCA), particularly through its emphasis on a capitalist political-economic model of development. The agreement also enshrined the superiority of settler property law over traditional Dene customary land titling practices, thus legitimising the role of geopower in ordering the everyday spaces of the Tulita Dene and Metis.

Chapter three reviews the literature on geopower. It focuses on critical geopolitics and attempts by feminist, popular, psychoanalytical, emotional and urban geopoliticians to link the production and reproduction of social (everyday, intimate, quotidian) spaces to the configurations of matter. It argues that the operations of geopower are ontologically

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circumstances, etc. -but whereby they are also vested with social properties: a hierarchy of positions, behaviours based on kinship, obedience to ethical codes, etc. These social properties are drawn from the repertoire of each culture... The result [is] a template for categorizing the types of relations that humans maintain with non-humans." (2005:30-31).

transformative insofar as they materialise particular spatial orders and thus organise the structures of everyday life of populations. In this sense, geopower serves strategies of governmentalisation since it precedes the deployment of biopower by shaping space in ways that subtend biopower's successful actions. Thus, by organising Indigenous lived spaces via specific configurations of matter, in Northern Indigenous Canada, geopower *renders* the material-semiotic complex specific to settler capitalist and industrial modes of being, *present* in the everyday, intimate, and banal spaces of the Tulita Dene and Métis. This produces social spaces with settler-based meanings, beings and practices that have transformative effects (i.e. to make *local* beings, place-contingent beings, *other*, that is settler-like). In this sense, I contend that geopower is an *ontological* force.

Chapter four presents the methodological framework of this research project, specifically its ethnographic design. It reflects on its analytical limits (and the forms of resistances it encountered) and explains the reasons for choosing this research design. I argue in particular that this project's principal contribution is to attempt to find ways to move geopolitical scholarship away from its Western ontological bases. However, I contend that this thesis does not follow decolonising aims insofar as colonisation does not relate to the same experience, nor does decolonisation entail similar interpretations of what should be done to counter ongoing experiences of colonisation. Because of this, I introduce a *progressive* research agenda that seeks to unsettle the geontological structures of power that subtend settler strategies of governmentalisation and subjectification in Tulita. I follow this agenda by drawing from Dene animism to devise ways to think space in ways that are different from dominant *rational* understandings. In this chapter, I also delineate further my use of the notion of *sign* in relation to the ethnographic analytical work I have undertaken to complete this dissertation.

In chapters five and six, I present my analytical observations. In chapter five, I investigate the way settler geopolitical visions of the NWT are deployed through industrial, infrastructural and resource development projects in Tulita. I demonstrate that the deployment of these materialities cannot be disentangled from the colonisation of Dene ways of knowing by what I view as settler probabilistic and future-oriented temporalities. These temporalities subtend bio-anticipatory logics of governance which necessitate (and thus legitimise) experts-based modes of assessment of what counts as life (or sovereign life) and nonlife (or bare life), and thus the bureaucratisation of political institutions in Tulita. I argue that geopower materialises the signs that convey these temporalities. I contend that this material-semiotic temporal complex should be viewed as a *chronoscape*<sup>27</sup>. Because of the ubiquitous character of geopower, this chronoscape is able to metamorphose Dene and Métis representations of their future, now almost exclusively framed by settler temporal tropes and modes of representing space. I then show that the political-economic structure of life in Tulita is tied to global commodity fluctuations precisely because these impact the speculative projections of resource companies regarding the profitability of future exploration/extraction activities.

Chapter six investigates the way objects, buildings and the spatial organisation of Tulita create an urban environment, which ensures the (re)-production of socio-functional spaces, on the model of settler modes of being (including in particular the formation of economic classes). Whilst this spatial specification is subtended by the normative system implemented as part of the SDMCLCA, Tulita was not viewed as an urban space

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<sup>27</sup> This term serves to link temporal representations of space with the manner in which it is organised materially. It is not, in this sense, derived from literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of *chronotope* (1981).

by the government officials I interviewed in Yellowknife. Yet, it was represented as an unhomely settler urban-like place by those of my acquaintances who grew up on the land. Because of this, in this chapter, I argue that the built environment of the settlement, and its components (I use the examples of roads, housing units, money, and food products), act, semiotically, as beings of geopower. However, at the same time as this occurs, everyday practices and representations operate, through speculative thought-processes, to subvert the original settler meanings of these beings in ways that solidify the semiotic agency of animist ontologies. I contend that the speculative confrontation between these different regimes of signs create problems in meaning but also crucially, solutions. I argue that this process (confrontation-problem-solution) moves in a dialectical direction.

In my conclusion, I begin by summarising my observations and contributions. Second, I also recapitulate suggestions developed in this thesis to move geopolitics away from its Western ontological bases. I draw from the strategies used by the Tulita Dene (and Métis) to resist, subvert and transcend geopower. I then review the conceptual arguments made in this thesis, that is the notions of speculation, dialectics and contingency. This is followed by reflections on the limits of my analytical and research design and the ways through which I have attempted to address them. Last, I suggest ways to further this project's objectives. I delineate a speculative geopolitics which would aim to give geopolitical agency, via the representational play of signs, to other-than and more-than-human beings.

**PART I – GEOPOWER AS METAMORPHOSIS: DENE ANIMISM,  
SEMIOTIC TRANSFORMATIONS, AND THE GEOPOLITICAL RE-  
SHAPING OF DENENDEH**

## *Chapter one - Dene animism: dream-visions, signs and the geopolitical agency of more-than/other-than-human beings*

### **Introduction**

In early December 2014, about a month after the beginning of my stay in Tulita, I had a dream whose content -symbolic and immaterial by nature- epitomises the semiosis I came to associate with Denendeh, and thus the types of beings I came to view *as* Denendeh. Put together in a chronological sequence, this dream can be narrated in the following way.

I -or rather my dreaming self- was walking towards Great Bear Rock, a hill located a few kilometres north of the community, sacred to the Sahtu Dene. Great Bear Rock is the location of an important mythological event, a site marking the victory of Yamoria, a Dene cultural hero, over a family of giant beavers who lived near Great Bear river. The landscape was altered but it still seemed familiar. Colours appeared saturated by a supernatural reddish glow. The land *felt* violent even though it looked, visually, the same as I had already experienced it. I was somewhere on the frozen Dehcho river. I could not be sure whether that somewhere was near or far from the community. I could see the settlement in the distant horizon -or what felt like a horizon- but again that horizon was infinite, there, accessible but not really. All around me, metamorphic beings, horribly mutated chimeras of half animals/half humans were advancing towards me. An object appeared in my hands and I was suddenly battling these creatures in order to go past them so that I could reach Great Bear Rock. I had to *become* a part of this land. The dream ended abruptly during the struggle. Denendeh's beings, incarnated

in these symbolic forms – uncanny mixtures of land, animals and humans- nevertheless stayed on with me.

‘Extra-ordinary’ experiences like my own dream are not unheard of among ethnographers who spent time among Northern Athapaskan peoples. In fact, for anthropologist Jean-Guy Goulet, the supernatural basis of Dene modes of knowing creates an obligation on the part of ethnographers to be open to the possibility of appraising reality through dreams, visions and other extra-ordinary events in order to understand their culture (1993; 1998:74). For this reason, Goulet (*ibid*:172) argues that ethnographers need to go beyond Clifford Geertz’s warning that they “cannot live other people’s lives” (Geertz, 1986:373). Goulet recognises the validity of Geertz’s argument that symbols (and signs, see Kohn, 2013) play a critical role in enabling the ethnographer to grasp the manner in which members of an alien culture interact, order and speak about their “subjective experiences” (Goulet, 1993:172). However, quoting Geertz again, he also cogently proposes to view experiences acquired in dreams or visions (the ethnographer’s and her/his Dene acquaintances’ interpretations of them) as actual proofs not only of having been there, but also of having been truly penetrated by “another form of life” (Goulet, 1993:173, quoting Geertz, 1988:4-5; 2014). Beyond the analytical function that dreams and visions can play in contributing to a better anthropological understanding of Dene ways of knowing, Goulet also argues that it is through personal extra-ordinary visions and dreams that Dene other-than-human beings can be experienced and thus investigated (Goulet, 1998:xxxi)<sup>28</sup>.

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<sup>28</sup> On this point, see also Ridington (1988) and Guédon (2005).

I follow Goulet's recommendations and attempt to view, throughout the remainder of this thesis, the contents of my dreams (and of other extra-ordinary experiences), not as the fruits of my unconscious, but as metaphors that I can use "to align the situated points of view of beings that inhabit different worlds" (Kohn, 2013:141), namely my own and those of Denendeh. My aim in doing so is to suggest a reading of the nature of these beings' message to me, and through this endeavour, to arrive, with the help of the verbal and non-verbal information communicated to me by my acquaintances in Tulita, at an interpretation of Dene representations of geopower.

In order to do so, in this chapter, I review the literature that pertains to the role of dreams, visions and the extra-ordinary among Northern Dene peoples, but also to the nature of being, signs and metamorphosis, since, from a phenomenological perspective, these experiences cannot be disentangled for the Dene (Hallowell, 1960; Goulet, 1998; Sharp H, 2001). I suggest that *in situ* actions (rituals, dreams, extra-ordinary encounters and events) -actions that are grounded in the contingencies of place- and related individual beliefs about more-than/other-than-human beings play a metamorphic function for the Tulita Dene and Métis in that they help transform the signs associated with traditional knowledges and practices so that their potency in the present remains (and the watchful eyes of the beings of traditions/heritage become a force for emancipation). The spiritual value of place is thus maintained via its constant semiotic evolution. In other words, the beings of place are kept *alive/sentient (or as persons)*, powerful and transformative, through the dialectic effects of continuous exchanges between semiotic (and relatedly, linguistic) regimes (personal, religious, settler, experiential and so on...). These exchanges serve to establish meaning (and thus temporalities) over mattered space. This is what enables its ordering, but also its

transformation and disruption (I have defined these mixtures of matter, place, regimes of signs and related temporalities as *chronoscapes*). For instance, using examples taken from my fieldwork, I show how my entanglement with the settlement's *beings* led to *disruptive* (I, as a settler-like chronoscape) and *speculative* forms of resistance (e.g. the example of nahanis) to my presence (via subtle semiotic indications that my acquaintances questioned my ontological nature, *who and what else could I be?*). For these reasons, in this chapter, I argue that the deployment of geopower in Tulita cannot be disentangled from speculative thought-processes, place-contingency and metamorphic exchanges between regimes of signs, since these processes are at the core of Dene animist ontologies.

### **Prophecies, dream-visions and the extra-ordinary: metamorphic exchanges and signs as modes of communication with other-than-human beings**

During my stay, I came across a belief, widely present among the Tulita Dene<sup>29</sup> and originating from a Dene religious leader born in Deline who came to public prominence in the 1930s. This belief, or rather 'prophecy' as it was called by my acquaintances, epitomises the intricate relationships that still exist between the beings of supernature, dream-visions and the semiotic economy that underpins their socio-political potency for the contemporary Tulita Dene.

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<sup>29</sup> But perhaps not necessarily readily acknowledged as such. By this I mean that whilst the importance of Ayah's prophecies was never openly discussed by my acquaintances, I observed portraits of him hanging inside several houses. At the time of my stay, Ayah's portrait could also be found inside Tulita's Roman Catholic Church, along with those of other important Dene spiritual figures. Similarly, one of Tulita's leaders admitted to me that his prophecies guided his commitment to see Tulita's self-government negotiations be brought to conclusion as soon as possible.

This leader, named Louis ‘Ehtseo’ (grandfather) Ayah, had dream-visions of (Christian) angelic figures who ‘told’ him that the Dene would soon witness the end of the world<sup>30</sup>. If they chose to prepare for this event, they would need to change their ways. This meant paying better attention to traditional rules of respect for and reciprocity with, Denendeh’s beings as well as showing obedience to Christian scripture. In the words of one of Ayah’s relatives whom I was able to interview formally whilst in Tulita (identified as AR):

‘Things are changing, that’s what he [Ayah] says is going to happen. Nobody believes in anything. A lot of kids...like the way I see it, you know...kids are not into the Church or things like that. Maybe they believe I don’t know but that’s what I see. The world what do they call this thing here, down south and down here, here is winter and there, it is summer...climate change? He knows it is going to happen, that it is going to happen. ... To be ready they have to pray, to praise god.’

(Recorded unstructured interview with AR, Tulita, 27/11/2014)

At the same time that Ayah’s prophecies illustrate a trend that began during the contact period, they also exemplify a political system that places vision-dreamers at its core. In *Drum Songs* (2011), historian Kerry Abel observes that in the period that follow contact, so-called Dene “Prophet Movements” multiplied throughout Denendeh in response to the presence of the “white man’s religion and his economic demands” (ibid:128). Abel argues that these movements attempted to revitalise certain beliefs and practices *because* they ran counter to contact culture and thus indicated its passive rejection (ibid). Yet, for anthropologist June Helm, in:

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<sup>30</sup> In *Prophecy and Power* (1994), anthropologist June Helm notes that Ayah was one among a series of Dene prophetic figures emerging throughout Denendeh between the early 1860s and the late 1970s (another notable prophetic figure from Deline is Naidzo). Ayah, the “Bear Lake Prophet” was born around 1870 (ibid).

“The prophets’ theologies the world of ink’on [medicine power] and the Christian cosmos do not merge. Their preachments and admonishments were incontrovertibly in line with those the Catholic fathers might enunciate from the pulpit.” (1994:70).

Thus, prophecies like Ayah’s could be viewed not only as Dene reactions to settler cultures and beliefs, but also as attempts to subvert Roman Catholic scripture, within and through traditional power systems, for the purpose of reinforcing their validity (and that of traditional power holders: individuals holding medicine power). For example, Goulet notes the following about one of his Dene Tha acquaintances, Alexis:

“He has become a Christian Dene Tha shaman who, in the process of his vision, transformed Christian symbols and incorporated them into a distinct Dene world view.” (1998:200).

I have observed the importance of Ayah’s prophecies, and of their Christian eschatological implications, in the everyday life of my acquaintances during my stay in Tulita. For example, an acquaintance once explained to me that he believed that one of Ayah’s messages meant that the construction of an all-weather road connecting Tulita to the rest of the NWT would bring an end to Dene society. For another, whilst Ayah’s teachings encouraged Dene communities to follow Christian discipline to the letter, it also involved refraining from drinking alcoholic beverages and behaving unrespectfully towards other (human and non-human) beings.

Both Goulet (1998) and Helm (1994) also emphasise that dreams play a critical function in the *production* of prophecies. For instance, Helm explains the following about the relationship between dreams and Dene prophets:

“To accept a prophet as true, a Dogrib of the 1960s must believe that a person can experience or enter into the state of being *nate* (a ‘dreamer’, a ‘prophet’), and that the source that informs the person’s prophecy is God.” (ibid:53).

They further argue that for the Dene, a clear phenomenological distinction can be established between medicine power (and visions obtained through medicine power), and those prophecies that emerged during or after the contact culture period (because these tend to make use of Christian symbols) (Goulet, 1998; Helm, 1994). However, they also observe that prophecies and visions are part of the same socio-political continuum, whose cornerstone is the ability to communicate with non/more-than-human beings through dreams (ibid). Thus, it is possible to view the critical role given to prophecies by the Dene in the history of their encounters with the ‘white man’s world’ as an indication of the continuous geopolitical<sup>31</sup> potency of dreams, and thus of other-than-human beings. This interpretation is confirmed by Guédon (2005). She writes:

“Dene shamanism is not... a series of passive traditions, but rather a particularly flexible system of mediation that facilitates cultural integration and social and political action.” (ibid, 2005:23, my translation).

Goulet’s analysis of the Dene Tha’s ways of knowing (1998) gives further ground to the suggestion that signs conveyed through dreams play a critical role in the geopolitical mediation of externally-induced changes into Dene society, and that this takes place through a process of semiotic transformation. Quoting Moore and Wheelock (1990:62), Goulet indeed explains that meanings attached to Christian rosaries changed in ways that benefited the Dene Tha:

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<sup>31</sup> In my introduction, I have defined geopolitics as the politics of space.

“Dene Tha did not always use or interpret the symbols of Christianity in the same way as priests... An elder might place a rosary on the upwind side of a gathering to part and clear away approaching rain clouds... In their contact with missionaries Dene Tha prophets clearly took advantage of what they saw as new sources of power, which complemented, rather than supplanted, their own practices.” (Goulet, 1998:204).

Similarly, in Tulita, one of the acquaintances referred to previously once told me that the strength of medicine power, and of medicine men, has been continuously declining since the advent of Christianity and the arrival of Christian priests and missionaries on Dene lands. At the same time, he was a stern believer in the moral value of Roman Catholic practices and rituals, and often reminded me that ‘evil’ medicine men were also those who did not abide by the rules implied by these practices. Another example is that contemporary Dene shamanist practices are mediated by rituals whose forms have been transformed with the generalisation of urban, settler modes of being. Fire lighting and burning ceremonies, and drum dances now also take place *in* Tulita, that is, within an urban, settler environment<sup>32</sup>. In this sense, transformed shamanist rituals also serve as semiotic conduits of traditional temporalities within the spaces of the community’s present (in other words, these rituals *produce* these temporalities and help sustain Dene *chronoscapes*)<sup>33</sup>.

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<sup>32</sup> Outside and inside the settlement, ritual spaces and the names given to them -places where traditional practices are re-enacted- more generally also serve to remind of *collective* social obligations (Basso, 1996). For example, during my stay in Tulita, following the death of an acquaintance, a group of his friends organised a ceremony on the land to facilitate the passing of his spirit to the more-than-human world (in addition to the funeral mass that had been organised at the Roman Catholic Church).

<sup>33</sup> Anthropologist Peter Jordan cogently argues that the relationship between place and rituals proceeds through “dialogues of place”, since Indigenous communities are continuously engaged in “ritual dialogues with divine beings, which reside in, or are continuously contracted from, specific sacred places in the landscape ... Visits reinscribe the place within inhabited maps of the world and material deposits form the media of communication through which the relationships with deities are tended ... [For these groups,] life is a state of dialogue –both individual and community – with certain places of power.” (2003:281).

Transformations like these are examples of metamorphic exchanges, where signs that are imported from external socio-cultural contexts (like that of Goulet's rosary) are altered (i.e.: their behavioural associations change), but still retain the same (physical/representational) form. These metamorphic exchanges have a critical function in enabling the operations of geopower in Tulita, precisely because they also operate on a semiotic plane, in dreams. Dreams can thus be viewed as the privileged medium through which Denendeh's other-than-human and more-than-human beings are able to influence Dene politics. For instance, individual power in Northern Athapaskan communities derives from dreams containing not only Christian symbols, beings and artifacts (as in Ayah's prophecies) but also visions of animal, land, or water beings (as in vision quests). It is the latter that determines the nature of one's medicine power. Anthropologist Robin Ridington writes the following about the Beaver Dene's understanding of the relationship between intra-community power dynamics, hunting and dreams:

“Hunting was understood to be an essentially mental and spiritual activity that could succeed only through the hunter's special understanding of the environment and of the animal's state of mind. Animals, in turn, were believed to understand the hunter's state of mind, and to give themselves only to people with whom they had made contact through dreams and visionary experiences .... Among the Beaver, hunters encountered their game in dreams before the physical contact of the hunt itself. Dreaming was used as a way of visualizing and organizing the hunter's information about the complex pattern of potential relationships between humans and animals...

Dreams and the experience of vision quest training during childhood were central to Beaver adaptive competence. Beaver men and women obtained "supernatural power" from childhood vision quest encounters with the mythical representatives of animals and natural forces... As adults, they drew upon these powers to assist them in hunting, healing, and success in all other endeavors. Dreams in particular provided a means of accessing these powers.” (Ridington, 1987:9-10).

Similarly, in *The Sahtuotine long ago* (1991), an educational compendium of stories told by 23 Dene elders from Tulita and Deline, medicine power is described as a gift, *signified* to the beneficiary by his/her animal helper during visions obtained on the land, in specific places of magical power:

“In the old days, when the Sahtuotine first became people... each person had the potential to acquire a gift from nature which became his or her power... Signs [of this power] included: dreams, ... a child refusing to eat some animals... There were special places or “power houses” which people drew upon to sustain themselves.” (ibid:11)

Anthropologists David Smith (1973; 1998), Julie Cruikshank (1990) and Scott Rushforth (1992) also emphasise that North American Athapaskan societies put knowledge and experiences acquired through dreams on the same footing as those learned in wakeful states. For Goulet:

“[Knowledge acquired in dreams] concerns real phenomena. [It] enters decisions concerning social interaction with fellow human beings and with animals conceived of as ‘other-than-human persons’”. (1998:xxix).

Furthermore, since ‘physical’ and other/more-than-human lands cannot be distinguished experientially in Dene ways of knowing, it is through dreams and visions that access to the latter becomes possible. For this reason, visions seen in dreams or when awake are an essential component of this epistemology and thus of the way Dene chronoscapes are produced and reproduced. Anthropologist of the Ojibwa Irving Hallowell thus writes that:

“It is in dreams that the individual comes into direct communication with the *atiso’kanak*, the powerful ‘persons’ of the other-than-human class... Thus, [in dreams as well as in wakeful visionary states] the behavioural environment of the self is all of a piece. This is why experiences undergone when awake or

asleep can be interpreted as experiences of self. Memory images, as recalled become integrated with a sense of self-continuity in time and space.” (1960: 39-40).

Thus, as is clear from these quotations, it is the gift of vision (the ability to see the future, or to identify the location of a successful hunt in advance), through which animal helpers (and other more-than-human beings) communicate, that creates social respect and political power for those individuals who have them. As is further explained in chapters 5 and 6, this animist power structure enters in direct contradiction with the rationalist logic of geopolitics and arguably explains why some among my acquaintances did not find existing processes for the selection of members of Tulita’s leadership valid<sup>34</sup>.

However, the frontier that separates dreams from visions is never clear-cut. For instance, Goulet observes that for the Dene Tha, visions also take place during awoken “transformative states” (1998:72). This can be the case for vision quests, where the individual is left alone on the land for a period of time *until* the spirit of an animal reveals itself to offer its supernatural assistance. Medicine beings can also appear in the form of a struggle in a dream (Sharp H, 2001:111). If the individual is able to overpower these beings, she/he is then able to “enter into a relationship with that being and is given power/knowledge (ibid; see also Goulet, 1998). An acquaintance with whom I interacted regularly whilst in Tulita explained to me that he was one of the only person

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<sup>34</sup> For example, an acquaintance once half-jokingly explained to me that through the SDMCLCA’s public elections-based framework of government, a dog could be elected as chief in Tulita and that the political effects of this would not be different than if it was a man.

in his family who was never given an animal helper and he repeatedly told me that he felt particularly ‘pitiful’<sup>35</sup> because of this.

However, having an animal helper of a particular species creates a series of taboos, obligations and rules of reciprocal interactions with other members of that same species for the person who benefits from this help, for his/her entire life (ibid). Goulet observes that these taboos and obligations involve the avoidance “of certain foods, actions, sounds, smells, touch” (ibid:74). During the time of my stay in Tulita, I have noticed that similar taboos were observed by some of my elderly acquaintances, men known for their medicine power and/or for their hunting skills and who also had political responsibilities.

Also implied in Sharp’s quotation above is that a crucial component of Dene vision-based epistemologies is the recognition of the extra-ordinary as a source of knowledge and power. By extra-ordinary, I mean ways of knowing that do not fit rational explanations. In *Extraordinary Anthropology* (Goulet and Miller, 2007), Peter Gardner observes the following about his own encounters with the extra-ordinary:

“We anthropologists not only get glimpses of these differing realities but sometimes also achieve explanations of them that we can accept scientifically. ... Every once in a while, however, the glimpses we get are the kind that only tease or baffle us ... I am obliged to conclude for now that reality is more complex than the scientific side of me has been able to accept.” (2007:18-19)

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<sup>35</sup> The term “pity” itself has been used by Northern Athaspakan peoples to describe the state of being “destitute, abandoned, orphaned [or] mistreated by their relatives” in order to attempt to “elicit sympathy from supernatural beings” or to “compel them to assist” (Sharp H, 2001:111). This point certainly applied in the case of this acquaintance who faced numerous difficulties during the four months I spent in Tulita.

Thus, the extra-ordinary appears as a *surplus*, an excess of reality that helps illuminate what is perceived through the senses *from* the perspective of the beings of the other land. Importantly, as with dreams, visions of the extra-ordinary proceed through signs, that is, indications that the surrounding world is in chaos and thus that a future event will put it back in order, at least for the person experiencing them. For this reason, Dene supernature can arguably be described as a *morally conscious* “watchful world” peopled by the (individual and collective) spirits of animals, objects and geophysical and climatic phenomena and which inter-acts with humans through signs (Nelson, 1983:15-27). Indeed, as suggested by anthropologist Richard Nelson in the case of the Koyukon Dene of Yukon<sup>36</sup>, communication with these spirits relies primarily on signs:

“The Koyukon people live in a world full of *signs* [my emphasis], directed toward them by the omniscient spirits. The extraordinary power of nature spirits allows them to reveal or determine future events that will affect humans. This understanding is sometimes divulged to watchful human eyes through the behaviour of animals or other natural entities. Rare or unusual events in nature are generally interpreted as signs, often foretelling bad fortune.” (ibid:27).

### **A Place-based metaphysics**

Because of the place-bound character of Dene visions and dreams, this investigation must also take account of the spatiality of these phenomena. For instance, in his descriptions of Dene Tha supernature, Goulet makes frequent reference to the *other land*, emphasising that what characterises this ‘other’ component of Dene reality is primarily its spatial integration in, or rather, its territorial continuity with, the ‘primary’ land experienced by humans through their senses. This observation is particularly important when it comes to analysing the function of visions in Dene animism, that is

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<sup>36</sup> They are, to be precise of the Koyukuk River (a tributary of the Yukon River) situated in Alaska.

in the manner in which the Dene view their relationship to other beings.

In his seminal work *God is Red* ((1973) 2003), Lakota Sioux philosopher Vine Deloria Jr. indeed argues that Indigenous ways of knowing are by essence spatial, that is, Indigenous peoples understand reality through spatial, rather than temporal, categories (Blondin, 1997; Kusch, 2010; Wildcat, 2005; Norton-Smith, 2010)<sup>37</sup>. In *Power and Place* (2001), he further delineates this contention through a description of what he calls “Indian metaphysics”. This metaphysics, Deloria contends, emerges through the experience of “power and place”, where power is “the living energy that inhabits and/or composes the universe”, and place “the relationship of things to each other” (Deloria, 2001:22-23). This view is summarised in the following terms: “power and place equal personality” (ibid:21). This implies first, that in Deloria’s “Indian metaphysics”, the relationships between personality and power are contingent to, and on, place and second that the nature of these interactions is determined by the configuration -material (via practices of subsistence production), linguistic, phenomenological, or as cogently put by geographic anthropologist Thomas Thornton, “sociogeographic” (Thornton, 1997:295; 2008)- of the place in which they develop since “a person *is* only in place” (Pratt, 2006:7)<sup>38</sup>. Indeed, for Deloria inter-being relationships are also agential since the entities that *contextualise* them (e.g. place, land, universe, or trees) are themselves “persons” with an ability to co-produce sign-beings (Pratt, 2006:5).

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<sup>37</sup> Related to this aspect is also the belief in the circularity of time, ensured precisely by the immutability of spatial ontological taxonomies and originating in place-based creation myths (Blondin, 1997; Norton-Smith, 2010; Eliade, 1981; Casey, 1998).

<sup>38</sup> Regarding this point, Thornton writes cogently that in the case of the Alaskan Tlingit: “to be born Tlingit means to be placed in a particular sociogeographic web of relations indexed by geographic names” (1997:295).

Anthropologist Carly Dokis confirms this point when, commenting on the ontological contradictions between Sahtu Dene understandings of nature and environmental impacts assessment programmes (implemented as part of the Mackenzie Gas Project), she explains that the Dene know the land through the “sensory perception” and “embodied experience of place” (2017:200)<sup>39</sup>. Research on North-American Indigenous geographies has also shown that for Indigenous peoples, place is “a conscious being with the capacity to speak, create, and teach” (Larsen and Johnson, 2016:149; Bawaka Country, 2016). It informs relational and engaged ethics of living that are uniquely oriented towards the geographical parameters of each Indigenous community’s lands (Cameron et al., 2014; Hunt, 2013). Furthermore, this literature views place as being the cornerstone of Indigenous peoples’ conceptions of the “sacred, sentient, and spiritual accounts and experiences” (Gergan, 2015:262), and thus argues that Indigenous knowledge is by essence situated and place-specific (Hunt, 2013; Shaw WS et al., 2006; Berry, 2008; Herman, 2008; Blaser, 2014). Crucially, this current of research also insists that it is precisely because of their existential attachment to place that Indigenous peoples have particularly suffered from the effects of industrial development and colonisation (Shaw WS et al., 2006; Brody, 2002). From this, it is already possible to infer that geopower can only be appraised in an Indigenous context as an ontological force.

This point is further substantiated in Yellowknives Dene political scientist Glen Coulthard’s *Red skin, white masks*. Coulthard indeed cogently argues that for the Dene,

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<sup>39</sup> Similar arguments can be found in Watts (2013), Basso (1996), Andrews et al., (1998), Legat (2012), Leroy, (1998), Kulchisky, (1998), Anderson DG, (2004), Thornton (2008), Ridington (2006).

“place-based practices” constitute an “ethical framework”, a “grounded normativity”,  
in which place is:

“A way of knowing, of experiencing and relating to the world and with others; [furthermore,] these relational practices and forms of knowledge guide forms of resistance against other rationalizations of the world that threaten to erase or destroy our senses of place.” (2014a:13).

Thus, for him:

“Indigenous struggles... are best understood as struggles oriented around the question of *land* –struggles not only *for* land, but also deeply *informed* by what the land as a mode of reciprocal *relationship*... ought to teach us about living our lives.” (ibid).

Traces of this attachment can also be found in Sahtu Dene mythological stories. In *Yamoria: The Lawmaker* (1997), Sahtu Dene elder George Blondin explains that the relationships that exist between the Dene and their lands has cosmological origins:

“My people, the Dene, believe that we have always lived in this place, in the North... We believe the Creator put us here when the world was new; he put us in this place that Canadians now call the Northwest Territories and the Yukon. It is our place.” (1997:18, 28).

The story of Yamoria, the Sahtu Dene cultural hero, is also symptomatic, not only of Dene existential connections to their lands and to the other-than-human beings that people it, but also of the manner in which the power of signs and metamorphosis is interwoven with the geomorphological fabric of Denendeh. It is worth retelling this story in detail.

According to Blondin, Yamoria, a term which means ‘the one who travels’- came to Denendeh long before the arrival of white trappers and explorers. Yamoria was born a human but used his shape-shifting abilities (his ‘medicine power’) throughout his life, in order to, at times trick his enemies, and at other times seek refuge or protection from them. Yamoria sought to tame, subdue or eliminate, giant animal beings who terrorised those humans who lived during this period. These beings looked like gigantic beavers, bears, wolverines, or wolves. They could speak, had their own laws and societies and had magical abilities. He also studied, and passed on to his fellow human friends, knowledge he had learned from these giant animals. Yamoria fought evil medicine men and gave the Dene “laws” to live by by (Blondin, 1997:70). After his departure, Denendeh was *transformed* as human beings could finally live in peace and thrive.

One story in particular exemplifies his metamorphic actions. A family of giant beavers lived in a place located near Tulita. They repeatedly killed those human beings who used a nearby river to fish, because they did not want to share it with them. Yamoria became aware of their presence and sought to eliminate them. The chase, and the struggle that ensued, left physical scars on the land surrounding Tulita. The beavers built a dam, which according to Blondin, is still visible near rapids located on Great Bear river (1990:30). At the exact location of current Tulita (the confluence of the Dehcho/Mackenzie and Sahtu Dé/Great Bear rivers), Yamoria “killed two medium beavers and one small one. He stretched and nailed their hides to the south face of Bear Rock, where you can see them to this day” (ibid). He also shot two large arrows to catch the remaining beavers. For Blondin, these arrows now form two poles that ‘can be seen’ sticking out of the river (ibid). Crucially, for Blondin, the physical traces left by Yamoria are still remembered as signs of Dene identity:

“The symbol of the three beaver pelts on Bear Rock Mountain [is a] sign of the land set there as a reminder of our ancient Dene stories... If we Dene take the sign set on the land as our symbol, we will never have any trouble surviving as a nation.” (ibid:31).

I have not been able to distinguish either the hides, nor the poles, from their respective surrounding topography. However, Blondin is not the only one who knows the story of Yamoria’s struggle with a family of giant beavers. Bear Rock is considered sacred throughout Denendeh. Although less knowledgeable than Blondin about the details of his struggle with these giant beavers, three different acquaintances in Tulita also confirmed to me that this epic battle had happened in a distant past, in the surrounding vicinity of Tulita and that to this day, they could still see three beaver hides stretched on Bear Rock as proofs that Yamoria was responsible for the eradication of these monstrous beings.

What is interesting for this thesis is the perceived actuality of this narrative. It is as if the geophysical traces of Yamoria’s past presence, act as signs of the continuous authority of magical rationality over physical land. This authority is still being felt as an actual reality substantiated not only by practices and beliefs but also by ethno-historical facts. As such, the beaver hides are arguably signs of the *other land*, precisely because their geometrical forms (visible in the warm season) and their spatial location, are unique to this place, to this area of Denendeh and are as such recognisable only to the Dene. In other words, they symbolise the presence of more-than-human beings only to those who can decipher Denendeh’s other-than-human grid.

In this sense, this example further substantiates two crucial observations regarding Dene animism. First, it shows that it is spatially contingent, that is, it is directly

dependent on the particular social and material configurations of the land from which it draws its metaphysical bases (its geomorphological shapes, geological constitution, and geographical structure). Second, it also confirms the crucial role played by signs in this metaphysics, not only as indexical devices able to put behavioural futures in the present, but also as geontological forces which structure the social involvement of other-than-human beings in human affairs. In the particular case of signs inscribed directly in earth matter, such as those described in the story of Yamoria, an argument can also be made that, when viewed together, these arguably form a geopolitical grid, that is, a system of geographical codes that mark the semiotic appropriation of Denendeh by the Dene.

### **Dene supernature and metamorphosis**

What also transpires from the story of Yamoria is the metamorphic character of Dene supernature. In *Ojibwa ontology, behaviour and worldview* (1960), anthropologist Irving Hallowell explains that metamorphosis, the ability to be several beings at the same time (and thus to alter one's outer form at will), is what defines Ojibwa belief that other-than/more-than-human beings should be viewed as persons<sup>40</sup>. This point is best explained using Hallowell's own words:

“There is no hard and fast line that can be drawn between an animal form and a human form because metamorphosis is possible... What persists and gives continuity to being is the vital part, or soul. ... the whole socialization process in Ojibwa culture ‘impresses the young with the concepts of transformation and of power’... These concepts underlie the entire Indian mythology... the

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<sup>40</sup> In *Animism: Respecting the Living World* (2005), anthropologist Graham Harvey summarises Hallowell's view on personhood in the following terms: “Persons are those with whom other persons interact with varying degrees of reciprocity. Persons may be spoken with. Objects by contrast, are usually spoken about. Persons are volitional, relational, cultural and social beings. They demonstrate agency and autonomy with varying degrees of autonomy and freedom.” (Harvey, 2005:xvii).

capacity for metamorphosis is one of the features which links human beings with the other-than-human persons in their behavioural environment... Metamorphosis to the Ojibwa mind is an earmark of 'power'. Within the category of persons there is a gradation of power. Other-than-human persons occupy the top rank in the power hierarchy of animate being. Human beings do not differ from them in kind, but in power... The spiritual 'masters' of the various species of animals are inherently powerful and, quite generally, they possess the power of metamorphosis. [These entities] are among the sources from which human beings may seek to enhance their own power. My Ojibwa friends often cautioned me against judging by appearances... It makes them cautious and suspicious in interpersonal relations of all kind. The possibility of metamorphosis must be one of the determining factor in this attitude; it is a concrete manifestation of the deceptiveness of appearances... Even in dream experiences, where a human being comes into direct contact with other-than-human persons, it is possible to be deceived... Metamorphosis may be *experienced* by the self in dreams." (ibid:37-38).

For Hallowell, the Ojibwa view *beinghood* and *personhood* as distinct metaphysical categories only in the sense that the latter has the character of power manifested in an ability to interact with them through what can be described as a system of reciprocal kinship (1960)<sup>41</sup>. Thus *beings* like animals, places, everyday objects, as well as meteorological phenomena and geological formations *may*, at some moment in time, *become persons*, that is agential components of a network of reciprocal relationships with the Ojibwa, insofar as their character as "living, functioning social beings" (ibid:33), and thus by inference, as *beings endowed with the capacity for semiotic thought*, becomes recognised by the Ojibwa. Again, myths, dreams, visions (and vision-quests) and extra-ordinary 'facts' play a critical role in this process.

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<sup>41</sup> The being-helper provides its assistance to a chosen individual as if he/she was its grandchild (Hallowell, 1960).

## **Animatism: making objects and beings into persons via extra-ordinary encounters**

It is possible to identify similar patterns closer to the Sahtu region. In his *Contributions to the Ethnography of the Kutchin* (1970), anthropologist Cornelius Osgood describes the Peel river Kutchin (now know as the Gwich'in) Dene<sup>42</sup> belief that objects are persons in disguise, as *animatism*. Animatism, he writes, is the belief “that inanimate objects themselves have life... It is as though one were to walk through a field of tall grass and *suddenly* [my emphasis] discover that his eyes had deceived him, that each blade waving in the wind was a snake” (1970:154).

Animatism, like animism, is also established along links of semiotic causality between this and the other land. For instance, in his ethnographic work on the Chipewyan Dene, anthropologist Henry Sharp writes<sup>43</sup>:

“Our culture and the English language distinguish between the natural and the supernatural as modes of being, experience and causality. It is this distinction we see as the core of the difference between ourselves and the animism of the other... This distinction is not present in Chipewyan thought and culture. What in our reality is the disjunction and incompleteness of unknown causality through the agencies of accident, coincidence, and chance, the Dene see as a far more complete and comprehensible reality within a unified field of causality.” (2001:66-67).

In *Loon: Memory, Meaning and Reality* (2001), Sharp argues that these causal links are established through socio-political processes of validation that rely on what he calls “successful performances” (ibid:113). These include gossip, and relatedly, the

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<sup>42</sup> The Peel river Gwich'in now live on lands that are part of the Gwich'in Settlement Area, located just north of the border with the Sahtu Settlement Area.

<sup>43</sup> On this point, see also Evans-Pritchard (1976).

manipulation of key individuals within the community, the occurring of events that tend to confirm a particular interpretation, the production of positive results in the future, and memories of events in the past (Sharp H, 2001)<sup>44</sup>. Because life in Sharp's Chipewyan community is never private but always takes place in front of the eyes of every being, the ability to manipulate the meanings attached to specific signs takes a critical importance in its political order (ibid)<sup>45</sup>. Meaning he suggests, and thus the manner in which particular signs are circulated, can kill (ibid:122). Sharp argues that if it is believed that someone might have lost or misused her/his medicine power -he talks of insanity-, she/he could indeed lose social or political status (through gossip), or worse, his ability to hunt may become compromised (as every failed hunt adds to this belief) (ibid). In the end, he might choose to refrain from undertaking hunting activities and face harsher forms of exclusion (ibid). One way that this happens is through the social weaponisation of the fear of unwanted metamorphosis (or of encountering a metamorphosed being having no control over its powers). For instance, in a paper on Athapaskan Bushman Images (1978), anthropologist Ellen Basso observes that the image of the bushman -or *nahani*- symbolising the possibility of ostracisation and the monstrous death or metamorphosis that can ensue, plays a crucial role in maintaining social order among the Willow Lake Dene<sup>46</sup>. She writes:

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<sup>44</sup> Sharp writes: "It is as if the Dene put meaning and interpretation on hold until the rest of the "event" becomes visible as time passes. Only then can the original "event" be understood and its correct meaning determined" (2001:110).

<sup>45</sup> Here again, Sharp's explanation is illuminating: "The separation of politics from reputation, inkonze [medicine power], morality, and most other issues is both an analytical strategy and an artifact resulting from the demands of writing about them. The Dene live these experiences without any separation between them... Privacy, in the Western sense, does not exist... The very density of social relationships and the omnipresent potential to be observed -and for that which is observed to be commented upon- allow for a system of social coercion of staggering power" (2001:108).

<sup>46</sup> Willow Lake is a hunting and fishing camp peopled by the Kaalo'otine, a sub-group of Sahtu Dene whose members now mainly reside in Tulita.

“Insofar as bushman narratives serve in oblique moral criticism, they have the effect of emphasizing the value of adhering to social standards, of justifying the necessity of conforming to contemporary ideals concerning behaviour.” (Basso, 1978:694).

Two experiences taken from my own fieldwork confirm that these observations are also applicable in the case of the Tulita Dene<sup>47</sup>. First, upon my arrival in the settlement, I was given the opportunity to meet an acquaintance whom I had the chance to know from a previous travel in the Sahtu region. We sat next to each other during the plane flight from Norman Wells and seeing that I was not sure as to how I would organise my stay in Tulita, he offered to set up a meeting with me early on the next morning to give me some suggestions. Unfortunately, I arrived late to my appointment with him. Because of this, he manifested a kind of uneasiness about our exchange and decided to shorten our conversation. Towards the end of our discussion, as we were leaving and walking towards the settlement’s centre (which was perhaps also a strategy on his part to imply that he needed to be left alone), he emphasised, half jokingly, that in order for me to really learn more on Dene beliefs and knowledges, I would need to look for what he called ‘nahanis’, or ‘real indians’ as he translated the word. Yet, as I later asked other acquaintances what the term ‘nahani’ really meant, and where to find them, I was only given embarrassed silences, or amused looks. I believe that in light of Basso’s (1978) and Sharp’s observations (2001), *nahanis* were, in this particular occurrence, a generic expression designating not only a social taboo, an extreme version of what is considered accepted behaviour (indicated through a sort of inversion: the ‘real’ Indian being in fact the ‘inexistent’ Indian), but also a symbolic -subtle in this case- reminder that someone is verging on transgression by causing social embarrassment. In a semiotic sense, this

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<sup>47</sup> Anthropologist James Van Stone reports an exactly similar belief among the Snowdrift Chipewyans, the Gwich’in and the Upper Tanana Dene (1974).

first encounter with nahanis was key to the ethnographic process on which this thesis is based. It impacted the ontological nature of my subsequent meetings with Denendeh's beings. For instance, for those acquaintances who mentioned them to me, the nahanis constituted a kind of overarching 'phantom' (or spectral) force representing (or a geontological agent of) Denendeh's semiotic resistance to my presence in the community. Speculatively, nahanis *enabled* and *structured* this resistance, precisely because this Dene concept entails ontological *possibilities* (i.e. the real and the unreal Indian) reminding of the power of the beings of supernature for these acquaintances. One can also *speculate* that the monstrous beings that peopled my dream were the more-than-human avatars of these phantoms -and thus expressions of Denendeh's beings- resisting me.

The second example is taken from an event that happened later during my stay. In December 2015, I was travelling to Deline with another acquaintance, Felix (this is not his real name), who had relatives there. On our way, we spotted several grouses moving in and out of the bush. For Felix, seeing wild chicken so close to the winter road was a one of a kind opportunity. A common meal consumed in Tulita is indeed a stew made of boiled grouse meat, mixed with rice and carrots. Felix thus decided to stop his truck. He then took his rifle, stored in the back of the vehicle, loaded it with small caliber bullets and attempted to shoot one of the grouses. The animal was sitting on a branch, quietly looking at us from atop a 3-4-metre-high tree, located at perhaps 4-5 metres from where we were standing. Felix shot 2-3 bullets in its direction. It moved to another tree. After several attempts, it was finally hit. The grouse fell down, almost vertically. We both heard the particular sound that a 5-6 kg soft object makes when it falls on a metre-high layer of snow. We walked in the direction of the fall, leaving the truck and

the road behind. There were no traces of blood, nor of broken feathers. We searched for 30 minutes for clues as to whether the animal had only been wounded and managed to escape or else if its dead body had been buried below the layer of snow. We found nothing. Felix became quietly upset and decided to let go of the search. We went back to his truck and travelled for another hour or so. We saw no other grouses but one on our way. However, this second encounter was as extra-ordinary as it was comical for an outsider like me. This time, the animal seemed to be waiting for us. It was quietly sitting in the middle of the road, unperturbed by the noise made by the running engine of Felix' car. This time, again, he thought this was the perfect chance (see photograph 2 below). Felix got out -I stayed in, as I thought that the grouse would be more frightened if both of us were out. He began to aim at the animal from where he was, standing upright behind the driver's door. He then fired at least 25 bullets. The path between his rifle and the animal was clear: only the snow-covered gravel road, on a straight line. The grouse itself was less than 3 metres away from him and it did not move at all as Felix kept firing at it (even whilst he reloaded his rifle). The confrontation must have lasted 20 or 30 minutes. In the end, perhaps tired of simply being there, it flew away. Felix then got back in the truck, switched the engine on and we continued on our way towards Deline. Nothing was said, and I did not dare to ask him what he thought had happened, or rather *why* it had happened. Clearly, this particular encounter was as problematic to him as it was uncanny to me. However, when considered in relation to Felix's social status, this event, which had all the markings of an encounter with an animal other-than-human being, was not meaningless. It is precisely the type of extra-ordinary fact that informs the mechanical fabric of Dene supernatural. Felix belongs to a powerful family in Deline. Yet, he told me that he had been in a precarious position vis-à-vis his relatives there and that for this reason, he had to move to Tulita a

few years ago. We spent a couple of hours in Deline that day, but we had nowhere to stay so we went back to Tulita. Thus, what also transpired was that his relatives would not help. However, his situation was not particularly better in Tulita. At times estranged from his children and his (third) wife, Felix spent hours in his car, living, eating and driving often aimlessly when he was not waiting to pick someone up and take her/him somewhere in the settlement. An acquaintance considered him an outsider, for another, he was a nefarious influence. A former alcohol addict, he had a habit of smuggling bottles of vodka in Tulita in order to sell them. Thus, simply put and to reuse Sharp's words, since "a man's reputation for power/knowledge is dependent upon his actions being noted and talked about by other Dene" (2001:96), Felix exhibited all the symptoms of either lacking medicine power, or of being the victim of other-than-human forces. Could his behaviour explain the fact that the two grouses we had seen during our trip to Deline refused to *give* themselves to him? Again, I never sought to find out what elders in Tulita thought of this interpretation for fear of creating more reasons for him to be ostracised. I was however told by one of them that alcohol abuse is the type of behaviour that leads to one showing disrespect towards other-than-human beings. It could also have been, speculatively, that in light of the example of the nahani, my presence led to the grouses -beings of Denendeh- refusing to give themselves to him.



**Photograph 2**

Felix's encounter with a grouse, January 2015 (source: author)

These examples illustrate the subtle symbolic entanglement of out-of-the-ordinary events with the structuration of social life in Tulita, and with the semiotic construction of other-than-human beings as agential factors in this life, that is, to employ Hallowell's distinction, as *persons* (1960)<sup>48</sup>. This is more obvious in the second case. The grouse, an other-than-human being, became a person at the precise moment when it refused to reciprocate Felix' demand, or perhaps, it already knew that Felix would attempt to kill it and thus *deliberately* sought to mock him, *twice*. In any case, it is the manifestation of semiotic intentionality (the possibility that the event meant something *else*, something *beyond* the obvious facts of the event) that indicates the presence of an other-than-human person, precisely because of its extra-ordinary character. It is thus possible to argue that events like this help reveal the personhood of other-than-human beings because their processual fabric is constituted through the production and exchange of signs<sup>49</sup>, what I have called metamorphic exchanges. Beyond the physical event itself it is indeed the *surplus*, the *excess* of meaning (what did it imply about my behaviour?), that creates a demand for magical rationality.

### **The dialectics of relationality: towards a speculative reading of animism**

Another important implication of the centrality of the semiotic function in Dene ways of relating to other-than-human beings is the intrinsic plasticity implied by such a system of communication. If Dene animism can be defined, and relatedly, their society, its spatiality and political organisation, through processes of semiotic exchange, then

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<sup>48</sup> For example, in *Athapaskan adaptations*, Van Stone writes that for the Upper Tanana Dene, "when a hunter meets an animal he is unable to kill, it is an indication that he had encountered evidence of the transmigration of a human spirit into an animal form." (1974:63).

<sup>49</sup> Dreams, visions, and extra-ordinary events are after all united by the fact that they all proceed from the production and exchange of signs between the physical and the other land.

this also implies that this mode of thinking is by essence dynamic, that is, it relies on the possibility that new meanings, new interpretations, new adaptations will be absorbed. Second, it is indeed precisely because Felix' grouses think like us, in signs, that it is possible to view their actions as a response to his own behaviour, and thus to inquire about what that response meant in relation to this behaviour. This is precisely what Kohn implies when he writes:

“Selves, in short, are thoughts, and the modes by which such selves relate to one another stem from their constitutively semiotic nature and the particular associational logics this entails... If selves are thoughts and the logic through which they interact is semiotic, then relation is representation.” (2013:83).

Thus, the relational character of this epistemology, permanent interactions between an individual and beings of the other-than-human land, animal-, objects- and meteorological- persons, creates a constant demand on the self to re-evaluate her/his actions. The underlying logic of this relational system, aims, for anthropologist Nurit Bird-David, to:

“Raise people's awareness of their [of other-than-human-beings] existence in-the-world and, dialectically producing and being produced by this, socializing with them.” (1999:77).

This process of dialectical production is precisely what defines Subarctic Athapaskan modes of knowing for Descola (2005). Indeed, for him, animist cosmologies do not mirror ecological parameters per se, rather they:

“Lay emphasis on dialectical relatedness and on the circulation of flows, identities, substances and components of the person between entities defined by their relative positions and not by a pre-existing ontological essence.” (2005:30).

Thus, from the perspective of one's becoming, signs act, within an animist ideological framework, as dialectical devices, because they enable one's direct inter-action over her/his reality, even without its physical transformation. Again, Kohn's clear explanation of this point is worth quoting at length:

“[Signs] are relational processes... Semiosis is the name for this living sign process through which one thought gives rise to another, which in turn gives rise to another, and so on, into the potential future. It captures the way in which living signs are not just in the here and now but also in the realm of the possible... All sign processes eventually ‘do things’ in the world, and this is an important part of what makes them alive... Selves, human and nonhuman... are waypoints in a semiotic process.” (2013:33)<sup>50</sup>.

In other words, the “dialectical relatedness” (Descola, 2005:30) that is at the core of Dene animism, can be said to be mediated through the exchange of signs. Since this representational system is ontologically open, these exchanges effect a metamorphic action on the thinking self, precisely because one is then able to conceptualise different courses of action upon (and different modes of being with/knowing) the world. However, this is not to say that this is a purely immaterial process. In the story of Felix's encounter with wild grouses, as well as in Ayah's prophecies, it is their materiality that gives other-than-human beings the capacity to influence the way the Dene shape their own reality. Whilst in the former case this materiality takes concrete shape in the form of a human-animal interaction occurring in a bush environment, in the latter, one can arguably talk of immaterial shapes that *transcend* concrete things by giving them uncanny (familiar, yet frightening) forms. For instance, as demonstrated at the beginning of this chapter, Dene prophecies -at least those that emerged during or after the period

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<sup>50</sup> See also Lévy-Bruhl ([1910]2015).

of contact-, exhibit traces of Christian *and* animist symbols (Van Stone, 1974:71-73; see also McKennan, 1965).

The development of endogenous Christian-animist prophecies (with their original mixture of forms, ideas and material things)- recall the example of the ‘animist rosary’ above- also highlights the flexible character of Dene supernature. Dene supernature can in this sense also be viewed as a framework for incorporating and adapting changes in ways that are familiar to the Dene. However, crucially, the dialectical relatedness that drives this flexibility begins almost systematically (as with all examples given above) from individual experiences. It is indeed primarily the individual (a hunter) that encounters other-than-human beings and subsequently chooses to represent them as such to other members of her/his band, either for political or social purposes. On these points, Van Stone cogently explains that:

“Another characteristic feature of traditional Northern Athapaskan religion was its individualism... An aspect of [this] individualism, [is] the considerable variation in beliefs that was characteristic of different persons sharing the same religious heritage... The highly individualised character of religion meant that each person had leeway in developing his own specific attitudes and ideas about the supernatural.” (ibid:59-60; 125).

Thus, there is necessarily an element of *speculation* in Dene animism. Indeed, if by speculation it is possible to understand, after philosophers Quentin Meillassoux (2012) and Graham Harman (2002), an openness to the ontological infinite (that is that something *else* is always possible) and thus to the necessary contingent nature of thought itself, then Dene ways of grasping reality are intrinsically speculative<sup>51</sup>. In other

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<sup>51</sup> Meillassoux sees speculation as the only accessible form of knowledge since “the sensible only exists as a subject’s relation to the world” (2012:3), given that “the intra-worldly contingency which is

words, since nothing can be known with certainty, we are left with only one absolute: that all interpretations, all meanings, all beings can or cannot be. For Harman, the radical implication of the speculative attitude is that “every relation [is] *ipso facto* a new entity” (2002:284). Yet, such an entity “always hold something in reserve beyond any of its relations” (ibid:230).

If we ignore the ‘Western’ metaphysical terminology (to reuse Povinelli’s expression, 2016) employed by both Harman and Meillassoux to describe what their respective forms of speculative realism entail, it is possible to view the similarity of the ontologies they propose with those implied in Dene animism. For instance, contingency in Dene modes of being primarily stems from the place-dependent character of their knowledges. However, this spatial contingency also underpins a contingency of speculative thought, since in Tulita for example, the forms taken by other-than-human beings are uniquely characteristic of the multiplicity of local geophysical/biophysical shapes that led to the specific manner in which these beings became represented as persons. The beaver hides stretched on Bear Rock are clear examples of this.

A more symptomatic illustration of the speculative imbrication of the extra-ordinary with the construction of selves in relation to thought, place and more-than-human beings, was provided to me by an elder in November 2014. We were in his house, a small two-bedrooms accommodation built in the 1980s overlooking the Mackenzie/Dehcho river from the eastern shore. He had invited me to drink tea. It was an early afternoon and although the day was already declining, the sky was relatively

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predicated of everything that can be or not be, occur or not occur, within the world without contravening the invariants of language and representation through which the world is given to us.” (ibid:40).

clear of clouds. Because of this, and because of the cold, we had a clear view of the sun, whose disc-shaped silhouette was slowly setting down behind the mountains. It was just over the horizon at that precise moment when we were looking at it, yet something appeared out of place. The sun was accompanied by an eerie halo which gave the impression that it had twins, positioned at equal distance from it on its left and right sides. This meteorological phenomenon is known as a parhelion and is the result of an optical effect caused by sunlight reflected by ice crystal suspended in the air. My acquaintance was surprisingly silent. However, I had never seen something like that before and I could not resist the temptation to ask him what this meant. He answered that this implied that something ‘bad’ was going to happen. I continued and asked whether this represented a bad omen for him or for someone else as I could not understand whether there was a distinction in his mind between his, mine and other residents’ entanglement with this sudden irruption of the other-than-human in our possible futures. He simply replied – with a tone that to me signified a reluctance to give any more details- that someone was going to die. A few weeks later a common acquaintance died in an accident. When I later pointed out to this elder that his prediction had unfortunately been exact, and I asked again how he could have known that this meteorological phenomenon meant the death of someone in the community, he kept silent and offered only a quiet nod.

This example shows the subtle relationships that exist between the contingent aspect of place, selves, the construction and solidification of the thought-belief in the power of more-than-human forces via speculative processes, and the eventful deployment of the extra-ordinary in the process-validation of this thought-belief. In this example, Tulita can indeed be viewed as a *contingent* world of ontological possibles, that is, the place

where the prediction will happen. The elder's personal reading of the meteorological event, marked by his reluctance to reveal what it implies -precisely because of the dire nature of these implications for those he knows- marks his assertion as an agential self vis-à-vis other-than-human beings, the community and myself. His mode of appropriating this phenomenon also has a speculative basis since his prediction relies on the recognition that knowledge of this event is simultaneously a possible and an impossible, at least until the concrete realisation of his interpretation of it -an element which also contributes to his reluctance to vocalise his fear-. Finally, the death of a common acquaintance indicates, or rather solidifies, the speculative role of the extraordinary in manufacturing narratives that validate the agency of other/more-than-human entities.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have attempted to demonstrate the critical role of dreams, visions, and the extra-ordinary not only in Dene conceptions of supernature, but also in the manner in which they conceive reality. I have shown in particular that individual experiences of place, and animals, meteorological phenomena, spirits, objects, or geological formations inform one's representation and knowledge of the more/other-than-human world, and also her/his ability to exert power within Dene society. More importantly, this chapter has also demonstrated the crucial function of speculation and of signs in producing, structuring, resisting and transcending representations and meanings that pertain to Dene supernature, particularly since it is this very supernature that serves as a symbolic system of adaptation to external changes. I have shown how this applied to me using the example of nahanis, and grouse hunting. To emphasise their

transformative effects, I have called these semiotic processes, metamorphic exchanges. Furthermore, I have argued that it is precisely because of these metamorphic effects that the metaphysics that is at the cornerstone of Dene animism should be viewed as a dialectical process. Thus, space for the Dene underlies freedom (and danger) precisely because their understanding of reality is made of multiple possible futures brought in the present through individual interactions with other-/more-than human beings that take place on the land (what I have called *chronoscapes*). For this reason, I have proposed to view the inter-weaving of selves, signs, beings of supernature and place, that characterise Dene metaphysics, through a speculative lens.

These observations have two important implications. These will inform the remaining discussion. The first is that, as suggested in the introduction, in order to be able to convey Dene representations of geopower, it is necessary to speculate, alongside them, that any entity can/cannot interact semiotically with human beings, and become persons, that is agential presences in their lives. This implies in particular an obligation to posit the *a priori beingness* of these entities. This is my intention when I propose to use the terms ‘beings-of-geopower’, ‘beings-of-Denendeh’ /‘-metamorphosis’, /‘-supernature’, and so on...The second implication is that spatial contingency is a crucial element of Dene metaphysics, since all possible beings, indeed all beings, emerge in response to sign-beings originating in the land. However, this is not to say that time, that is historical factors, do not also play a role in this metaphysics. For instance, as noted by Kohn in the case of the Avila Runa’s forest (2013:165), the contemporary “overarching form”, made of plant, animal and spatial configurations, of Denendeh cannot be understood independently of the relations of production/exchange that have shaped the NWT since the period of first contact. Indeed, the semiotic and concrete

forms left by colonisation, industrial development, and more recently, neoliberal resource extraction processes overlap to create “the conditions of possibility for the political relations” (ibid) that emerged and continue to emerge in Tulita. As with prophecies, contemporary Dene animism is thus also directly influenced by these forms. As such, in order to analyse the operations of the beings of geopolitics in Tulita, it is necessary pursue this discussion with a review of the political-economic history of this community. This is the object of the next chapter.

## *Chapter two - Colonisation, industrial development and resource extraction in the NWT: structures of power in Denendeh*

### **Introduction**

In light of the previous chapter, it is possible to outline an interpretation of the manner in which the dream I described previously can help shed an illuminating light on the operations of the beings of geopower in Tulita. This interpretation is of course merely a speculation. However, as noted previously, the purpose of a speculation is precisely to help uncover unknowns, to reveal possible beyonds.

For the acquaintances to whom I described the contents of my dream, the struggle it depicted and the form of the entities who peopled it, meant that it either represented a battle against a medicine man or beings of the medicine world. One acquaintance believed that my apparent failure signified that I had lost the fight against these enemies, for another, the fact of having a sword in my hand implied the contrary: it represented my ability to respond to the aggression and to protect myself. No matter the exact meaning of this dream, what is important is that it seems to show a struggle between myself and beings of the other land. The question then is why would a medicine man or other-/more-than-human beings decide to attack me?

I suggest that an answer to this question lies in a metaphor. I, an outsider, represented an amalgam of non-endogenous beings: a mixture of entities incarnating colonisation, industrialisation, Western values and so on... The metamorphic creatures that attacked me on the other hand are forms that mirrored the land and its conflictual relationship

with the beings of geopower (recall the nahanis mentioned in the previous chapter). This, of course, is only a speculation but as I will show in this chapter, it can be grounded in the concrete facts of the history of the NWT and Tulita. Indeed, as is argued in this chapter, the settlement's current spatial, social, cultural and economic configurations are in part the result of the colonisation of the NWT through the expansion of EuroCanadian ideas, peoples and ways of thinking. More importantly, from the perspective of longer historical trends, this colonisation has operated hand in hand with capitalist processes of spatial re-organisation.

The relationships between space and capitalism have been analysed at length by Marxist geographers (see for example Harvey, 2000; Smith N, 2001). For instance, in an essay entitled *Geopolitics of Capitalism* (2001), geographer David Harvey argues that it is through the very ability to manufacture (relative) spaces that capitalism is able to master (absolute) space:

“The ability of both capital and labor power to move at short order from place to place depends upon the creation of fixed, secure, and largely immobile social and physical infrastructures. The ability to overcome space is predicated on the production of space.” (ibid:332).

In the Canadian Indigenous North, it is precisely via infrastructural development, resource extraction and land commodification that spatial barriers are overcome. This point is confirmed by Coulthard, for whom capitalism in Canada's Indigenous North (U.S and Canada) is primarily a material phenomenon as it remains centred on what he calls extractivist development projects, that is, an existential need to devour the land and resource base (2015). In Canada, these processes are premised on the particular form of government and socio-political organisation taken by settler states. In this

chapter it is precisely these processes and this form of government that I aim to describe.

### **Industrial development of the NWT**

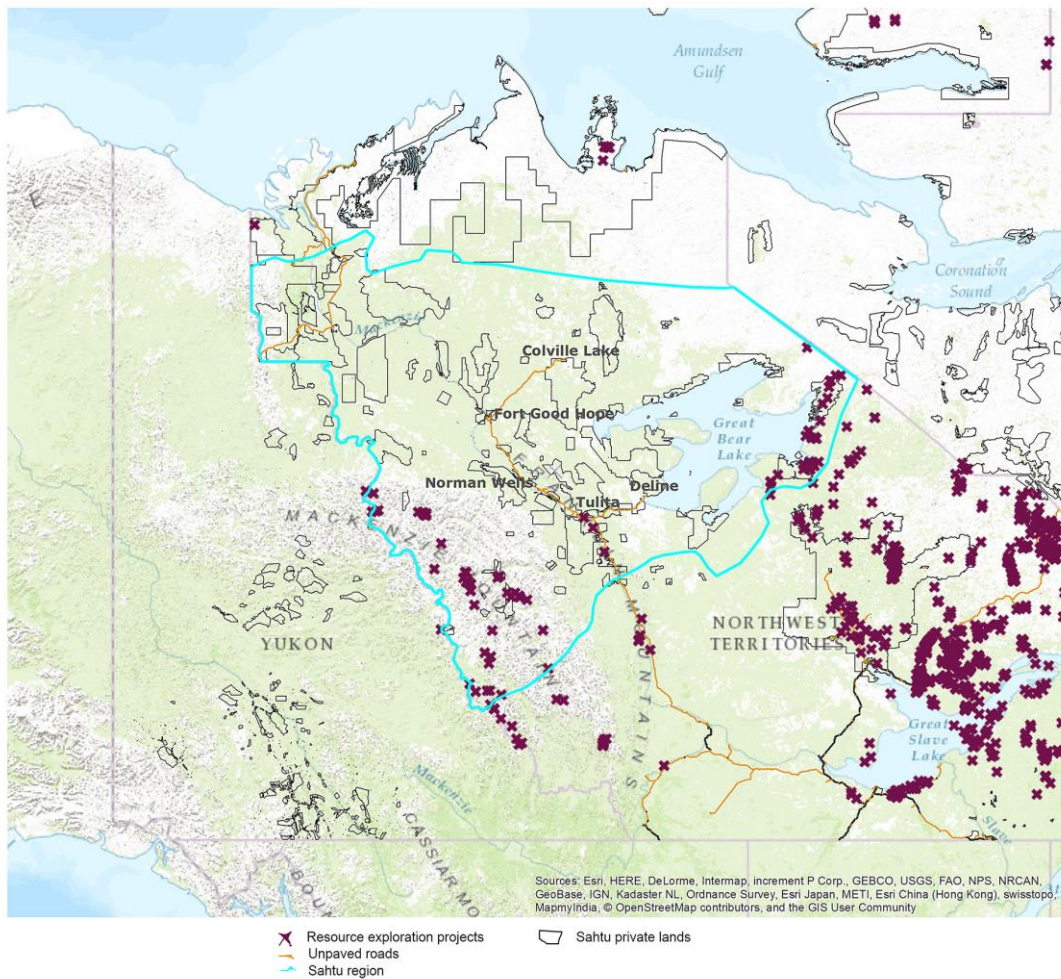
The settlement of Fort Norman (later renamed Tulita) was founded around 1810 as a trading post by the North-West Trading Company (later acquired by the Hudson's Bay Company) (Michéa, 1963). Anglican and later Roman Catholic missionaries arrived in the area between 1866 and 1876 (ibid). A Royal Canadian Mounted Police post was opened in the settlement in 1916 (ibid). By the end of the 1950s, an Indian Agent office, services regulating hunting and trapping activities, a small school and a dispensary had also been built. Until this period, several bands would migrate in and out of Tulita, coming into the community in the early summer to sell their furs, trade or seek medical assistance. Most important among them were the Shutah'gotine (or Mountain Dene), who would normally fish, hunt and trap in an area located between the Mackenzie and Selwyn Mountains to the West of Tulita. Other bands included the Kasho'gotine (or Hare Dene) and the Kaalo'gotine (Willow Lake Dene), whose traditional hunting, trapping and fishing grounds lie to the north of the settlement, in an area delimited by Willow Lake in the south and the settlement of Fort Good Hope in the north.

In the late 1950s, anthropologist Jean Michéa observed that the Shutah'gotine still lived a semi-nomadic life (1963). In July-August, they would usually leave the settlement and walk towards the mountains where they would stay until October to hunt game, essentially caribous, sheep, moose but also fox, marten, beaver. They would then come back to Tulita on mooseskin boats using small waterways connected to the

Dehcho/Mackenzie river, in particular the Keele and Redstone rivers. After two to three weeks in the settlement selling meat, they would go back towards the Mackenzie mountains and spend the winter fishing and trapping near or around several small lakes located between the Dehcho/Mackenzie river and the Mackenzie mountains. At the time of Michéa's travel to Tulita, Mountain Dene territory was situated between Drum Lake to the south (and the valley formed by the Redstone river), the northern and western edge of the Mackenzie mountains, and the Mackenzie river to the east (1963).

More than 60 years after Michéa's fieldwork, my own first encounter with Tulita began from inside a Twin Otter after a 20-minute flight from Norman Wells. The settlement is now one of the five composing communities of the Sahtu region (the others are Fort Good Hope, Norman Wells, Deline, Colville Lake) and its population is predominantly composed of (Mountain, Hare and Willow lake) Dene and Métis. From inside a small airplane flying at full speed, the lands that surround the community appear like a patchwork of black dots scattered across a white mantle of snow and ice. The settlement is located well below the tree line separating the barren grounds of the Arctic tundra from the sparsely forested areas of Canada's boreal North. The Sahtu region is indeed covered with conifers and deciduous trees. However, from high above ground, one of the striking features of the settlement's geography are geological traces of its rich hydrographic capital (GNWT, 2016). For instance, Tulita is nestled within a triangular shaped point of land where the Dehcho/Mackenzie and the Sahtu Dé/Great Bear (a tributary of the Dehcho/Mackenzie) rivers meet (Tulita thus means "where the two rivers meet. A second highly visible feature is the presence of several mountains and mountain ranges, including the Mackenzie and Mackay mountain ranges, and closer to the settlement, Bear Rock, elevated at 400 metres above ground, towering over it.

Once arrived, the apparent calm of Tulita's small airport -travellers quickly disappear as those who wait for them or who expect a delivery know in advance when the plane is going to land- belies the geographical significance of the settlement. The community indeed lies at the geo-economic heart of the Canadian Northwest Territories' resource corridor (for example, figure 2 shows the extent of resource exploration activities in the Central Mackenzie Valley and Mackenzie Mountains and in the NWT, in the period running up to 2014). The Sahtu region encompasses the NWT's central Mackenzie valley whose high hydrocarbon potential (mainly in non-conventional shale oil/gaz) was confirmed in a geological study published in 2015 by the National Energy Board and the Northwest Territories Geological Survey (NEB, 2015b). According to the Government of the Northwest Territories (GNWT), this area of the Mackenzie valley has a potential of almost 200 billion barrels of marketable oil (CBC News, 2015). Around Tulita alone, five major oil/gas corporations have been operating or have expressed a public interest to do so between 2011 and 2014 (Shell; Imperial Oil/ExxonMobil; ConocoPhillips; Husky Oil; MGM Energy) (SLWB, 2014)).



**Figure 2**

Map of the extent of resource infrastructure in the Sahtu region (and the NWT)  
(source: author, 2014)

This map was first published with the title “Map of the Sahtu region with an emphasis on resource exploitation activities” in Perombelon, B., (2017). An ontology of development in the geopolitical North: Resource extraction in the Canadian Northwest Territories and the shift in Indigenous experiences of nature. In: Pereira, L.M., McElroy, C.A., Littaye, A., Girard, A.M., (2017). *Food, Energy and Water Sustainability: Emergent Governance Strategies*. Abingdon: Routledge. Ch. 11, p. 199. Permission for reproduction for non-commercial purposes granted by Taylor and Francis.

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However, these activities are only the latest examples in a long stream of industrial development projects taking place across the Canadian Indigenous North since the early contact period (Piper, 2009). Indeed, the geopolitical creation of the NWT (that is, as a territorial-administrative component of the Canadian state) cannot be disentangled from settler capitalism's reliance on the never-ending commodification of natural resources, and from the operationalisation of this process via colonialism and the industrialisation of the North (Coulthard, 2014a; Dickerson, 1992). Mohawk political theorist Taiaiake Alfred convincingly summarises this point:

“The political economy of the process [France's and Britain's acquisition of Indigenous lands] sheds light on the dependency aspect of the colonial enterprise... Canada as the legacy state of European imperialism in North America has had a consistent goal centred on the seizure, control and use of Indigenous lands in support of resource-based extractive industry to generate profits for, first European regimes, later, for the resident of Euroamerican metropolitan population, and more recently for globalised corporations.” (2009:46).

In the Sahtu region, the commodification of natural resources -and the concomitant solidification of settler geopolitical control in the region- began in the 19th century with the advent of the fur trade, which introduced commercial exchanges and a debt-based economy in the area (Krech, 1990). By encroaching more and more on traditional Indigenous hunting and trapping grounds used for subsistence activities, commercial fur trapping forced the Dene to enter a relationship of dependency vis-à-vis external economic agents and processes (i.e. fur trading companies, commodity price fluctuations and welfare services provided by the settler state) (Krech, 1990; Ray, 1990; Yerbury, 1986; Blondin, 1997). By the end of the second decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, settler police presence slowly increased (via the creation of the North West Mounted Police, later renamed the Royal Canadian Mounted Police) (Sandlos, 2007). This was

not only because that presence was thought of as a necessity to protect Indigenous groups from the violence of intruding non-native fur trappers and traders but also because new laws had been enacted that sought to re-organise Indigenous subsistence practices so that they could be regulated by Canada (Abel, 2005). Fear of potential American claims to sovereignty over parts of the North also factored in this change (ibid). In parallel, the heightened involvement of Protestant missionaries attempting to convert Indigenous groups based in the Mackenzie Delta from the 1850s convinced the Roman Catholic Church that it needed to send its own representatives to the NWT (Choquette, 1995). Henri Grollier, a member of the Oblate order, set up a series of mission posts throughout the Territories, including in the Sahtu region in Tulita and Fort Good Hope in 1859 (ibid). Although never total, the assault of the Catholic Church on the Indigenous NWT had as significant an impact on Dene ways of thinking and being as resource development activities (Goulet, 1998).

### *Resource extraction*

The discovery of oil by white prospectors took place in Tãegõhtî (which means ‘where the *oil* is’) in 1920. Tãegõhtî, or Norman Wells, is located along the Mackenzie river, 72 kilometres north of Tulita. This discovery gave the impetus for Ottawa to begin negotiations on a new treaty with Indigenous groups living north of Great Slave Lake. This treaty was theoretically to lead to the acquisition of all their lands (Fumoleau, 2007). Over the course of the first half of the 20th century, two other major resource development projects took place in the Sahtu region. The first was the extraction of pitchblende, uranium, and silver at Port Radium, on the eastern shore of Great Bear Lake, from 1932 to 1982. The second project was the building of the Canol pipeline by

the United States Army between 1942 and 1944 (Van Wyck, 2010; Lackenbauer & Farish, 2007:925). During the same period, revenues from the selling of fur began to decline and Dene families had to rely increasingly on wage labour to survive (Asch, [1977]2014; Coulthard, 2014a). Coulthard explains that upon realising the extent of the effects of this decline:

“The Federal government began to initiate policies aimed at forcefully establishing permanent Dene communities, arguing that this would better facilitate the integration of adult workers into the wage economy [whilst] educating Native children in the skills required for attaining menial employment in an emerging capitalist economy.” (2014b: 151, 152).

By the end of the 1960s, State-funded social, health, housing, and education programs were put in place (Sabin, 1995). Thus, Tulita, began to metamorphose into a permanent dwelling site for four nomadic Sahtu Dene groups (Mountain Dene or Shutah’gotine, Willow lake Dene or Kaalo’gotine, Dehcho Dene, and Hare Dene or Kasho’gotine) (Michéa, 1963). The transformation of the Indigenous North into an administrable territory (away from its function as a colonial frontier) culminated in 1967, when the GNWT was transferred from Ottawa to Yellowknife (Kulchyski, 2005a:25, 28; see also Dickerson, 1992).

This change in strategy led to an influx of non-Indigenous government workers in the NWT, all bound to create the experience that the state and its administrative apparatus were now *tangible*, controlling realities (Kulchyski, 2005a). This bended the NWT’s demographic balance in their favour (Coulthard, 2014b). As a result, the Dene felt increasingly powerless, and needed to negotiate a sense of control back from government (ibid). Thus, the Dene Nation was created in 1969 to ensure that their interests would be represented at national level. In the wake of this event, in 1973, a

group of sixteen Dene leaders filed a legal caveat to halt the industrial transformation of their lands (McMillan and Yellowhorn, 2004:257; Dickerson, 1992). It insisted that the Dene still had a legal title to 117 000 square kilometres of land. Whilst Justice William Morrow from the Supreme Court of the Northwest Territories ruled in their favour, the judgment was eventually invalidated. It nevertheless opened the way to the formal recognition by the Canadian state that the extinguishment of Dene rights and title to land still had to be negotiated through land claims settlement agreements. In parallel, the Federal government in cooperation with a group of multinational oil companies, initiated a plan “to construct a multibillion-dollar pipeline [the Mackenzie Valley pipeline project] that would transport the gas via the Mackenzie River Valley to markets throughout southern Canada and the United States” (Coulthard, 2014b:153). Following the results of a public inquiry on the potential impacts of this project undertaken between 1975 and 1977 by Thomas Berger throughout native communities in the NWT, the Dene Declaration, which demanded autonomy within the Canadian confederacy, was published. The Berger inquiry led to the indefinite postponement of the Mackenzie Valley pipeline project (Berger, 1977; Asch, 2014; Fumoleau, 2007). However, it did not completely halt industrial activities in the NWT. For example, in the Sahtu region, a major programme of expansion of the capacities of oil production and transportation took place in Norman Wells in the early 1980s (Bone and Mahnic, 1984). Oil continued to be extracted in this hamlet until as recently as March 2017 (CBC News, 2017a). To understand the reasons behind the continuation of these processes, it is necessary to now turn towards the question of colonisation and settler colonialism.

## Settler colonialism and structural violence

Canada's ongoing *settler* colonial<sup>52</sup> mode of interaction with Indigenous peoples cannot be doubted (Coulthard, 2014a; Morgensen, 2013; Thielen-Wilson, 2012; Coates, 1985). For instance, In *Far off metal river*, Canadian geographer Emilie Cameron cogently argues that:

“In Canada, the colonial project is defined by the specific dynamics of settler colonialism, in that the colonising group not only occupies and extracts wealth from Indigenous lands but also has settled on them.” (2015:17).

Former settler populations, she adds:

“Aim to feel, finally, *settled*, to be ‘post’ colonial, and this involves a persistent denial of the ongoing displacement and dispossession of Indigenous lands, claims, knowledges and lives.” (ibid).

Similarly, for Coulthard:

“In settler-colonial contexts such as Canada -where there is no formal period marking an explicit transition from an authoritarian past to a democratic present- state-sanctioned approaches to reconciliation tend to ideologically fabricate such a transition by narrowly situating the abuses of settler colonization firmly in the past [leaving] the present structure of colonial rule largely unscathed.” (2014a:22).

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<sup>52</sup> As observed by Povinelli (2016), the underlying roots of colonisation can be found in the ontology implied in Western metaphysics. In fact, for philosopher and historian Susan Bock-Morss, Western metaphysics cannot be disentangled from enlightenment's Eurocentric imperialist and racist world-view (Buck-Morss, 2000; Said, 1994; Pitts, 2011). In *Hegel and Haiti*, she skillfully delineates how “Hegel's philosophy of history has provided for two centuries a justification for the most complacent forms of Eurocentrism” (2000:864). Postcolonial scholar Gyatri Spivak argues cogently that this is because Western metaphysics “forecloses” the “native informant” to assert Western subjectivity as the only *true* object of Being (1999:30). Similarly, for Fanon (1986; 1991) and Aimé Césaire (2000), to exist in a colonial reality is to be in a place (the colony) that has been totally (physically and psychically) transformed by the presence of the coloniser (see also Mbembe, 1992).

The establishment of settler colonies is “premised on displacing indigenes from (or replacing them on) the land” (Wolfe, 1999:1; 2006). Thus, settler colonialism is a “specific mode of domination” (Veracini, 2015:2) that is “intimately related to both colonialism and migration” (ibid, 2010:3). The relationship between settler polities and their Indigenous nations proceeds through the systematic negation (by annihilation, erasure, cooptation and recognition) of aboriginal otherness<sup>53</sup>. For historian Patrick Wolfe, settler states are indeed characterised by structural forms of racism and of economic depredation premised on a strategy of territorial acquisition/control of traditional Indigenous lands (1999).

In this system, Indigenous economies are seen as competing forms of political-economic organisations rather than primitive systems that would, by way of a supposed archaic nature, have to be subservient to settler colonists in order to endure (ibid). For this reason, settler colonialism also seeks the existential collapse of Indigenous polities (ibid). This implies that in settler states, space, violence and power (discursive and political) are normatively entangled together in ways that are uniquely structured to act *against* Indigenous ways of being (Woolford, 2009; Green, 2003; Brody, 2002).

In this sense, settler states’ political power also hinges upon a form of structural violence that is “embedded in ubiquitous social structures normalised by stable institutions and regular experience” (Winter and Leighton, 2001:99). Or, as accurately put by Coulthard, settler states like Canada create a situation in which the:

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<sup>53</sup> One can find a similar critique inscribed at the core of Frantz Fanon’s anti-colonial writings, albeit in ways that seek to subvert it deliberately for revolutionary purposes (Bignall, 2010:63; Fanon, 1991). The existential character of colonisation for the colonised is described as “coloniality” by Nelson Maldonado-Torres (2010), a member of the Latin American Subaltern Studies group (following Quijano, 2000, and Mignolo, 2000).

“Material conditions of poverty and violence that condition the colonial situation appear muted to the colonised because they are understood to be the product of one’s own cultural deficiencies<sup>54</sup>.” (2014a:114).

Thus, in this geo-historical context -that of Canada’s settler colonial *present*-, the question of colonisation harkens back to the problematic of whether “the freedom” enjoyed by minorities in “postcolonial sovereignties does not mean comparable or even worse forms of oppression than under colonial rule” (Young, 2012:25; See also Alfred and Corntassel, 2005; Gregory, 2004; Coulthard, 2014a). The continuing existence of internal forms of colonialism (Watkins, 1977; Coulthard, 2014a; Alfred, 2001; Battiste, 2013; Perley, 1993) and their impacts on experiences of structural racism, ecological destruction, land dispossession, economic, cultural and social deprivation, political exclusion, marginalisation and (gendered) violence (Sharpe, 2003; Daley, 2015) lived by Indigenous communities in settler colonies (Holmes et al., 2015; Loppie et al., 2014; Simpson A, 2008; Thielen-Wilson, 2012) can only substantiate this point. For this reason, in the context of Canada’s Indigenous geographies, it is necessary to “acknowledge the coexistence of ongoing colonial legacies, entrenched material inequities, and already existing forms of cultural and political resistance” (Byrd and Rothberg, 2011:11; See also: Radcliffe, 2012; Cameron et al., 2014:24-25; Johnson et al., 2007b; Blaser, 2014).

In this context, the *post*- of postcolonial, the underlying notion that colonisation ended, thus needs to be problematised, whilst also acknowledging its *de facto* acceptance as a dominant historical narrative (a period that begins, tentatively, with the formal independence of the last Euro-American colony) (Sharp J, 2009; Loomba, 2005;

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<sup>54</sup> Or an improvement in standards of living.

Veracini, 2015). However, it is precisely the fact that this narrative is generally accepted (Cameron, 2015) that poses a problem since it shows that contemporary forms of postcolonisation also stem from the domination of the West over the production and circulation of knowledge (Escobar, 2016; Mignolo, 2002; Dabashi, 2015; Said, 1995; Chakrabarty, 2000).

For instance, in Canada, Cameron writes that:

“The ‘idea of North’ has been central to this dynamic [i.e.: the denial of ongoing dispossession of Northern Indigenous peoples]; Qablunaaq [non-Indigenous, ‘white’ settlers] claims to be fundamentally ‘Northern’, to locate our dreams of national unity in Arctic lands, and to perennially ‘go north’ to discover ourselves reflect the ongoing and impossible desire in settler colonial contexts to legitimise the unresolved, unjust relations that underpin dispossession and settlement.” (2015:17).

Thus, in Canada’s settler context, colonial representations continue to be mediated through Northern orientalist narratives. In these narratives, the experiences, realities and knowledges of Canada’s Northern Indigenous peoples are erased for the benefit of a particular representation of the country’s identity, one in which settlers are the masterful actors. In *Red Skins, White Mask* (2014a), Coulthard draws insightfully from Fanon’s interpretation of Hegel’s master-slave dialectic (1986) to argue that it is because of this situation of power imbalance, that modern liberal policies of settler recognition of Indigenous sovereignties -such as Canada’s land claims settlement agreements with First Nations- are in fact part of “those situations where colonial rule” does not work through the “exercise of state violence” (2014a:25) but rather rely:

“On the ability to entice Indigenous peoples to identify, either implicitly or explicitly, with the profoundly asymmetrical and nonreciprocal forms of recognition either imposed on or granted to them by the settler state and society.” (ibid).

Emphasising that the inherent aim of this process is subjectification, Coulthard adds, that without its metaphysical inversion:

“The Indigenous society will tend to come to see the forms of structurally limited and constrained recognition conferred to them by their colonial “masters” as *their own*: that is, the colonised will begin to identify with “white liberty and white justice.”” (ibid:39).

In fact, for Coulthard, Canada’s liberal politics of recognition (enacted via land claims negotiations/agreements) only serve to achieve long-term settler colonial attempts to dispossess Indigenous nations from their traditional lands and cultures (2014a). In this sense, in Canada’s settler polity, structural violence is mediated through the perpetuation -that is beyond the political decisions made at a particular moment- of unjust social, gendered, political-economic and spatial conditions against Indigenous groups (Rylko-Bauer and Farmer, 2016). This includes material factors, such as diseases caused by exclusion, marginalisation, poverty, poor housing and medical facilities but also suicides caused by psychological and emotional distress resulting from a lack of employment opportunities, limited life choices, reduced protection from harm, racism or environmental destruction (ibid; see also Holmes et al., 2015; Coulthard, 2014a). The colonisation of Indigenous ontologies by EuroCanadian ideals and ways of knowing also creates by essence a silencing of voices which takes the form of self-censorship. This point is echoed by subaltern and postcolonial geopoliticians (Sharp J, 2011; 2013; Kuus, 2013, Sidaway, 2012; Gregory, 2004; Slater, 2011) and by Indigenous geographers (Gergan, 2015).

*Colonisation in the everyday: structures of violence*

In parallel to the aspects investigated previously, there is also a semiotic dimension deployed in the everyday. This dimension leads to a habituation to forms of suffering that are normalised through symbolic (and relatedly linguistic) violence – violence that enables an epistemological system and the individuals that are able to use it to stay in control (Gergan, 2015; Bourdieu, 1993). In *Language & Symbolic Power*, sociologist Pierre Bourdieu writes:

“Symbolic power – as a power of constituting the given through utterances, of making people see and believe, of confirming or transforming the vision of the world and, thereby, action on the world and thus the world itself, an almost magical power which enables one to obtain the equivalent of what is obtained through force - [is] a power that can be exercised only if it is recognised, that is, misrecognised as arbitrary.” (1993:170)<sup>55</sup>.

In *Hunters and Bureaucrats* (2003), Nadasdy sheds an illuminating light on the functioning of this form of violence in the political processes of administration of Indigenous lands in the Yukon. He argues that concepts like “knowledge”, “environment” and “tradition”, which form the taxonomical bases of Northern Indigenous-EuroCanadian resource co-management systems, do not exist as such in native cultures and practices (2003). Their use in the institutional context of Indigenous land governance implies a power-laden strategy to impose a EuroCanadian mode of representation of nature, that is one that proceeds through calculative geographies, epistemological atomism and bureaucratisation (ibid). For Nadasdy, this occurs because, via this process, Indigenous peoples “are compelled to subject their own way of life to external standards of validity established and imposed by scientists and

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<sup>55</sup> Symbolic power includes the ability to name, to create personal taxonomies of place.

resource managers” (ibid: 144). These standards allow the Canadian state to exert a subtle form of political control over what counts ontologically as traditional land, animal behaviour, or forms of government (as well as over the way these entities are conceived to interact). More importantly, they determine how Indigenous concepts like respect or reciprocity are translated and politicised by Ottawa and subsequently applied in the administration of Indigenous lands in ways that fit its model of governance (ibid). Crucially, for Nadasdy, this translation eliminates these concepts’ *Indigenous* meanings (ibid).

In settler Canada, there are thus two phenomena that structure these invisible forms of violence and enable them to function. There is first a material aspect that corresponds to the ways in which infrastructural and physical forms are configured in ways that create suffering and oppression for some and power for others. The second aspect is representational. It is the ability (or rather the lack thereof) to master the cognitive associations, meanings and symbols that operate within dominant political and economic domains. However, as can also be inferred from the previous discussion, a semiotic continuity links these two aspects. It is arguably this continuity that allows these invisible processes of repression/control to operate (that is, to be experienced and represented) as a geopolitical totality.

The question then becomes: what is this semiotic continuity made of in the NWT? DEF’s personal experience can help provide an answer to this question. As the following quotation demonstrates, it is through a mixture of materialities (here, the *physical* infrastructure, that is residential schools, pipelines, mines and trucks, but also the bodies and buildings that enable the circulation of money), and the symbols

associated with them in EuroCanadian ways of being (e.g.: getting a Western education, earning an important salary, driving a truck) that the settler state's structural control is mediated and experienced in the everyday spaces of Northern Indigenous lives. Indeed, from DEF's perspective, it is via a process of material/cognitive re-wiring that the semiotic structuring of the NWT as such has taken place for Northern Indigenous peoples:

'[We are told that] Everything should come from the development of non-renewable resources. That's the way that our brains have become wired. That's a form of colonisation. The majority of people, here in the North: that's the way that their brains are wired so you can say that that's a form of colonisation. So part of decolonisation is to educate people to get their heads out of that whole space and to start looking at the world in a different way. This is a hard thing to do and it's a process. Sometimes it's small steps at a time. Myself, I can see it, because I lived a different lifestyle. I used to be a trapper. And I know that you can live on very little. You don't need a big income. You can live on very little, you don't need big machines and all of that. That's one example of it... Right now, if you are totally into driving big trucks and mining and oil and gas, that's all you are gonna do. You are not gonna be thinking renewable resources. That's gonna be bullshit to you...

Forty years ago, it was a pipeline, the Mackenzie Valley pipeline, it's always been development pressure, it's a lot more now, lot more pipeline, mining, it's more inevitable now...just take Norman Wells for example...it started in 1921, another 5 years and it's gonna be a hundred years. By now we should have had a fourth generation of oil field workers, but no...what happened there? How come? What happened? What's going on? Why we don't have that, you just have to think about that... I am 64, I can tell you that none of my nieces and nephews have the same education as me... It's all messed up now.

In residential school, one bad thing is that you lose the ability to make decisions for yourself, which is not good I think, when others make decisions for you... You get used to that, you get used to some ways, you lose the ability... You let others make decisions for you... Over time over years and years, that's not a good thing... Once you have to make decisions for yourself after that, you find it hard... I am talking about decision-making, even things like deciding what kinds of clothes you should wear and those kinds of things, you know those kinds of decisions become important in later life, they seem like small things but they could be important in your life... I had a colonial education syndrome.'

(Semi-structured, recorded interview with DEF, Yellowknife, 26/03/2015)

DN, a Dene youth activist based in Yellowknife who is involved in organisations promoting the cultural resurgence of traditional Indigenous knowledges and who has personal ties with Tulita, also offered a similar appreciation. As the following quotation shows, for him, the symbols and associations that give meaning to resource exploitation activities in the NWT have been experienced, in their semiotic continuity, as a system of power, whose violence has led to the development of particular pathologies in First Nations communities. For DN, the relationship between this violence, and the ontologies (the beings of commerce, of industry, of colonisation) conveyed in the English language, is evident:

‘We are still operating in the mindset of the 1970s where there’s like, there’s a bunch of people that are there and their whole agenda is to push push push this aggressive resource development and extraction kind of mechanism and regime, I mean that’s the way the world... When we talk about economy... We live in a petro-capitalist system... They created a culture and it’s really embedded in the peoples and places that we live in...

The way it has been presented, there’s always been two things: always the proverbial carrot and the stick... This new mine will lead us to economic development, this new oil and gas field will lead to economic development so that we’ll all be richer, we’ll all be better for it, we will all have jobs and that has been the case up here since at least 1889 when they signed treaty 8 because the whole mindset with the Yukon gold rush, people were travelling through here saying: now we all gonna be rich, let’s go out there, after it... That’s why they established treaty 8 between the crown and the Dene and after that oil was discovered in 1920 in Norman Wells and after that treaty 11 was signed in 1921...

We have...to take back the meaning of some of the words that are used out there...economies are driven by a language; the language of commerce is usually spoken in english so english has certain meanings and definitions behind words...

We are called the NWT but really that’s not a name... It’s a direction from Ottawa and I think that’s the common attitude that people have about this place that we live in here, they don’t really even care about us enough to allow us to have our own name, they just say let’s call this whole area the Northwest Territories...

That's colonisation, right? You come in and you set up your ideas and your way of doing things in another part of the world and without really thinking about the people that are already there... That's the legacy of Christopher Columbus... Colonisation is like a breeding ground for everything that is not good for the human spirit, that's where everything like racism, sexism, discrimination, jingoism... All those 'ism', they are all bred in the process of colonisation, us versus them, epistemology, schools of thought, that's like a form of 'ism' right there, the way I think about things at school is better than what you've learned at that other school and it creates barriers, divisions and puts us in neat little categories so we can be studied. But, that's been a symptom of being colonised. It's systematic, this colonisation and the force of assimilation, subjugation of Indigenous peoples in this country... Then you have a dysfunctional people... The longer that dysfunction continues, it kind of creates a normalisation of how things are.

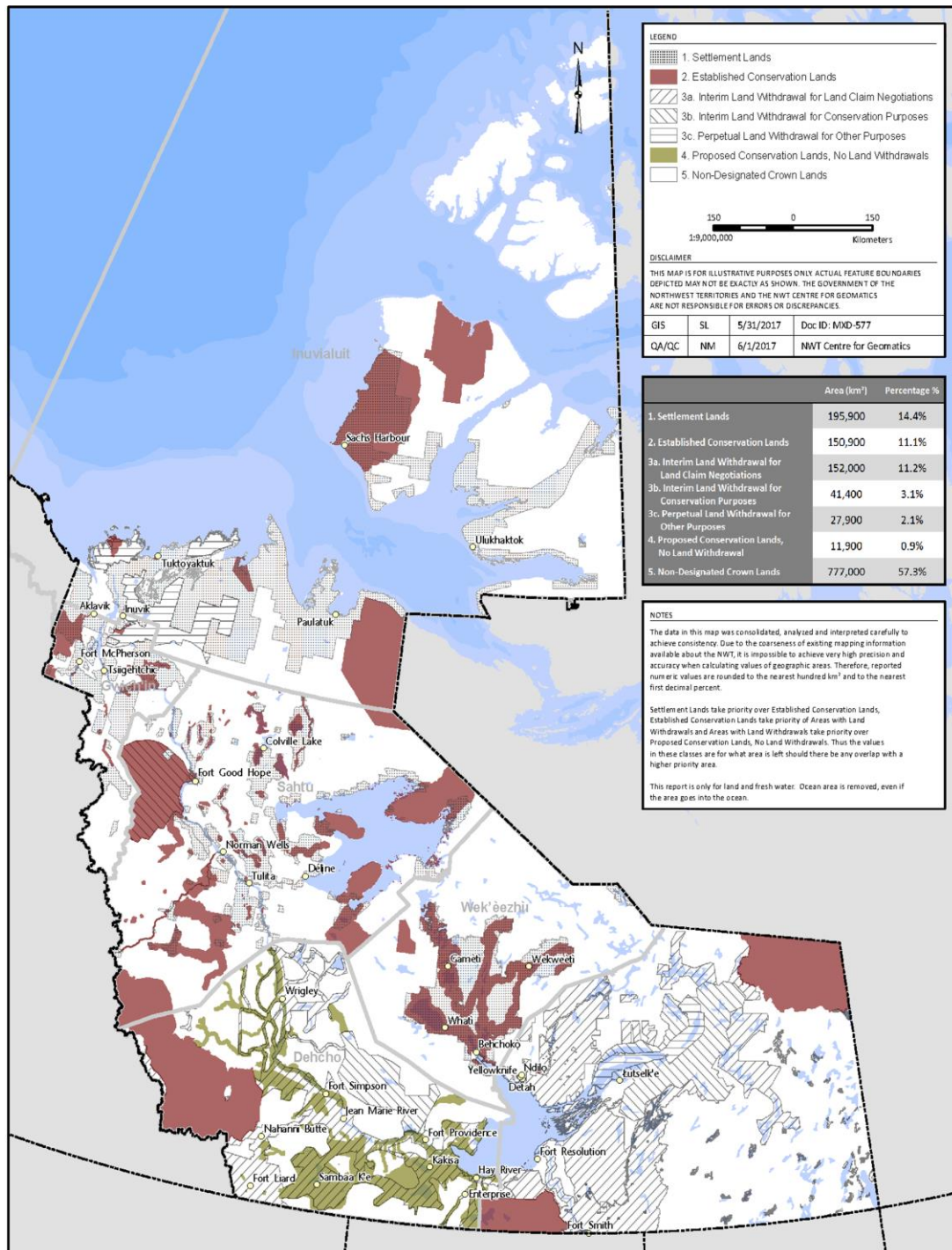
(Semi-structured, recorded interview with DN, Yellowknife, 17/03/2015)

It can also be inferred from these quotations that this interweaving of material and symbolic violence appears as a semiotic continuity because they are experienced as being part of the *same* logos, a logos in which settler colonisation, commodification processes, industrial development, and capitalism are co-dependent (in a *logosphere*). Thus, in Tulita, the current conditions of coloniality cannot be disentangled from the political-economy of industrial capitalism, and the legal system through which settler control is normalised. To understand how these conditions came to be deployed, I turn now to the architecture of governance implemented through the Sahtu Dene and Métis Comprehensive Land Claims Settlement Agreement and its effects.

### **Land claims settlement agreements**

The rise and progressive recognition of Indigenous claims to control their own destinies in the NWT from the 1970s onwards eventually led to the signing of several Land Claims Settlement Agreement with the Federal government (see figure 3 below for a map of lands' status in the NWT). In 1993, one such Comprehensive Land Claims

Settlement Agreement was signed with the Sahtu Dene and Métis (SDMCLCA). However, as cogently argued by Coulthard, the architecture of government that was subsequently put in place only served to “domesticate Indigenous claims to nationhood” and to “rationalise the hegemony of non-Indigenous economic and political interests on Dene territory” (2014b:159; See also Keith, 2015; Povinelli, 2002).



**Figure 3**

Map of the NWT's lands status (source: Northwest Territories Centre for Geomatics, NWT State of the Land, January 1, 2017)

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In effect, by way of its reliance on commodifying discursive processes and devices<sup>56</sup>, the land claims negotiation process, and the political system that emerged with the agreement, entrenched a capitalist ideology (Kulchyski and Bernauer, 2014) and a class-based separation between a wealthy, educated elite and non-economically integrated margins within the NWT's Indigenous communities (Mitchell M, 1996; Green, 2003:67; Dokis, 2010; Alfred, 2009b:80-81). Furthermore, as already noted, the number of resource exploitation mega-projects did not decrease in the decades that followed the signature of the agreement. For example, the Mackenzie Gas Project, born from the ashes of the Mackenzie Valley pipeline inquiry, was re-launched in 2003-2004 by a consortium of Indigenous (Aboriginal Pipeline Group) and non-Indigenous corporations (Esso Imperial Oil, ConocoPhillips, Shell Canada and ExxonMobil). It aimed to exploit natural gas fields in the Mackenzie Delta and deliver natural gas produced there to markets in Canada and the United States through a pipeline built in the Mackenzie Valley (NEB, 2015a). It was hoped that this would create an influx of revenues and opportunities for Indigenous populations in the Sahtu region (Meis Mason et al., 2008; Green, 2003:66-67; Dokis 2017). Yet, after more than 10 years of public consultations and negotiations between all parties involved, the project was abandoned again in 2014.

The SDMCLCA itself was implemented from 1994. At the time of the Dene Declaration (1977), the Dene Nation envisioned decolonisation as a single, united group, which included all Indigenous and Métis peoples in the NWT. Their objectives

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<sup>56</sup> Most if not all these processes were set up and led by the Federal government, to the detriment of the Dene (who then had to learn these processes, and the particular languages, words, behaviours and jargons that underpin them) (Nadasdy, 2003; Irlbacher-Fox, 2009). In this sense and as argued by anthropologist Paul Nadasdy, the land claims settlement agreements in the NWT, as elsewhere in Canada, also helped legitimise the ontological foundations of the Canadian state (2003:xxi-xxii; see also Alfred, 2009b:84).

comprised a rejection of the capitalist ethos in favour of a traditional egalitarian socio-political system, the re-valorisation of renewable resources as a core developmental base, full political control over the entire NWT within the Canadian confederacy, and sovereignty based on a form of endogenously designed land-based economic self-reliance.

When viewed in relation to these objectives, the SDMCLCA gave birth to a governance system based on political-economic and social compromises whose effects run partially opposite to the decolonial aims the Dene Nation had initially set. In fact, the signature of three different land claims settlement agreements (Gwich'in; Inuvialuit, Sahtu Dene and Métis), one land claims and self-government agreement (Tłı̄chǫ), one self-government agreement (Deline), and one treaty settlement agreement (Salt River First Nation) between 1984 and 2015 in the NWT, can arguably be explained by the Indigenous failure to act as a single, united political entity, *beyond* the settler spatial notion of territory and its political-economic reliance on calculated space. These agreements created a territorial division based on the geographical compartmentalisation of each group, according to colonial categories of residence (in settlements/communities), percentage of Indian-ness (establishing a division of rights between Métis, Indian, and Inuit individuals) and history of non-renewable resource development (being the cause for the current demographic composition of the North). Furthermore, and most relevant for this thesis, by prioritising the settlement of Indigenous rights over land and natural resources (rather than say, rights to an autonomous governing entity), it made their commodification the cornerstone of any future development, whatever form it took.

Consequently, the result is an imbalanced system as the nature and effects of each agreement ended up reflecting the political particularities and tribal composition of the Indigenous groups they involved. For instance, the Inuvialuit signed a final agreement in as early as 1984 as a single five settlements-strong entity. This agreement emphasised a tribally owned resource corporation model of development with equal shares given to each Inuvialuit individual (Indian Affairs and Northern Development Canada – IANDC-, 1984). However, in other areas, the land/resource claims negotiation process is still on-going. In some cases, the reason for this delay is ideological and involves the rejection of the SDMCLCA's land corporation model (Dehcho and Akaitcho Dene) or an attempt to secure full control (surface and sub-surface) over the entire portion of tribal lands through the creation of a regional government (following the Tłı̄chų model) (Irlbacher-Fox, 2009; IANDC, 2006; Dehcho First Nations, 2015). For others, it is the result of a political strategy whose aim is to obtain as much local autonomy as possible (Acho Dene Koe/Fort Liard Métis and K'atlodeeche First Nation) or simply to gain the recognition of a particular historical context (this is the case of the Northwest Territories Métis Nation) (IANDC, 2007a; Department of Aboriginal Affairs and Intergovernmental Relations, 2014; Wohlberg, 2014; Tambour, 2010).

Similarly, for those areas where a land and resource claim agreement has already been implemented and where negotiations for the creation of self-governments still have to be undertaken to complete the process, the situation is highly contrasted. For instance, the Tłı̄chų Dene have secured the setting up of a tribal self-government that has jurisdiction over the entire Tłı̄chų territory as part of a final agreement signed in 2003 (IANDC 2003). In parallel, the Gwich'in are still negotiating the creation of a similar entity. However, for the Sahtu Dene and Métis, the situation is more complex as the

region's cultural composition is less homogenous. For communities like Tulita and Fort Good Hope whose populations are composed of different cultural-linguistic groups, any decision-making process became particularly long and difficult. By contrast, Deline, which is predominantly inhabited by members of the same band, became the first and only Sahtu community to see a self-government be put in place in 2015.

In fact, from the momentous beginning of Northern Indigenous activism in the 1970s Ottawa's 'divide and administer' (and *inter alia*, the NWT's) system of government also made use of disagreements among Dene, Métis and Inuit groups as regards to what decolonisation entailed (Hamilton, 1994). Chief among these disagreements was the lack of consensus as to whether the Métis should be treated as an Indigenous nation (ibid). Furthermore, since the Federal government's legal and financial procedures and objectives structured the negotiations process since their inception, most if not all Dene and Métis participants were at a political disadvantage (Kulchyski, 2005b). Thus, from a geopolitical perspective, the SDMCLCA could *only* be a success for Ottawa. And indeed, it was, since only 15% of the Sahtu region's lands became settlement lands, and less 5% of these settlement lands' subsurface resources are now under the jurisdiction of the Sahtu Dene and Métis (SDMCLCA, 1993).

### **The geo-coding of the NWT**

From a semiotic perspective, the SDMCLCA also represents the final step in the process of deployment of the spatialisation of EuroCanadian ways of knowing in the Sahtu region since it *normalised* for the Dene and Métis, a grided, or geo-coded, organisation of Denendeh. One way of conveying this idea is by using the spatial metaphor of 'boundaries'. For instance, sociologist Stephen Cornell writes:

“By the “boundary legacies of colonialism”, I refer to the boundaries into which colonial powers fit Indigenous peoples over time: spatial or geographical, political/administrative, and even cognitive – the boundaries of identification that separate “us” from “them” in the minds of Indigenous peoples themselves. The “lines”, so to speak – spatial, political mental -that today demarcate Indigenous peoples in Canada [are] to a significant degree colonial constructions, products in part of European invasion, colonization and imposed control.” (2013:35).

In the Sahtu region, these boundaries were given a very concrete and physical reality via the SDMCLCA’s emphasis on the (Western) notion of property. As cogently noted by political geographer Nicholas Blomley, “Settler property is not open-ended, but is only available in a finite set of legal forms and practices.” (2014:3). Crucially, property, is also a *Western* signifier associated almost exclusively with spatial fixity and capital accumulation (Blomley, 2014; 2016; Harris, 2002). Via *property*, within settler spaces of negotiations pertaining to territory, First Nations can only possess their lands “through the very tools of land title that had originally served as instruments of dispossession.” (Blomley, 2014:3). Thus, land claims agreements like the SDMCLCA, rely on the same geopolitical logic -a settler attempt to discipline Indigenous spaces- as the numbered treaties that preceded them.

Importantly, these agreements also entrenched the idea that it is the Crown that has ultimate jurisdiction over land titling since they confirm its *normative* anteriority to Indigenous occupancy. Hence, through such inter-related notions as fee simple, land uses, surface and sub-surface rights of ownership, access, use and alienation, *property*, and the Western doctrine of tenure that sustains it, “entails an attempt to stabilise or remake Indigenous reality” (Blomley, 2014:9). The underlying metaphysical assumption behind this strategy is that Indigenous title to land is *not* property and that its categorisation into calculable, predictable patterns, and thus its fungibility in the

EuroCanadian system of spatiality is necessary for it to be recognised as such (ibid). The notion of clarity (of rights, titles, as well as geological and topological categories) is essential to this logic. For historical geographer Cole Harris, cartographic technologies that involve the transformation of Indigenous spaces into rationalised grids made of clear geometrical shapes, via systematic mapping, geological or topological surveying, and numbered zoning for the purpose of land use planning, are central to this process (2002).

Both Blomley (2003; 2014) and Harris (2002) emphasise that these technologies also aim to forcefully impose the integration of Indigenous spaces into capitalist networks of production and accumulation. For instance, for Blomley, “violence plays an integral role in the legitimation, foundation, and operation of a regime of private property” (see also Harris, 2008), since by making sense of, and navigating:

“The grid on a daily basis, we internalise and reproduce the “self-restraint” associated with property [and make] possible a capitalist market in parcels of land and [the] creation of the boundaries that are so vital to a liberal legal regime.” (Blomley, 2003:131).

Thus, central to this process of geographical disciplining is the nature of the ontology of land (what it is, how it is defined) that is operated in the discursive and material spaces of Indigenous land claims settlement agreements. Land, writes anthropologist Tania Li, has three characteristics:

“[First,] Its uses and meanings are not stable and can be disputed. Second, its materiality, the form of the resource, matters. Land is not like a mat. You cannot roll it up and take it away. It has presence and location. Third, inscription devices – the axe, the spade, the plough, the title deed, the tax register, maps, graphs, satellite images, ancestral graves, mango trees – do more than simply

record the presence of land as a resource: they are integral to assembling it as a resource for different actors.” (2014:589).

When land is conceived exclusively in terms of property rights, it not only enables its geopolitical appropriation through state-sanctioned laws (and therefore normalises the state’s monopoly over the production of sovereign space), it also enacts, in a performative sense, a mode of being that legitimises its representation and practice as capitalised use-value (ibid, Harris, 2002; Bridge, 2017). In this sense, *land use planning*, a process that is for instance part and parcel of the SDMCLCA, gives normative power to the settler state to “specify how and by whom [property] rights can be acquired, and [establish] procedures and actions for particular physical environments” (Bridge, 2017:13). It also silences other ontologies of land, in particular in the case of the SDMCLCA, Dene ontologies, according to whom land does not require calculative planning, nor geometrically shaped boundaries or numbers to be used and where more-than-human and non-human beings have a bearing on customary tenure practices (Dokis, 2017; Nadasdy, 2003; see also chapter 6 in this dissertation).

The common semiotic thread that structures the SDMCLCA is the assembling of land as a *commodity*. For instance, the agreement begins with these lines:

“The Sahtu Dene and Métis and Canada have negotiated this agreement in order to meet these objectives...  
to provide for certainty and clarity of rights to ownership and use of land and resources...  
to encourage the self-sufficiency of the Sahtu Dene and Métis and to enhance their ability to participate fully in all aspects of the economy...  
to provide the Sahtu Dene and Métis with specific benefits, including financial compensation, land and other economic benefits...  
to provide the Sahtu Dene and Métis the right to participate in decision making concerning the use, management and conservation of land, water and resources.” (1993:2)

To achieve these objectives, the agreement established a distinction between settlement lands (“Sahtu lands outside local government boundaries”), municipal lands (“land within local government boundaries for residential, commercial, industrial and traditional purposes”) and protected areas (which include pre-existing national parks set up under Federal legislation and new areas proposed for conservation under the new regulatory regime) (SDMCLCA, 1993:7, 72, 77). Settlement lands are held by specific Sahtu organisations in fee simple. These organisations took the name of *settlement* (later, land and financial) *corporations* with jurisdiction over land titles and capital transfers managed on behalf of their respective signatories and received from Ottawa as part of the agreement. These are separated according to the geographical boundaries established in the agreement -three district land corporations (Fort Good Hope, Deline and Tulita) and five community land corporations-. At the regional level, the Sahtu Secretariat Incorporated was given responsibility for coordinating all seven land corporations. It also holds Federal financial transfers in trust for these corporations. The Indian act band institutional system remained in place (community band councils and chiefs) for local decision-making orientation but lost most of its political power following the implementation of the SDMCLCA. For example, in Tulita, two land and financial (community) corporations were created: the Tulita (Dene) Land and Financial Corporation and the Fort Norman Métis Lands and Financial Corporation with almost full control over the political-economic future of the community. As part of the agreement, Sahtu Dene and Métis title comprises the following:

“39 624 square kilometres of lands in fee simple, reserving therefrom the mines and minerals, whether solid, liquid or gaseous that may be found to exist within, upon or under such lands and the right to work the same, subject to any rights, titles or interests in the lands existing at the date of settlement legislation; and (b) 1 813 square kilometres of lands in fee simple, including the mines and minerals, whether solid, liquid or gaseous that may be found to exist within,

upon or under such lands, subject to any rights, titles or interests in the lands existing at the date of settlement legislation.” (SDMCLCA, 1993:82).

In other words, most of the Sahtu settlement area’s surface and almost all its sub-surface remained under Federal control (later transferred to the authority of the GNWT).

Furthermore, and as is clear from the above quotation, through the SDMCLCA, Sahtu Dene and Métis land title is transformed into fee simple estates. Fee simple, notes

Blomley:

“Is the way most private property owners hold their property, enjoying broad rights to access, use, and alienate. [It] is a grant from the Crown, which holds the allodial title. “Simple” signifies that the interest can be passed on to heirs and is not restricted.” (2002:8).

Blomley cogently argues that the use of fee simples aims to acknowledge the particularity of Indigenous spatiality since it gives First Nations a legal means, within settler regimes of sovereignty and recognition, to own their land jointly and thus the freedom to distribute property rights to their members in whichever way they choose (ibid). However, it also allows Ottawa to retain normative control over the manner in which that spatiality is expressed in geopolitical terms (ibid), the purpose being to assert the country’s sovereignty. Although apparently peripheral in the property rights architecture developed in the agreement, the following lines are symptomatic of this logic:

“Agents, employees, contractors of government and members of the Canadian Armed Forces shall have the right to enter, cross and stay on Sahtu lands and waters overlying such lands and to use natural resources incidental to such access to deliver and manage government programs and services, to carry out inspections pursuant to law and to enforce laws. Government shall give prior notice of such access to the designated Sahtu organization when, in the opinion of government, it is reasonable to do so”. (SDMCLCA, 1993:94).

In this sense, and as convincingly put by native studies scholar Shiri Pasternak, this strategy of “cultural recognition of Indigenous difference is meant to disarm resistance while it circumscribes the proprietary aspect of Indigenous sovereignty.” (2015:180). On Sahtu settlement lands, ownership is collective but individual use and access is predicated upon the ability to alienate on the basis of band membership, which is itself a condition of one’s ability to “identify [an] ancestor that has lived in, used or occupied the settlement area on or before 1921 and [to] show [direct] biological relationship to this person” (TLFC, 2008). Yet, at the same time and as noted previously, by framing the terms of the agreement exclusively through a EuroCanadian capitalist proprietary logic, the Federal government becomes the sole purveyor of Dene and Métis sovereignty over their customary lands. Thus, the SDMCLCA also inscribes the capitalist ethos -the idea that the entrepreneurial spirit, the marketisation of the land-base for financial gains, and wage labour, are synonymous with collective and individual economic progress-, at the heart of the the manner in which it construes the land. This point is made clear in the following quotation:

“To achieve [economic development], government shall take such measures as it considers reasonable, in light of its fiscal responsibility and economic objectives, including: b) assistance in the development of commercially viable businesses and enterprises of the participants, and when necessary, identification of possible sources of financial assistance; (c) provision of business and economic training and educational assistance to participants so that they may be able to participate more effectively in the Northern economy; and (d) encouragement of the employment of participants in the settlement area, including employment in major projects and developments, in the public service and public agencies.” (SDMCLCA, 1993:42).

Implied in the SDMCLCA’s architecture is also the deployment of a complex of cartographic technologies aimed at the systematic coding of the Sahtu region’s geography. The discursive and semiotic apparatus that gives meaning to the notion of

land use planning is critical to the geopolitical functioning of this complex, particularly since it is there that *property* is used to make Dene land fungible, and thus governable. Indeed, as convincingly argued by Blomley, this association “entails the construction of a specific relationship between planning and property, with a concern at the regulation of things and spaces through zoning, that seeks to enroll private property in order to achieve desired ends” (2016:352-353).

This logic subtends the Sahtu Land Use Plan (SLUP, 2013), whose geographical scope covers the entire Sahtu settlement area (and not just settlement lands and municipal lands). The SLUP establishes 6 different “Land Use Zones”: General Use Zones (GUZs are for all types of land uses), Special Management Zones (SMZs have the same purpose as GUZs, whilst also being to some extent protected for their cultural and ecological significance), Conservation Zones (CZs are “significant traditional, cultural, heritage and ecological areas in which specified land uses are prohibited”), Proposed Conservation Initiatives (PCIs are areas that are to become protected), Established Protected Areas, and Community Boundaries (ibid:28-29). Most important among these are the GUZs and SMZs, since these are considered to be “the economic engines of the region, promoting sustainable development, generating revenues and providing jobs.” (ibid:28-29). A total of 66 zones are listed in the SLUP, a majority of which (representing 78.34% of the Sahtu settlement area) are GUZs and SMZs (ibid:29). Non-renewable resource exploration, exploitation and production activities take place on GUZs and SMZs. However, industrial use of Conservation Zones and Proposed Conservation Initiatives for the purpose of facilitating development happening on GUZs or SMZs is allowed (i.e. “quarrying, transportation and infrastructure development”), provided that:

“Such activity is necessary in order to carry out a permitted land use outside the zone, and the user will be authorised to conduct the land use outside the zone (for example, subject to other applicable Plan conditions, water may be taken from a Conservation Zone to the extent necessary to carry out authorised oil and gas activities in a Special Management Zone or General Use Zone, and a pipeline and related infrastructure may be built in a Conservation Zone in order to transport hydrocarbons lawfully produced in a Special Management Zone or General Use Zone, or to connect authorised pipelines in other zones) [no] feasible alternative [exists]; the activity avoids significant ecological and cultural areas [and] minimise any foreseeable adverse impacts on the ecological and cultural values identified for the zone, including subsistence use.” (ibid: 29-30).

Thus, the SLUP offers clear spatial provisions to enable industrial development to continue in the Sahtu region. Zoning, or spatial compartmentalisation, produces an abstract space detached from the realities of Dene lived spaces, and most importantly, from the supernatural aspects of Denendeh. From an animist perspective, one can question the assumption, implied in the above quotation and throughout the SLUP, that animal, plant, land, and water beings always obey these zoning delimitations. For instance, all zones are numbered (from 1 to 66) and their diagrammatic representations are mapped following Western cartographic conventions, in particular via the use of artificial territorial boundaries, ratios of distances, or geometrical shapes used in lieu of actual geomorphologies. The SLUP also excludes “government funded geological research for the purpose of determining the geological potential of the area” from the manner in which it defines mineral, oil and gas exploration and development activities (ibid:30-31). Hence, geological and topological surveying, spatial compartmentalisation (by this I mean the creation of artificial spatial boundaries), scientific naming and coding (numbered zones proceed from the same symbolic logic as mathematical taxonomies, notwithstanding their use in military jargon), and the recognition of spaces of cultural exception (CZs and PCIs), constitute the semiotic fabric of the SLUP. It is this semiotic fabric that enables the SDMCLCA to take

material shape in the everyday lives of the Dene. By way of doing so, it produces a settler *territory* -it transforms Denendeh into a geopolitical component of Canada-. This idea can be inferred from Elden (2013b:322) for whom territory is “a bundle of political technologies”, the “political counterpart to notion of calculating space” and it is thus “the extension of the state’s power” in the Sahtu region. More precisely, Elden writes that:

“Territory is not simply land, in the political-economic sense of rights of use, appropriation, and possession attached to a place; nor is it a narrowly political-strategic question that is closer to a notion of terrain. Territory comprises techniques for measuring land and controlling terrain. Measure and control -the technical and the legal- need to be thought alongside land and terrain.” (ibid:323).

Rose-Redwood refers to these techniques of geo-coding as geopower and cogently argues that it is through them that governments are able to *know* space, or rather to produce a spatiality that they can control so as to administer populations (2006). In this sense, and to reuse Olsson’s expression cited in the introduction, the SDMCLCA enacts the *ontological transformation* of Denendeh (it fashions it into a different being) into a settler space, the ‘Sahtu settlement area’. The SLUP serves as a geopolitical device in this process. As a complex of semiotic technologies, it subtends geopower, and determines what counts as land use and what does not (and thus also which beings *assemble* land).

Indeed, what transpires in the spatiality developed in the SLUP, is first the utilisation of boundaries, surveys, numbers, geometrical figures and diagrams as *material* performances that allow the settler state to produce and normalise its geopolitical authority ‘on the ground’, in the everyday spaces of life in Denendeh. Second, it also

serves as a means to fabricate the *permanent* presence of the settler state *in abstracto* via the invisible operations of a particular semiosis of land (land as property, as right, as territory, as use-value, or as tactical, and strategic resource). More importantly, this abstraction creates the sense that a spatial semiotic *absolute* exists beyond the normalisation of settler geopolitical authority over Dene lands. Indeed, it subtly redefines, or rather displaces, the field of Indigenous-settler power struggles from issues of local control over space to the ability to master the semiosis of EuroCanadian modes of being.

One example of this semiotic displacement is found in the ontological distinction established via the governance architecture of the SDMCLCA between water, wildlife, land, and non-renewable resources. For instance, in addition to the SLUP, which, as can be inferred from the previous discussion, establishes general guidelines for the geocoding of the Sahtu region, several organisations were set up in the wake of the agreement: the Sahtu Land Use Planning Board (SLUPB), the Sahtu Renewable Resources Board (SRRB) and the Sahtu Land and Water Board (SLWB) (however the SLUPB and the SLWB were established in 1998 following the implementation of the Mackenzie Valley Resource Management Act). These organisations were given responsibility for the administration of the SLUP (SLUPB), the management of wildlife, fisheries, and forestry (SRRB), and the regulation of the use of land and water and the deposit of waste in the Sahtu settlement area (SLWB), respectively (SLWB, 2014). However, the National Energy Board (NEB), a Federal organisation based in Calgary, Alberta, has kept jurisdiction over the regulation of shale oil and gas activities in the Sahtu region (*ibid*). Lastly, the Mackenzie Valley Environmental Impact Review Board (MVEIRB), based in Yellowknife, conducts environmental impacts assessments

for industrial development activities taking place in the Mackenzie valley. All local and regional organisations function as co-management institutions. The SRRB defines co-management in the following terms:

“The purpose of the co-management system is mainly to ensure that Sahtu residents are able to participate in the management and regulation of our resources in a direct and meaningful way. The new system recognises the special knowledge that Sahtu residents have about the land, and accounts for their rights as land users and participants in decision-making. The co-management boards are accountable to the public in that Aboriginal, Territorial and Federal governments nominate their directors. To ensure an equal voice for the rights of land claim beneficiaries, the Sahtu Secretariat Incorporated nominates one half of the members on each of the Sahtu boards. Although the three levels of government are involved in the appointment of board members, the boards themselves are independent, and don’t directly answer to any level of government. As so-called “Institutions of Public Government,” they are accountable only to their legal mandate.” (2005, no page).

In practice however, since potential Dene board representatives must have no prior criminal convictions before their nomination is accepted, the boards of these organisations are often left with no acting Indigenous board members for long periods of time. Thus, as cogently demonstrated by Nadasdy, co-management institutions created as part of Northern land claims settlement agreements function more like an attempt on the part of settler Canada to translate Indigenous:

“Cultural beliefs, values, and practices into a language that can be understood and acted upon by EuroCanadian bureaucrats, lawyers, and politicians... In addition, the apparently straightforward act of negotiating these agreements - not to mention implementing them- requires the creation of governmental structures and processes within First Nations communities themselves that are far more compatible with the lifestyles of EuroCanadian bureaucrats.” (2003:223).

Similarly, in the Sahtu region, not only did the governance structure of the SDMCLCA manufacture and legitimise a EuroCanadian bureaucracy of experts (lawyers, scientists,

advisors, academics, government employees), tailored to the Sahtu settlement area's fabricated geography, but it also developed its own, self-sustaining, epistemological logic, one that is organised to be compatible with EuroCanadian modes of being. Indeed, concepts like 'zones', 'conservation', 'use', 'wildlife', 'management', 'board', 'risk' or 'assessment', stem from a semiotic context -an interrelated system of signs, languages, symbols, behaviours, things- that is detached from Dene experiences of walking in the bush, of hunting, trapping and foraging for survival, and reciprocating acts of respects with other-than-human and more-than-human beings. For example, the very notion of 'land' as an external 'thing' whose actions and thoughts are considered non-existent and are thus viewed as being disentangled from those of humans, water, plants and animals that is implied in the SLUP, contradicts Denendeh's supernatural unity.

What also transpires from the SLUP is that when land is no longer conceived as an *agential* junction of human and other-than--human/more-than-human beings but rather as an abstract space *absolutised* through a mode of thinking that posits humans as being the sole entities with the power to be or produce signs, it becomes different signs altogether (e.g.: fixed capital, multiple types of 'uses', diagrams, numbers, colours, maps, and so on...). It is arguably these signs that act like beings of metamorphosis since they quite literally *possess* Dene supernature by making it other (the notion of property being here a case in point). For instance, and as will be further discussed in the following chapters, I observed that the proliferation of industrial things in the everyday spaces of the Tulita Dene -for example, TV sets, pre-fabricated housing units, cars, mobile phones, gaming consoles, snowmobiles- bring together a world, a *dimensional thereeness* of EuroCanadian capitalist values that separates metaphorically

their lives from Denendeh's supernature. In his *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* ([1930]2001), Max Weber argued that what characterises modern capitalism is not the pursuit of gains per se but the *ethos* that underlies it, that is, the *rational* belief that what matters above all else is the act of making money and that this can only be done through one's systematic dedication to work for a living (2001:33-34)<sup>57</sup>.

Similarly, in the Sahtu region, it is precisely this capitalist ethos that infuses the SDMCLCA's semiosis since its objective is, from the outset, to instigate an entrepreneurial spirit among the Sahtu Dene and Métis. The material environment that makes the fabric of Tulita can in this sense, and following Weber, be viewed as particularly suited to that spirit. However, and as I have already suggested, I offer to go beyond this interpretation in this thesis by contending that this material environment is in fact specifically supportive of that spirit, in that it not only conveys its ways of thinking and being but also, crucially, it transforms whoever or whatever is already there to fit its gentological grid. One way of substantiating this argument is by analysing this relationship, as it operates in Tulita, through the concept of geopower, an enterprise which I have already begun in reference to the processes of geo-coding underlied in the SDMCLCA and which I will pursue in the remainder of this dissertation.

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<sup>57</sup> Weber's theory can be criticised for the fact that it relies on the links he establishes between protestantism and capitalism. One can indeed argue that in Tulita, capitalism came *before* and developed *during* the advent of Roman Catholicism.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I have sought to demonstrate the relationships between Canada's settler colonialism, capitalist processes of commodification of land and peoples and industrial development in the Sahtu region. I have argued in particular that the SDMCLCA should be viewed as a technology of geo-coding, part of a strategy of settler geopolitical control of the Sahtu region and its peoples and as such a critical component of geopower's machinery. In Canada, settler control harkens back to the continuation of colonial processes of structural and institutional violence that are conveyed by dominant knowledges, norms and laws. Crucially, at the core of the functioning of these structures of violence and power is the EuroCanadian regimes of signs: maps, infrastructures, norms, laws and at a macro-structural level, political-economic modes of exchange, and ways of being, speaking and knowing that impose a particular ontological hierarchy over Indigenous peoples (one in which Indigenous modes of being are ignored, transformed or belittled), and thus a particular mode of spatialisation over their lands. As I have argued in the last section of this chapter, I propose to view the workings of this system of signs, following Olsson's ontological transformation (2007), as a metamorphosis of signs, and thus of beings (from Dene animist place-based to settler industrial capitalist, regimes of signs). For instance, as is shown further in chapters 5 and 6, what is rendered invisible in this geopolitical transformation are beings that *appear* to have lost their political potency (i.e. nahanis, prophecies and prophets, elders and members of peripheral families that have no say in contemporary structures of power, and animal species that are disappearing) because they are made to belong to *nonlife*. In parallel, signs, behavioural possibilities and things that are attached materially to traditional pre-urban, pre-settler worlds, such as rituals and places with medicine power, meteorological phenomena that have no regulatory value in the

SDMCLCA, features of the land that have lost their subsistence function (and their related names), are progressively rendered semiotically marginal (but as I will show, only in their pre-contact forms) since, through processes of geo-coding, they no longer act as *sovereign* beings that have to be respected and cared for (but are rather construed normatively as spaces of *geontological nothingness*). Thus, by geo-coding the familiar worlds of the Tulita Dene and Métis, geopower and the colonial, industrial and capitalist processes that subtend it, in effect transformed Denendeh into a *settler territory*.

At this stage, however, I have only investigated the manner in which this metamorphosis is enacted, through the SDMCLCA, via immaterial signs, that is words, languages, maps and diagrams, ideas or concepts that enable the re-shaping of Denendeh into a calculative space. In the following chapters, I will attempt to demonstrate that a similar interpretation can be made about not only the material things that are circulated in the intimate spaces of everyday life in Tulita but also about the physical infrastructure that canalise the movements of people in and out of the settlement. However, in order to do so, it is necessary to review the links that can be established between these aspects and the notion of the socio-ontological production of space in the literature on geopolitics and geopower. This is the object of the next chapter.

## *Chapter three - Geopower, geopolitics and ontology*

### **Introduction**

At this stage, it is possible to introduce a third kind of semiotic reading to my dream, that is, that of space. At the beginning of the preceding chapter, I have suggested that beyond the possible stories (and narratives) that could be produced to interpret this extra-ordinary experience, one of the most plausible speculative possibilities is that it depicts a struggle, a struggle with other-than/more-than-human beings. Yet, at the *infra*-structural level, this dream also substantiates the importance of a second sign process in my own mediation of my experience of being in Tulita. It is that of the spatiality of Denendeh. In my dream, Bear Rock, the Dehcho/Mackenzie River, and buildings belonging to the settlement, are the most identifiable features of this spatiality, albeit in distorted forms. This spatial familiarity also relied on the feeling of being ‘there’, walking in the direction of Bear Rock, entering in communication with the sign-beings of this place, that is, finally, gaining a sense of being-*in-this-world*, precisely because of its uncanny similarity with the *same* land experienced when awake.

As noted by anthropologist Tim Ingold, this sense hinges upon the impression of the dreamer’s self being-in-movement, conveyed by the personal conviction that she/he is interacting with an *other world*, that is with an other kind of cosmos formed by a different, yet similar, mixture of sky, fire (in my dream, both incarnated through a reddish glow), earth (as Denendeh and its beings) and water (I was after all on the Mackenzie river):

“The world of one’s dreams [is] precisely the same as that of one’s waking life. But in the dream, you perceive it with different eyes or through different senses, while making different kinds of movements [and] possibly even in a different medium such as in the air or the water rather than on land.” (2011:239).

Second, this feeling of uncanny familiarity also stemmed from the fact my dreaming self was, to a certain extent, this interweaving of sky, fire, earth and water (Ingold, 2013:738). This impression of internal metamorphosis, of finally understanding a different spatiality from the inside out can be viewed as a geontological<sup>58</sup> “raw moment” (Hastrup, 2010:204), that is a moment when an:

“Unknown territory arises on the margins of [a] coded space, and the entire topography seemed to shift around through a process of transcoding. Raw moments are thresholds of knowledge [by] their being highly charged with emotion... Raw moments are indicators of transcoding as much as they are the reason for it” (ibid:206).

If, by transcoding, one can understand a shift in perception, then being somewhere necessarily presupposes an ability to order ontologically (i.e: to define who counts as being and what is Being) -and thus to (re-)produce socially- that somewhere, whilst at the same time being open to the possibility of being transformed by it<sup>59</sup>. The geontological transformations enacted through such a process thus also hinge upon a

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<sup>58</sup> The *geontological*, according to Povinelli, pertains to the question of “the antagonism between various forms of human life-worlds and their different effects on the given-world.” (2016:12). In other words, the geontological is what counts as life and nonlife in the manner in which space, land, territory, earth co-produce beings (ibid). Here, I mean precisely this: a shift in one’s perception of what counts as life and nonlife in the *geos*.

<sup>59</sup> On this point, Foucault’s definition of the notion of *order* provided in *The Order of Things* (2002b) is telling: “Order on the other hand, is established without reference to an exterior unit... We establish series in which the first term is a nature that we may intuit independently of any other nature; and in which the other terms are established according to increasing differences.” (2002b:59). In other words, order is established through dialectical interactions with what appears to us in our surrounding environment, nature. The relationships between these interactions and sign processes are also clearly delineated: “When dealing with the ordering of complex natures (representations in general, as they are given in experience), one has to constitute a taxinomia, and to do that one has to establish a system of signs... The signs established by thought itself constitute as it were, an algebra of complex representations; and algebra, inversely is a method of providing simple natures with signs and of operating upon those signs.” (ibid:79-80).

geopolitical relatedness with one's familiar environment, that is, an interaction with that environment which leads to it being shaped along the lines of a particular system of spatialisation. This is precisely what philosopher Carl Schmitt implies in his concept of the *nomos*, that is, a process of geopolitical ordering (and politico-theological narrating), which follows from one's physical appropriation, and subsequent semiotic and normative systematisation, of nature (2003). For philosopher Kojin Karatani it is precisely this process, which he calls 'will to architecture', that is at the core of Western metaphysics (1995:18).

At this point of my demonstration, it is thus possible to offer a third speculation: that my dream was also a metaphorical expression of my attempt to spatialise, to produce socio-politically and thus to render familiar, Denendeh's spaces (or in other words, to categorise, through the works of my dreaming self, what I count as life and nonlife in this unfamiliar *geo*). In the introduction to this dissertation, I have proposed to link this geontological process with geopower. In this chapter I aim to substantiate this proposition by reviewing the literature through which links between geopower, geopolitics, signs and ontology can be established. In particular, from the literature on critical, feminist, psychoanalytic, popular (and non-representational) and urban geopolitics (and their underlying reliance on Lefebvre's concept of the social production of space), I demonstrate that geopower operates in the intimate, banal spaces of the everyday. I also show that these operations function through the deployment of (almost exclusively neoliberal, industrial and more generally capitalist) urban, architectural and infrastructural material forms and *inter alia* through the metamorphic effects that this has on beings' affects and representations of their environment. Finally, following Lefebvre, I contend that the relations between space and modes of material

production and exchange can be viewed as not only social but also dialectic. I conclude this chapter by arguing that, from a geopolitical perspective, geopower acts as an ontological force in Tullita precisely because it configures/structures the dynamic relationships that link signs to matter and to *Being*/beings, as well as to the particular orderings of space that result from this dialectical interaction (since this ordering determines the types of beings that are given metaphysical reality and political sovereignty).

### **Critical geopolitics, geopower and governmentality**

Geopolitical scholarship has investigated the concept of geopower in two ways. The first stems from Ó Tuathail's foundational work on this concept and summarised in his *Critical Geopolitics* (1996). In it, Ó Tuathail (also Gerard Toal) interprets geopower as the privileged object of study of critical geopolitics. He defines geopower as:

“The functioning of geographical knowledge not as an innocent body of knowledge and learning but as an ensemble of technologies of power concerned with the governmental production and management of territorial space.” (ibid:7).

Crucially, in relation to the argument I advanced in the introduction to this chapter, he contends that it is via these technologies that political organisations have been able to “impose order and meaning upon space” to “exercise their power” (ibid:1). Ó Tuathail's conceptualisation of geo-power<sup>60</sup> -the hyphen is used in geo-politics and geo-geography to highlight the critical function of discourse in “scripting [global] space by state-society

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<sup>60</sup> Writing *geopower* without the hyphen serves to highlight the fact that definitions of this term are always also influenced by the universalising tendencies of Western metaphysics.

intellectuals and institutions” (ibid:66-67)- follows from Jacques Derrida’s deconstructionist approach (1997) and from Foucault’s work (2002b) on governmentality<sup>61</sup> (Ó Tuathail 1996; see also Dalby, 1991; Dodds and Sidaway, 1994). He thus observes that “the problematic of geo-power concerns the modern governmentalization of geography” (1996:7), since geopolitics took the form of geopolitics in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, because of this period’s association with the state-led development of governmentality as a rationalised system of administration of populations (Criekemans, 2010; Ó Tuathail, 2005a:66). Similarly, for Agnew, the modern geopolitical imagination (1998) is “a particularistic spatial ontology of world politics” that originated in 16<sup>th</sup> century European concepts of nation-state, identity and power and was later exported through colonialism (Ó Tuathail, 2005a:66-67). It worked through the institutionalisation of “ethnocentric ways of seeing and imagining world political space” (ibid). It also essentialised, exoticised and absolutised differences between places whilst normalising “a state-centric ontology” in which the relationship between space, state, territory, and society is naturalised (what Agnew termed the ‘territorial trap’) (ibid).

Ó Tuathail’s critical geopolitics focuses on the symbolic technologies (textual, discursive, narrative and pictorial) of “seeing and displaying space” (ibid:12). In an essay on geopolitics written as part of a *Critical Dictionary of Key Concepts of Cultural geography* (2005a), he specifies further what geo-power entails:

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<sup>61</sup> Governmentality corresponds to a series of technologies through which the concept of ‘population’ was invented and used by modern liberal states to rationalise the government of peoples over territories (Foucault, 2002a). Thus, for Ó Tuathail the rise of governmentality served not only to solidify the modern state as the dominant model of government over space, but also the essential role of its bureaucracies in ensuring the administrative operations of this government, and the subjectification of populations as “datum, as a field of intervention, and as an objective of governmental techniques.” (Ó Tuathail, 1996:8). For this reason, political-economy became the “science and objective of the governmentali(sed) state.” (ibid).

“Within the universe of possible geo-graphy / geo-politics is that domain of knowledge directly related to the state as a politico-territorial entity. This domain of knowledge can be described as ‘geo-power’, or the geo-graphing/geo-politics produced by the state as a functioning nexus of power, culture and territory. Thus, the production of cartographic maps of the territory of the state is a form of geo-power, as is the creation of territorial surveys, administrative inventories and the demarcation of borders and frontiers... Geo-power is geographical knowledge for and by the state. The particular structure, form and functioning of geo-power depends on the nature of the state and interstate system” (2005a:66).

Space, for Ó Tuathail (but also for his former doctoral supervisor, John Agnew), is constructed by intellectuals (politicians, diplomats, policy advisors) and invested with ideas, narratives, ideologies and values (e.g.: masculine, racialised) so as to convey particular dramas, peoples and types of places (1992). Thus, in *Geopolitics and discourse*, a paper published in 1992 that synthesises critical geopolitics’ objectives and proposals, Ó Tuathail and Agnew contend that critical geopolitics is concerned with investigating the workings of what they call “geopolitical reasoning”, which they define as an:

“Intimate political process of representation by which intellectuals of statecraft designate world and ‘fill’ it with certain dramas, subjects, histories and dilemmas” (1992:194).

They also argue that most of what constitutes the fabric of geopolitical reasoning -the core of the processes of spatialisation- is the result of “practical” rather than “formal” thinking. “Practical” geopolitical reasoning stems from “unremarkable assumptions about places and their particular identities”, whereas “formal” reasoning comes from “thinkers and public intellectuals” (ibid:194). Geopolitical reasoning is also reproduced via “popular” cultural processes and activities (films, newspapers, magazines, TV shows, cartoons, games, and so on...) where “identities and differences” are manufactured and solidified (Ó Tuathail, 2005a:68; 2005b; see also Dittmer, 2010;

Sharp J, 2000). In the NWT, intellectuals of statecraft are those individuals who participate in the work of the GNWT and the Federal Government. In chapters 5 and 6, I put their practical reasoning about the role of Tulita in Northern Canadian geopolitics in parallel with the formal reasoning present in the SDMCLCA and in former Prime Minister Stephen Harper's Northern Strategy, as well as with particular aspects of the popular culture prevalent in the everyday life of the settlement (money, food, architecture, cars, TV sets and so on...).

In a more recent publication, Ó Tuathail lists the analytical notions developed to investigate further the interweaving of these various modes of agency and agents with the production of particular geopolitical reasonings (2005a). These include the concepts of "imagi-nation", that is, the manner in which a state sees itself in relation to other states, in particular through the "everyday identity assemblage processes", that constructs and structures its "social unconscious" (Ó Tuathail, 2005a:68; see also Ó Tuathail and Dalby, 2002; Sidaway and Power, 2005). Other grids of analysis that serve to investigate a state's social unconscious include the cultural-religious (Kuus, 2007a; Hughes, 2013; Megoran, 2013), the performative (McConnell, 2013), and processes of geopolitical story-making (Ó Tuathail, 2005a:68; Adams, 2013). In this thesis, I attempt to follow from these remarks but also to go beyond them by analysing the inter-weaving of space, place and time in geopolitical terms (in particular via the notion of chronoscape) and by proposing to develop a *speculative geopolitics*, which seeks to give geopolitical agency to other-than/more-than-human beings.

Beyond the critical programme that is inscribed at the core of critical geopolitics' aims, the innovation of O'Tuathail is to view geopolitics as a "semiotic free radical"

(O'Tuathail, 1994:229), that is, as a signifying notion that is context-dependent, yet inherently open to ontological manipulations through the *imagination* of state-makers. For instance, in *Critical Geopolitics and development theory* (ibid), he argues for a psychoanalytic reading of geopolitics, in order for it to be “made into a semiotic free radical which problematises how geography and politics are brought together to make sense” (ibid: 229). The interweaving of place and psychological factors in the way geopolitics is fashioned is also viewed by Agnew as a crucial question in a re-envisioned study of world politics (2007:144). Crucially, for Ó Tuathail, the historically-dependent character of geo-power inherently supposes the possibility that new forms of it will emerge (1996:142).

This is particularly the case in the Arctic (and elsewhere, see for example, Sage, 2016). For instance, in *Polar geopolitics? Knowledges, Resources and Legal Regimes* (2014), political geographers Richard Powell and Klaus Dodds call for a *critical polar geopolitics* which can account for the manner in which variegated representations of Arctic (and Antarctic) landscapes stem from geopolitical visions that are people-, place- and state-contingent (2014). They argue that Indigenous peoples and non-human actors are often ignored in these representations, unless as part of wider strategies of state-making and (geopolitical) identity solidification (ibid; see also Ray and Maier, 2017). Hence, whilst *some* places but also “objects, agents, borders, boundaries and relationships” are scripted as part of different geopolitical narrations of these regions, others are necessarily silenced (Powell and Dodds, 2014:10; see also Steinberg et al., 2015). Caught up in these various “particularisms”, and sometimes contradictory geopolitical imaginations, the ‘spaces’ of the Arctic can, they contend, only be viewed

as unsettled and contested (ibid; see also Steinberg et al., 2015; Dodds, 2010a,b).

Powell and Dodds write:

“Space in this context is never simply a physical backdrop; rather it is the very medium through which the Polar Regions are subject to multiple representations... There is not ‘one Arctic’ or ‘one Antarctic’. Our definitions are always deeply geopolitical” (ibid:9-10).

These ideas are echoed by geographers Sarah Jaquette Ray and Kevin Maier (2017). For instance, in *Critical Norths* (2017), Ray and Maier argue that the globalisation of issues that are endogenous to the Arctic (in particular environmental change and the question of Indigenous sovereignty over resource-rich lands) can be described as “transnationalisation” (ibid:2; see also Dodds, 2010a,b; Nicol, 2010)<sup>62</sup>. However, as also observed by Powell and Dodds (2014), for Ray and Maier, this process relies on the strategic amplification of particular geopolitical issues, narratives, visions and identities to the detriment of others (2017:5). One of these dominant geopolitical tropes is that of a “fragile yet unforgiving Arctic environment, a resource frontier ripe for exploitation and northern territorial access and control” (Steinberg et al., 2015:xiii; see also Dodds and Nuttall; 2016; Powell, 2008; 2010; Stern and Stevenson, 2006). Crucially, this trope is one that is not determined by space but rather by time, that is, it relies simultaneously on the production of geological potentialities and speculations and on a determinist vision of the future bound by the telos of industrial development, capitalist modernisation and relatedly, nation-building. As I show in chapter 5, in Tulita, this takes the form of the domination of a settler, calculative, bio-anticipatory chronoscape over the lives of its Dene and Métis residents.

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<sup>62</sup> They write cogently: “the North’s visibility in the past several decades has decidedly been due to its nature(s).” (Ray and Maier, 2017:2).

Furthermore, for Ray and Maier, processes of nation-building are symbolically violent, since for Indigenous peoples, dominant ideas of the North still function *against* them, precisely because they tend to be subservient to these processes (2017; Steinberg et al., 2015; Bravo and Triscott, 2010). On the other hand, recent political changes (i.e.: decolonisation, the birth of transnational Indigenous organisations, the recognition of Indigenous political and economic rights by international instruments) have meant that Indigenous peoples have been able to “reframe” the spatial boundaries through which Northern nation-states define themselves (Nicol, 2010). For instance, as observed by Powell (2007; 2008; 2018), in the Arctic region, scientific surveys, mapping projects, geologic studies and other research activities have long functioned hand in hand with strategies of sovereignty assertion. This subtle imbrication of actions that *appear* not to be geopolitical, with discourses, ideals and visions that are, prove that in the Arctic, not only is geopolitics embodied in seemingly benign practices, but also that this takes place through the use of *innocent* bodies as earthly, territorial, markers of lines of sovereignty (ibid; Powell and Dodds, 2014)<sup>63</sup>. It is precisely these processes of “iterative, performative and embodied materialisation”, that, through everyday interactions, give birth to an “Arctic geopolitics” (Dittmer et al., 2011:212) and that enable geopower to operate at an infrastructural level in Indigenous spaces like Tulita. It can indeed be inferred from this literature that, in addition to overt strategies of geocoding, an Arctic geo-power operates through bodies, and processes/structures of material spatialisation that aim to *create* political lines. Lines here mean not only physical separations between identities, but also limits beyond which embodiment becomes either subversion or submission to power. However, as noted in the

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<sup>63</sup> The example of the Indigenous Canadian Rangers also comes to mind (see Lackenbauer, 2013). I explore this topic in chapter 5.

introduction to this chapter, in this thesis, I argue that the operations of geopower in Northern Indigenous spaces go beyond the question of the manner in which sectionality (or separateness) is created through the material manipulation of spatial configurations or through epistemological strategies of actor-network assemblages of geopower (Depledge, 2015). I will show that once more-than and other-than-human beings are considered as Dene animism requires us to do, than geopower needs to be viewed also as an ontological ‘force’, that is as a system of spatialisation capable of producing, altering and transcending signs, and thus able to metamorphose the nature of space and of beings.

For now, however, it is possible to conclude that geopower as a “semiotic free radical”, exists in different versions. In what follows I focus on the way feminist, popular, non-representational, psychoanalytic, and urban geopolitics can help inform this discussion. Again, I argue that the *geo-powers* implied in these streams of critical geopolitical literature can help specify further what a conceptualisation of geopower as an ontological force in Tulita could be.

### **Geopolitics in the intimate: geopower’s ‘beings of metamorphosis’**

Feminist (Dowler and Sharp, 2001; Hyndman, 2004), popular (Dittmer and Dodds, 2008), non-representational (Carter and McCormack, 2014) and psychoanalytic geopolitics (Kingsbury and Pile, 2016; Pain, 2009) have taken up O’Tuathail’s and Agnew’s calls to investigate the place-contingent, ontological and symbolic aspects of geopolitics further. Urban geopolitics on the other hand follows from subaltern and feminist geopolitics’ attempt to problematise the issue of scale in the manner in which

geopolitical discourses are perceived and experienced by communities situated at different levels of the global political-economic ladder (Rokem and Boano, 2018; Rokem et al., 2017). It thus focuses on the everyday, banal and intimate experiences of geopolitical phenomena as they are mediated through urban forms, some of which are understood as being rooted in the violence of warfare (Fregonese, 2012; Graham, 2004; 2010).

One common thread that runs through these five currents is the importance given to materialities (*things* such as tools, objects, but also infrastructures, architectural forms and so on...) in not only creating the conditions of subjectification but also of subversion and resistance. Thus, in reviewing these five streams of literature, I aim to outline what geopower's 'beings of metamorphosis' could be, or rather to ground my speculation as to *how* the 'beings of geopower' operate in Tulita in the contingencies of other *forms* of geo-power.

### *Feminist geopolitics*

For political geographer Jennifer Hyndman, feminist geopolitics seek to uncover the situatedness of actors that either benefit from or subvert dominant geopolitical narratives (2004:309). Thus, at the core of feminist geopolitics is an attempt to open the average individual, but also the marginalised, silenced, dispossessed or subaltern - in any case away from the socio-political spheres of the deciding elite- to scrutiny and to reveal through such investigations how the distinction that is inscribed in dominant narratives about power and non-power does not stand. For feminist geopoliticians,

every-*thing* and everyone is a geopolitical subject and object (Dodds et al, 2013:7; see also Fluri, 2009; Dowler and Sharp, 2001).

As a result, feminist geopoliticians contend that what needs to be problematised is not only that the geopolitical gaze is ocular-centred<sup>64</sup> but also that it is always *from somewhere*, and that as such geopolitical relationships are necessarily embodied at different scales (from the global, to the national, the local, the home and the body) (ibid:169; see also Gilmartin and Kofman, 2004; Dowler and Sharp, 2001). Thus, everyday practices, be they those that take place in intimate or public spaces are also, to a certain extent, performances of geopolitical identities, representations, images, practices and symbols as it is through space that “the nation and the international are reproduced in the mundane practices we take for granted” and “discourse becomes relations of power” (ibid:171; 172). For them, it is in the spaces of home that a relation can be established between the way a nation geopolitically identifies itself by opposition to the outside, and embodied practices that reveal this identity in the semiotic imbrication of quotidian activities (Dowler and Sharp, 2001:174). Furthermore, geopolitical discourses, have an impact on bodies (ibid).

Deborah Dixon and Sallie Marston further contend that because they can be moulded, objectified, used quite literally as political symbols, bodies can convey marginality and domination as much as they can account for resistance (2011; see also Wastl-Walter and Staeheli, 2004; Mayer, 2004). Embodied practices that can account for the performed corporealisation of geopolitical identities include writing, the wearing of

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<sup>64</sup> On this point O’Tuathail’s observations are telling. He writes: “the geopolitical gaze spatialises a world within a system of ethnocentric sameness... Critical theories of geopolitics must inevitably address the question of geopolitics as an ocularcentric system of knowledge, that is, a form of power/knowledge that relies on a Cartesian perspectivalism in order to function” (1996:53; 143).

particular clothes, the crafting of objects (ibid:448), but also walking (Koopman, 2011), bodies *making* territories (Smith et al., 2015), mapmaking (Gerlach, 2015), working (Dixon, 2015), or participating in informal social networks, and activities (Secor, 2001). In *Feminist Geopolitics: Material States* (2015), Deborah Dixon argues that feminist geopolitics ought to “query the *geo-*” from the perspective of the “assemblage of site-specific practices, grounded through bodies” (ibid:47). This would enable “an inquiry into the very nature of those bodies.”, and thus “place the matter-ing of the body at the forefront of analysis.” (ibid). By “matter-ing” Dixon refers to the inherent separateness that is birthed in the creation of fixity through material forms, that is of boundaries between non-entangled surfaces (ibid). She contends that it is by imagining the manner in which the flesh of bodies -bodies expressing an outside to the body politic such as “the inattentive traveller, the climate refugee”- (2015:50) is embedded in “inhuman power relations” (ibid) that one can conceptualise a geopolitics that moves away from what critical geopolitician Simon Dalby has termed “terrestrocentrism” (2007) -the tendency to externalise the *geo* (Dixon, 2015:50). If, under “inhuman power relations”, it is possible to understand literally, emotions, drives, affects, representations, that is psychical actants -what I have termed, following Latour, ‘beings of metamorphosis’- then a direct link can be established between the geo-power of Dixon’s feminist geopolitics and those of popular, non-representational and psychoanalytic geopolitics as well as with the conceptual endeavour of this thesis.

### *Popular, non-representational and psychoanalytic geopolitics*

Popular, non-representational and psychoanalytic geopolitics investigate the agency of everyday objects and symbols in the structuration of individual quotidian experiences

in relation to the way geopolitical identities are shaped and reproduced. In *Popular Culture, Geopolitics and Identity* (2010), political geographer Jason Dittmer argues that through *cultural* and *affective* readings, it is possible to reveal the representational and non-representational processes through which geopolitical identities “are generated, contested, and sometimes obscured” (2010:156). Affect, for instance, helps outline the inward processes through which “popular geopolitics become embodied biologically as adrenaline, passion and other sites at the interface between the inside and outside of bodies” (2010:xx).

In parallel, the medium of popular geopolitics become active at the moment of “consumption activities that are usually undertaken in our living rooms, shopping malls, movie theaters, and on the Internet.” (2010:155). Subject-formation, subjectivity, in short, the rise of a sense of self -of an identity as such- is a crucial field of analysis for popular geopolitics (Dittmer, 2010; Dittmer and Gray, 2011). Geographer Rachel Pain’s emotional geopolitics is one example of this. In *Globalized Fear: Towards an emotional geopolitics*, she argues that the formation of individual identities cannot be disentangled from the action of emotions and from the fact that these emotions are also constitutive parts of “wider individual and collective landscapes” (2009:478). Thus, emotions like fear, excitement or hate can be used to filter certain reactions, encourage others or create an atmosphere which conditions “within and without, politicises subjects and mobilises self- and collective action at conscious level” (ibid:480; Pain and Smith, 2008; see also Woon, 2011). In these conceptualisations, the subject is thus multiple, it is simultaneously the resulting identity of sometimes competing political discourses and structures (a voting citizen, a foreigner, a soldier), and an autonomous ‘self’ capable of interacting with the apparently fixed cultural norms of a specific

geopolitical community, be it a nation, a state or a city (Müller, 2008). As I show in chapter 5, in Tulita, settler geopolitics also acts to create what *it* views as political subjects.

The question of the way selves (and identities) are influenced by geopolitical processes is also central to both non-representational and psychoanalytic geopolitics but it is investigated from different angles. Non-representational geopolitics focus on the pre-cognitive corporeal movements that show traces of embodiment of geopolitical phenomena (Thrift, 2008; Amin and Thrift, 2002. McCormack, 2003; Wylie, 2005; Thien, 2005). What matters the most for this current of research is that “some of the most potent geopolitical forces [are] lurking in the ‘little details’ of people’s lives, what is ‘carried’ in the specific variabilities of their activities.” (Shotter and Billig, 1998:23). As noted by geographer Nigel Thrift, the “little things” (2000) create the everyday routines, the quotidian practices that generate forms of embodiment that are located at the level of pre-cognitive consciousness. This process entails that, similarly to popular geopolitics’ envisioning of a self/identity that is never really stable, for non-representational geopolitics, “there is no stable ‘human’ experience because the human sensorium is constantly being re-invented as the body continually adds parts in to itself” (Thrift, 2007:2). One of the privileged area of investigation of non-representational geopolitics is also the role of *affect* on the political play between senses -seeing, hearing, touching, feeling and so on...- (Macdonald, 2006; and Carter and McCormack, 2006; Kraftl and Adey, 2008; Anderson and Adey, 2011)<sup>65</sup>, practices (Müller, 2007), and things (Thrift, 2007). This non-representational interplay of pre-

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<sup>65</sup> In *Representational Theory: Space, Politics, Affect*, Thrift writes that affects are “this roiling mass of nerve volleys that prepare the body for action in such a way that intentions or decisions are made before the conscious self is even aware of them” (2007:7).

cognitive capacities and external stimuli is envisioned through an almost exclusively *material* interpretation of the way reality is structured. For instance, the use of the notion of *practice* in non-representational approaches serves to emphasise the “materiality of thinking” (Thrift, 2007:8), that is the manner in which body movements become stabilised through “corporeal routines and specialised devices” whose reproduction over time permits the apparent establishment of behavioural stability (ibid) and the constitution of place. Similarly, things are “sense-catching”, they influence our own perception of the way in which we act out (or embody) particular experiences (ibid:9). This is because the “technicity” of a tool -the relationships of an object with wider infrastructural collectives (Simondon, 2012)- creates “an empire of functions” (Harman, 2002:29) that bears on human modes of corporeality and thus on ways of being (Thrift, 2007:9; see also Carter and McCormack, 2006). In chapter 6, I show that in Tulita, it is precisely through industrial-capitalist *things* (I use the examples of money, roads, housing units and food products) that settler geopolitics is able to create an empire of functions that ensures the success of its operations in the spaces of the everyday.

Psychoanalytic geopoliticians on the other hand, do not emphasise the role of pre-cognitive functions but rather that of the (collective and individual) unconscious in the societal construction, development and reproduction of particular geopolitical identities. Yet, as in feminist, popular and non-representational geopolitics, they insist on the critical importance of material factors, including objects and infrastructures in this process. For instance, in *Towards a Psychoanalytic Geopolitics* (2014), political geographers Ian Shaw, Jared Powell and Jessica De La Osa, view the geopolitical operations of drives (death / life and relatedly, enjoyment / desire / pain and so on...)

as functioning at the liminal frontier between conscious enjoyment and unconscious desire. For this reason, psychoanalytic geopolitics seeks to shed light on political agents' and agencies' ability to manipulate psychic *drives* (Kingsbury and Pile, 2014). This is done through activities, structures or events that engage the active participation of an audience by creating the real-time conditions of *jouissance/enjoyment* (Shaw et al., 2014). It is also achieved through objects, symbols, ideas that function like passive signs of libidinal drives (Nast, 2014). Thus, psychoanalytic geopolitics:

“Places the banal practices of nationalism [as] vital existential anchors for ensuring the consistency and durability of nation [through] *jouissance*: a political factor beyond pleasure and pain, war and peace, civilization and its many discontents.” (Shaw et al., 2014:223).

The geopolitical relationship between materialities and the manipulation of psychical drives is particularly well illustrated in an essay written by Heidi Nast (2014). In *“Race”, Imperializing Geographies of the Machine, and Psychoanalysis* (2014), she argues that through the history of imperial capitalism, industrial machine-objects were strategically located in the “bodily ego of white industrial man” (ibid:259). As white working-class men were constructed as the only highly productive actors of the industrial economy, the advanced technical abilities and capacities implied in these objects were mapped almost exclusively onto the body of these men, and relatedly onto the body politic of their nations. This led to a problematic power-laden collective unconscious in which “industrial machinery” was made a “phallic agent of progress and history” alongside the (white) men that were given the function of being their exceptional embodiment (ibid). Crucially, in the capitalist process of colonial expansion it also gave white subjects the ontological legitimacy to act from a position

of pre-eminence over non-white subjects (ibid)<sup>66</sup>. This created an idea of the nation in which the semiotic identifier “white” came to represent a dominating place, a location of geopolitical (and thus of racialised/gendered) superiority (ibid). One crucial implication of Nast’s analysis is that material infrastructures, such as industrial body-machines, bear on the manner in which a nation’s geopolitical psyche is structured (what *drives* it), and *inter alia*, on the manner in which the unconscious of the individual members of this nation is structured (i.e.: the anxieties, drives, pulsions, fears that infuse it) (see also Wilson, 1998; Nast and Pile, 1998).

### *Summary*

At this stage, it is possible to better explicate the conceptualisation of geopower I have outlined at the beginning of this chapter. The analyses developed by feminist, popular, non-representational and psychoanalytic geopoliticians offer a more complete picture of the manner in which geopolitical visions, narratives, scripts and reasoning (to reuse O’Tuathail’s taxonomy) are infused in the *things* that people the spaces of the everyday and the intimate (rather than the superstructural scale of formal geopolitical elites) and are thus able to shape identities. The crucial point of convergence of these different streams of literature is indeed that they highlight the critical importance of materialities (objects, as well as their place within wider structures) in conveying forms of embodiment, practices, and thus also representations that tend to enact *performances* of geopolitical representations, identities, visions and ideas.

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<sup>66</sup> In settler states as in postcolonial polities (former colonial empires and their colonies), one can thus speak of psychoses of “coloniality” (Apter, 1998).

Urban geopoliticians also emphasise the importance of materialities. However, by materialities, they understand those that symbolise life in disenfranchised urban suburbs, districts and slums. I now turn to this stream of literature. In what follows, however, I extend my discussion to wider debates within geography about the relationships between the urban condition, its architectural shapes and capitalist-led forms of social exclusion and marginalisation. My aim in doing so is to demonstrate that a geo-power that would be drawn from urban geopolitics cannot be disentangled from the industrial-capitalist expansion of the city as a mode of being. To insist on, and substantiate, this point before continuing, it is worth quoting social geographer Christian Parenti for whom there is a unique relationship between geopower and capitalism (this universal essence would arguably sit *alongside* the place-contingent character of geopower). He writes:

“Before capital can harness energy, as labor power, or as the pre-existing “rents” of nonhuman nature, the state must control terrain, portions of the surface of the earth where these utilities exist. The state must seize parts of the surface of the earth. The state must then measure it, understand it, represent it, contain it, and control it militarily, legally, and scientifically. [For] capital to use the biosphere, the state must control it. We can call this subset of biopower, *geopower*” (2016:170).

### **Urban geopolitics and the “production of space”: geopower as urbanity**

Urban geopoliticians argue that we should view modern cities as battlefields, that is either literally as sites where particular kinds of warfare and militarisation take place (Graham, 2004; 2010) or metaphorically, as environments where unique forms of structural violence are deployed through planning and architectural technologies (Fregonese, 2009; 2012; Rokem et al., 2017). For instance, in a paper entitled *Intervention in Urban Geopolitics* (2017) urban geographers Jonathan Rokem, Sara

Fregonese (and co-writers, see list of references) argue that “Conflict and violence in all their degrees and nuances have become a political and humanitarian concern that is predominantly urban and affecting the everyday life of city dwellers” (Rokem et al., 2017:254). As a result, Rokem calls for an end to the distinction between peaceful cities and non-peaceful ones (ibid). He contends that the future of urban geopolitics is to focus on the interconnected themes of segregation and mobility, since these offer “ways to explore everyday movements with a geopolitical significance at the urban and local scale” (ibid). He proposes to do so via an investigation of what he calls the “planning policy nexus” (how planning strategies relate to political choices). In parallel, in a paper titled *Affective atmosphere, urban geopolitics and conflict (de)escalation in Beirut*, Fregonese (2017) draws from the work of cultural geographer Ben Anderson on “affective atmospheres”, in order to show that the “quotidian intensities of feeling” of the urban (built) environment, that is the “affective atmospheres”<sup>67</sup> of specific neighbourhoods or buildings, bear on local perceptions of fear, or violence (Fregonese, 2017:1-2; see also Anderson B, 2017; McCormack, 2008). This work bears similarity to those of architectural geographers which also insists on the importance of the everyday and feelings in this process (Adey, 2008; Kraftl, 2010; Mould, 2016; Dekeyser, 2016; Moran et al., 2016; Llewellyn, 2003; Rose et al., 2010).

Underlying the different streams of literature that together form urban geopolitics, is a recognition that urban forms of dwelling have become a major force in the shaping of modern geopolitical issues (see for example Rosen and Charney, 2016; Pullan et al., 2007). For some, this stems from the acknowledgement that we now exist in a urban

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<sup>67</sup> Anderson defines an affective atmosphere as “a class of experience that occurs before and alongside the formation of subjectivity, across human and non-human materialities, and inbetween subject/object distinctions’ (Anderson, 2009:78).

(industrial-capitalist) geopolitical totality (Graham, 2004; Brenner et al., 2014; Merrifield, 2014), that is a mode of being that relies on the capitalist political-economic system, diffused through architectural/infrastructural bodies (in other words, via the built environment) (Brenner et al., 2014; Brenner et al., 2012; Lopes de Souza, 2016; Graham, 2004).

In a chapter published in *Urban Geopolitics, Rethinking Planning in Contested Cities* (2018), anthropologists Nimrod Luz and Nurit Stadler also argue that “contemporary nation-states have planned cities based on neoliberal logic, geared primarily to maximizing growth, cost efficiency and accumulation” (2018:173). At the heart of this process is the global explosion of the urban fabric and the infinite repetition of this fabric to ensure “its own reproduction and the consequent totalizing mechanism of control that guarantees this process of infinity” (Aureli, 2011:16).

Crucial to this neoliberal-industrial logic is also the production of socio-spatial inequalities and polarities (Allegra et al., 2012; Harvey, 2000; Smith N, 2008; Merrifield, 2002; Soja, 1980). Drawing from the case of Rio de Janeiro’s favelas, urban geographer Marcelo de Souza cogently demonstrates that the manufacturing of these inequalities through urban and architectural forms derives from the spatial deployment of geopolitical visions of the city (de Souza, 2016:788)<sup>68</sup>. Echoing Rokem’s “planning policy nexus”, De Souza suggests that urban planning is in essence a geopolitical phenomenon since it refers to “the organisation of space aiming at social control and the consolidation and expansion of power by means of producing space in specific

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<sup>68</sup> De Souza observes that in the case of Rio de Janeiro, “the desire to eradicate the favelas from the landscape, is doomed to never be fully satisfied. [Without] the favelas, an essential part of what enables the urban economy in the cities of (semi)peripheral capitalism simply could not exist.” (2016:785).

ways” (ibid:781). However, for him urban geopolitical actors are not exclusively spatial planners. Other agents include environmental experts or state-led policies (ibid).

Echoing these remarks, and O’Tuathail’s focus on governmentality, Rose-Redwood argues that some of the constitutive elements of geopower emerged in response of the need by state and parastate actors to find ways to *create* urban-like spaces, *before* populations could be administered (biopower) and political control established (sovereign power) (2006). Technologies of geo-coding (e.g.: house numbering, zip codes, street numbering/names, populations census, geological and geographical surveying/mapmaking and so on...), characteristic of urban landscapes, thus enabled the *material* engraving of commodity relations in space whilst facilitating the subjectification and rationalisation of populations (ibid). Rose-Redwood thus explains that:

“Managing populations by examining statistical regularities and mapping these patterns out cartographically (i.e: totalisation) is only possible once a ‘population’ has been individualised (via record-keeping practices of various kinds), which in turn depends upon being able to locate ‘individuals’ spatially.” (ibid:480).

For him, the production of calculative spaces (that is, ‘striated’ and standardised by networks of transportation, information and communication) for the purpose of manufacturing sovereignty over territories, mimicks the manner in which urban landscapes are ordered through what he calls “neoliberal governmentality” (ibid:475). A neoliberal governmentality seeks to render space knowable, and populations visible (ibid). Quoting historian Patrick Joyce, Rose-Redwood suggests that this system of rationalisation of government, in other words geo-power, can be conceptualised as an “omniopicon (the many viewing the many)” (ibid:475).

In the Canadian Indigenous context, this neoliberal urban logic seeks to establish spatial boundaries to create the conditions of legal and political-economic certainty (Porter, 2013). Certainty is indeed critical to the extension of the settler city, an extension which is presented as essential, since:

“Cities are seen as the engine of growth, and in the neo-liberal urban policy world that dominates the [current] contexts [thus] an assertion of Indigenous rights and title constitutes a direct threat to private property rights and thereby the development potential of a city.” (Porter, 2013:303).

As already noted in the preceding chapter in relation to the SDMCLCA, what is crucial in this material process of production of spatial boundaries is also the use of technologies of spatial planning (see Porter, 2013; Cornell 2013). However, for Cornell, these technologies have been applied *against* Indigenous peoples (2013). The reasons for this lie in the fact that these technologies, along with the urban forms they have produced, have enabled the colonisation of the Northern frontier (Walker et al., 2013; Edmonds 2010). Indeed, as cogently shown by historian Penelope Edmonds in *Urbanizing Frontier* (2010), the *urban* expansion into Indigenous lands, via the setting up of hamlets, towns and cities, was (and arguably still is) crucial to Canada’s settler-colonial project (ibid:xviii). For geographer Ryan Walker and political scientist Yale Belanger (2013), the colonial nature of urban planning technologies is still a lingering reality:

“[Western] authority over procedural and substantive knowledge continue to dominate and presume cultural neutrality in the physical and aesthetic, social, cultural, economic, and political production of space” [precisely because planning remains] “a colonial cultural practice” [that conceives] “the shape and form of modern cities, [and] scarcely engages in relational processes with Aboriginal peoples that might expand its repertoire.” (2013:198-199).

Thus, for political geographers Marcus Lane and Michael Hibbard, it is necessary to view planning also as a transformative geopolitical practice capable of “resolving resource conflicts, enhancing Indigenous capacity to regain and manage custodial lands, and developing community autonomy” (2005:172). These observations can be extended to architectural-urban forms. For example, the Québec Cree village of Oujé-Bougoumou (built in circle, using constructions designs that are similar to teepees), designed by Blackfoot architect Douglas Cardinal has been hailed a material expression of sovereignty, that is, a reclaiming of urban forms in order to express Indigeneity in space (Stevens and Acland, 1999).

### *Summary*

Urban geopoliticians show that states and state-like actors can enact their geopolitical visions through urban materialities. Urban space serves as a template for the geo-coding of other spaces through technologies of governmental rationalities. In the capitalist neo-liberal conditions within which the current expansion of urban landscapes take place, these visions rely on the permanent creation of inequality/polarity in space, in addition to facilitating the control and subjectification of populations. This is done via planning strategies and policies. Technologies of spatial planning, grid-making, house numbering, which are essential to the functioning of a capitalist neoliberal logic (see also Elden, 2014).

Within the city, the aesthetic, architectural and infrastructural roles given to buildings serve to enact these visions in the physical realm, through the effects of movements, and embodied affects and emotions (materialities in this context not only include

everyday infrastructures such as transportation services, roads, buildings, but also houses, postcodes and so on...). However, this also applies to neo-urban spaces, that is spaces whose existence stems from and enables, the existence of the city. It is indeed on these neo-urban places that the geopolitical identity of Canada's settler world (the way it relates its territory to its body politic) continues to rely.

Given the critical importance of resources to this identity, it can be argued that urbanity in Canada's Indigenous communities functions through the inscription in architectural and infrastructural forms, of the industrial-capitalist commodification of lands and peoples. However, it is also in these neo-urban/marginal zones that Indigenous institutions transcend urban materialities and are able to produce a different kind of space, a different kind of urbanity that is more attuned to their own ontologies. This point can also be inferred from Brenner (Brenner et al., 2014). In *Implosions/explosions: Towards a Study of Planetary Urbanization* (2014), he argues, after Lefebvre (1991), that peripheral zones that support the political-economic structures of our increasingly planetary urban civilisation should also be viewed as intrinsic elements of this urbanity (Brenner et al., 2014; Lefebvre, 2003a; Monte-Mor, 2014; Soja and Kanai, 2014). For these reasons, I have suggested in the introduction that it is necessary to view small Indigenous communities like Tulita as peripheral but *integral* parts of the planetary urban fabric<sup>69</sup>. Another factor for this choice is that, as shown in chapter 2, Tulita has served -and still continues to serve- the extension of

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<sup>69</sup> This implies in other words, that my understanding of the urban is not based on the city-countryside (or urban-rural) dichotomy. Rather, I follow urban geographer Roberto Luis Monte-Mor, for whom, the urban is "the material and sociospatial manifestation of contemporary urban-industrial society, now extended virtually throughout the entire territory." (2014:264). This understanding draws from Lefebvre's notion of the "urban fabric" (2003a). The urban fabric "proliferates, spreads, and corrodes the remains of agrarian life. [The] urban fabric does not strictly designate the built-up domain of cities, but the set of manifestations of the city's predominance over the countryside. From this view, a second home, a highway, a supermarket in the middle of the countryside, are all part of the urban fabric" (Lefebvre, 2003a:17).

settler Canada's urbanity into Northern lands. In this sense, urban geo-power also operates in the everyday lives of Tulita's residents. Furthermore, this section has also shown that this form of geopower proceeds through neoliberal processes. It is indeed because of these processes that certain materialities and modes of ordering space become hegemonic in the fabric of urban landscapes. In this sense, urban geopolitics not only echo Lefebvre's *Production of Space* (1991) -where the notion of *social* space is developed-<sup>70</sup>, but also the second current of literature concerned with the notion of geopower, introduced in the next section, where it is equated to a 'tellurgic' force. Before analysing in more details the manner in which the concept of social space inform my understanding of the operations of geopower in Tulita, I first turn to this literature in order to delineate its commonalities with the work of urban geopoliticians and with the approach I seek to develop in this thesis.

### **Geopower and the shaping of the earth: ontologies, being, and modes of production**

#### *Materialisation of power relations: alteration of the earth, creation of land*

As argued in the preceding sections, the first stream of literature concerned with geopower considers this notion to be the overarching force that subtends governmentality since it enables (and thus precedes) the operations of biopower and sovereign power in space (Ó Tuathail, 1996; Rose-Redwood, 2006; Clare, 2011; see also Sage, 2016). For this current, the main concern is the strategies of subjectification used by states or state-like actors to create and sustain functioning polities through

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<sup>70</sup> Lefebvre's social space, is a space that is political and ideological, and which can be produced like "any given particular type of merchandise" (1976:31).

everyday objects and practices (Thrift, 2000), networks of matter and ideas (Depledge, 2013; Dittmer, 2014) or particular ways of seeing (Hughes, 2014; Agnew, 2007).

The second current takes the etymological root of geopower more literally. It argues that geopower corresponds to the processes of mediation that determine, on a bio-physical level, the relationships between human life and the geological forces of the Earth (Grosz, 2012; Yusoff et al., 2012; Yusoff, 2013; Clark, 2013a,b; 2014; Conway, 2016; Squire V, 2015; Donovan, 2016; see also Woodward, 2013; Serres, 1995; Berque, 2014). This current focuses on the “geo” which it conceives as incarnating the politics of generation of an earthly space (Elden, 2013b; 2015; 2014) in its poetic (Last, 2015), elemental (Adey, 2015; Squire R, 2015), ludic (Ingram et al., 2016) or more recently, anthropocenic (Bonneuil and Fressoz, 2016; see also Dalby, 2007; 2014; Dalby and O’Lear, 2016) human understandings. These interpretations underpin an understanding of geopower as the ability to manipulate space to convey and ensure the reproduction of certain ways of being, types of meaning (space as land, territory, Earth) and practices (the enactment of these meanings in space).

For philosopher Elizabeth Grosz and political geographers Katherine Yusoff and Nigel Clark, geopower is indeed the life-enabling and shaping force that stems from geologic processes (Yusoff et al., 2012; Yusoff, 2013; 2015). Thus, to a certain extent, this current establishes a direct relationship between the manner in which human life views itself (via ontologies) and how it is politically organised in response to geologic elements (Grosz et al., 2017). Ontologies, in the spatial-existential sense they propose, are thus arguably interpreted as forms of meta-power. Through geopower, the earth fabricates space and orders human and non-human modes of becoming. However,

within this current, some conceive the relationships between ontologies and geopower as reciprocal.

Most relevant for this thesis, is the approach proposed by cultural geographer Stephanie Clare, a former doctoral student of Elizabeth Grosz. In *Earthly Encounters* (2011) (her unpublished doctoral dissertation) and in a paper titled *Geopower, the politics of life and land in Frantz Fanon's writing* (2013b) she argues that geopower should be viewed as “the force relations that transform the Earth” (2013b:62). She contends that these “force relations” are constituted by the interactions between the non-human materialities that people space (urban, architectural, agricultural, infrastructural and natural objects) and humans (2011:9). As such, for her, all forms of power relations that have an ability to *shape* the earth are part of geopower. Particularly important for this thesis, is her proposition to view Canada’s settler colonialism as a system of power over space that:

“Entails an overhauling of the earth: architecture, urban planning, and engineering, come together to reshape the earth. [Geographers] map it so that it is amenable both to political and economic interests. [Colonised] peoples modes of inhabiting the earth change.” (ibid:11).

She further suggests, through a reading of Fanon’s *Wretched of the Earth* (1991), that colonisation (and decolonisation) provides a perfect example of the manner in which the construction of specific buildings at particular locations are constitutive forms of power relations insofar as their resulting alteration (in addition to their appropriation) of the “earth’s surface” mould space physically according to the coloniser’s (or the decolonised) modes of being (2013a), that is, according to her/his ontologies. Thus, geopower for Clare, is the ability to produce, reproduce and sustain spatial beings

insofar as these are sustained by particular buildings, particular ways of altering the earth or simply particular ways of dwelling.

It is possible to further delineate and extend Clare's envisioning of geopower through philosopher Martin Heidegger's reflections on the notion of dwelling (because an ontological interpretation of this notion is already implied in Clare's approach introduced above). Dwelling, is, broadly conceived, the experiential act of making place, of "being alongside the world as if it were at home there" (Casey, 1998:246). In *Building, Dwelling, Thinking* (1971), Heidegger conjoins dwelling, building and thinking into an experiential nexus through which "the power to let earth and heaven, divinities and mortals enter in simple oneness into things, and order the house" (1971:157). In Heidegger's "existential spatiality" (Casey, 1998:246), senses, thoughts, symbols, perceptions and bodies become a holistic entity through which the search for "wider generalisations about behaviour, landscape, meaning [and] underlying structures [which] generate particular modes and contexts of meaning, behaviours and experiences" is pursued (Seamon and Mugerauer, 1985:20). Humanist geographer Anne Buttmer cogently argues that it follows from this that dwelling is *existentially* connected to the process of discerning "the meaning of earth reality in mythopoetic as well as in rational terms" (Buttimer: 1993:3). Thus, for Heidegger, a building-dwelling is not only a physical object, a locational coordinate in space, it also establishes a world, a being-in-place insofar as beings become entangled in, their lives shaped by, their experiences enframed in, this construction. Heidegger sees in this process of being embedded phenomenologically in the world (dwelling as being-in-the-world<sup>71</sup>) a

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<sup>71</sup> *Being-in-the-world* refers broadly to "the basic state of human existence, it indicates the fact that everything [has] an environment" (Relph, 1985:28).

personal quest towards authenticity, whereby place becomes one's *world* alongside its geophysical specificities, through a personal entanglement (Heidegger, 1962; 2002; El-Bizri, 2004; Dardel, 1990; Berque, 2015; see also Mészáros, 2010).

Heidegger's notion of dwelling offers a way to read Clare's (but also Yusoff's and Clark's) geopower, *ontologically*. For him, ontology is the *Being* of beings, it is in other words, the study of the metaphysical process through which ways of experiencing reality are ordered (1962). Thus, in Heidegger's perspective, the ontological relationship between space, being and place is not only a matter of experience, it is also one of *reality-making*, accomplished through one's concern for her/his surrounding world (Mitchell A-J, 2010; Wollan, 2003; Malpas, 2006). Heidegger's *being-in-the-world* is primarily a process of existential familiarisation with one's living environment, an affective appropriation that leads to events, emotions, ideas, beings, *taking place* (Mitchell, 2010). In this sense, much like Plato's Khôra (2008; see also Derrida, 2006; El-Bizri, 2004), geopower can be viewed as the process through which a familiar environment, a place, emerges as a structured experience.

Thus, Clare's and Grosz' telluric take on geopower can be said to proceed, ontologically, from the *primordial inhabiting/reshaping of* space that stems from one's dwelling-in a particular geophysical setting (one's experiential land, territory, earth) that is, in the particular case investigated in this dissertation, Denendeh. In this way, the ontological binding process that is implied in the telluric current to geopower proposed by Grosz can be said to be drawn from the metaphysical character of a self's embodied experience of a familiar environment (the familiar geologic,

geomorphological, meteorological elements that people it)<sup>72</sup>. Yet, this experience is viewed by Heidegger, in its modern form, as alienating. In *The Question Concerning Technology* (1977), Heidegger argues that industrial modes of production and consumption create a metaphysical *everydayness* in which human beings “act as the producer of all ‘reality’” because of the domination of technology in their understanding of being (2003: 74). This *everydayness* places human beings within a *gestell* (i.e.: Enframing) (Heidegger, 1977:9-12). Enframing “constrains them to obey” to current processes of “global standardization” (Heidegger, 1977:9-12; Dallmayr, 2001).

This brief foray into Heidegger’s metaphysics also enables a double ontological reading of Clare’s and Grosz’s interpretation of geopower. Indeed, as the “the force relations that transform the Earth” (Clare, 2013b:62) or as “a force that subtends the possibility of politics” (Grosz et al., 2017:129), geopower not only produces ontologies, it also remains embedded in an epochal *ontological* context, characterised by industrial-capitalist modes of production. For instance, as chapters 5 and 6 show, through geopower, this process of *enframing* also takes place in Tulita. Thus, to a certain extent, the tellurgic interpretation incarnated in Clare’s, Yusoff’s and Grosz’s approaches also imply that geopower is the ability for an ontology (or ontologies) to be (re-)produced through the built environment. It is in this sense that in Tulita’s neo-urban landscape, I have argued that the beings of geopower are also the beings of metamorphosis. The question then becomes how does this production/reproduction/transformation take place? Clare already provides an answer to this question when she writes:

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<sup>72</sup> In other words, this binding occurs via the *reality-making* process that stems from a community’s collective and repeated experiencing of place (Arendt, 1950; Schmitt, 2006; Jurkevics, 2015).

“Through transforming the earth, marking it with signs of themselves, and taking proprietorship over it, the colonised transform themselves, developing a new world, and with it a new human and a new nation. [Fanon] also develops an understanding of subjectivity that is tied to the land through work and appropriation. Whereas we can understand property primarily as a relation between humans that dictates differential access to land, in Fanon appropriation is equally about work that involves the physical transformation of land. Such transformation leaves signs of the self as remnants. As a consequence, the earth comes to reference the subject who transformed it.” (2013a:73).

In the next section I argue that geopolitics’ ability to produce/reproduce/transform ways of being happens through a dialectical exchange of signs.

*The semiotic production of space: towards a dialectics of progress*

In the preceding discussion, I have argued that it can be inferred from the literatures that pertain to critical, feminist, non-representational/popular, psychoanalytic and urban geopolitics that the forms taken by geopolitics are contingent to place. These forms operate through affective, psychic, emotional and embodied practices, whose meanings are conveyed by materialities. They include everyday objects, but also infrastructural and architectural structures whose spatial positions, aesthetic forms and organisational shapes are designed and enacted through technologies of geo-coding.

In an epoch marked by neoliberal processes of planetary urbanisation, driven primarily (but not necessarily exclusively) by state-based systems of governmentalisation, these objects create spatial inequalities and polarity. This polarity is then inscribed in the way space becomes represented and lived through everyday practices. In this sense, geopolitics can also be viewed as an ontological force: it creates modes of being, that is, from an animist perspective, *beings*. This interpretation is implied particularly in the ‘telluric’ approach to geopolitics developed principally by Yusoff, Grosz and Clare.

Indeed, through a Heideggerian reading of this interpretation, it is possible to view geopower not only as a force that is contingent to geophysical factors (to *mattered* place), but also to the experiential parameters of dwelling, and to the dominant ontological context in which this experiencing takes place. In this sense, geopower also acts at a metaphysical level, since it is able to shape reality.

Implied in this idea, and indeed throughout this dissertation, is the assumption that space is an ontological product. It is, in other words, the result of the manner in which beings, ways of being and categories of being, not only manufacture space *materially* (through, in essence, what Heidegger described under the triptych building, dwelling thinking), but also *semiotically* (by filling a void of unrecognisable shapes with *forms that have meaning*). I argue that these two processes cannot be disentangled in the operations of geopower since the materialities that it realises in the physical realm are only effective insofar as the use-meanings attached to them are subservient to the dominant ontology in which geopower is rooted at the precise moment when these materialities are built. For example, a road is only effective as such if it is used as a road by vehicle drivers and not say, by airplane, or racing cars pilots. Yet, this transformation in meaning and practice can also take place, either through transgressive practices (in the example above, illegal street racing) or when major geopolitical revolutions initiating profound changes in the dominant system of geo-coding occur (e.g.: a road effectively becomes a landing strip for military airplanes). I contend that in both cases, transformations -or metamorphoses- are caused by dialectical exchanges that take place through the medium of signs between beings and the objects produced by geopower with which they inter-act; Or, to put it in animist terms, between the beings of geopower and local beings (in other words, place-contingent beings).

The idea that space is produced socio-politically was most famously coined by philosopher Henri Lefebvre (1991; 2003b; see also Brenner et al., 2003; Brenner, 2014; Wallenstein, 2009; Aureli, 2011; Cache, 1995). Lefebvre argued that the production of space and the concrete solidification of the existence of a state (centred on the model of the city) are metaphysically entangled (2003b). For him, it is indeed the capacity to shape reality through land-ordering objects and space-organising symbols -geometrical shapes, numbers, what he calls “a homogenous, logistical optico-geometrical, quantitative space” (2003b:90)- that subtends the ability of states to transform natural space into political space. He writes:

“During the course of its development, the state binds itself to [first,] the production of a space, the *national territory* [in which the] state has the city at its centre. [Second] the production of a social space, an artificial edifice of hierarchically ordered institutions, of laws and conventions upheld by “values” that are communicated through the national language. This social architecture [is] the state itself [a] concrete abstraction, full of symbols, the source of an intense circulation of information and messages, “spiritual” exchanges, representations, ideology, knowledge, bound up with power. [Each] state has its space. [Each] state is a social space. [Third,] the state occupies a mental space that includes the representations of the state that people construct.” (2003b:84).

Lefebvre further contends that at a political-economic level, “the capitalist mode of production” produces its own space, a space that is linear and fragmented, but uniformly driven by the pursuit of capital accumulation (2003b). Through its investment in the management of this space -for the purpose of maintaining relations of production- the state is transformed into a “mode of production” whose ideology establishes power through scientific rationality, grid-based codings of space, and a bureaucratic “technostructure” (ibid). This ideology functions through repetitive actions undertaken on an everyday basis (ibid:96). These repetitive actions, Lefebvre

argues, are characteristic of modern life whose traits derive mainly from urban existence:

“The repetitive fits ill with the realm of the lives, for its dependence upon logic and identity implies the abolition of lived experience (*du vécu*). [Hence] the strange (alienating-alienated) climate of the modern world: on the one hand, the repetitive and identitarian rationality; on the other hand, violence.” (ibid).

Beyond his important claim, followed in this dissertation, that we now live in a planetary urban society (Lefebvre, 2003b), Lefebvre also critically proposes to view the spatial structure of this society (the social space) as being the dialectical product of political-economic and material forces (ibid). He conceptualises this process via three moments of interaction between space and user-inhabitants (Lefebvre, 1991; see also Schmid, 2014). The notion of “perceived space” comes first (Lefebvre, 1991). Perceived space stems from everyday spatial practices, particularly from the manner in which taste, sight, touch, smell, and hearing interact to form one’s quotidian world of habits, places and feelings in relation to daily uses of infrastructural and architectural objects (Lefebvre, 1991). The second moment stems from what Lefebvre termed “conceived space”, that is the abstract zone through which images, ideas, feelings, cartographic devices, geographic work and theories are brought together to form a coherent representation of the urban fabric, made of a multiplicity of functional rules and concept-spaces (ibid). Conceived space is primarily produced by representational elites (politicians, architects, photographers, planners, artists and so on...), that is individuals who can spread their visions of the urban through works of art, scientific projects and other grid-manufacturing abstractions. The third moment of interaction derives from “lived space”, that is the memory-informed experience of a place that alters its original symbolic meaning for an individual or a group of individuals (1991).

However, these intellectual visions are always political and tend to enable, when in the service of the state's (itself, a transformed capitalist) mode of production, the reproduction of relations of domination (Lefebvre, 2003b). The most important characteristic of these relations is their uneven character, that is the fact that they create (and rely on) inequalities. In the case of relations of domination that pertain to peripheral zones within governmentalised polities (this would apply to Tulita), Lefebvre's thus argues that:

“Places are arranged unequally in relation to the centres. [State] action exacerbates this situation: spaces form extreme hierarchies, from the centres of domination to the peripheries that are impoverished but still all the more strongly controlled.” (ibid:94-95).

Most relevant for this thesis is the fact that Lefebvre envisions the relationship between these interactions and the production of space as dialectical and based on the exchange of signs *materialised* in space. Thus, the abstract space of a society (“every society produces a space”) is necessary for its own existence (it is the only tangible manifestation of its reality). However, its confrontation with history and thus with the material forms taken by the spaces of perception, practices, concepts and memories must also give birth, through a dialectical process, to alternative (new) modes of production that are unique, in order to endure. Lefebvre writes:

“Every society produces a space, its own space. [Any] ‘social existence’ aspiring or claiming to be ‘real’, but failing to produce its own space, would be a strange entity, a very peculiar kind of abstraction unable to escape from the ideological or even the ‘cultural’ realm. It would [disappear].”

“Groups, classes or fractions of classes cannot constitute themselves, or recognise one another, as ‘subjects’ unless they generate (or produce) a space. Ideas, representations or values which do not succeed in making their mark on space, and thus generating (or producing) an appropriate morphology, will lose all pith and become mere signs. [The] ‘world of signs’ clearly emerges as so

much debris left by a retreating tide: whatever is not invested in an appropriated space is stranded and all that remain are useless signs and significations.”

“Dialectical materialism [is] amplified, verified -and transformed. New dialectics make their appearance. [The] dialectic thus emerges from time and actualises itself, operating now, in an unforeseen manner, in space. The contradictions of space [transport] these old contradictions, in a worldwide simultaneity, onto a higher level. [As] this contradictory whole takes on a new meaning and comes to designate ‘something else’ -another mode of production” (1991:53; 417; 129).

Lefebvre’s dialectical materialism is evidently Hegelo-Marxian, yet contrary to Marx and Hegel, his view is that there is no sure, definitive *telos* to history’s end (either in a Marxian material or Hegelian ideal, form), except planetary finitude (1991). However, one commonality is that modes of production structure modes of being insofar as the former determines the material conditions of consciousness (all three of Lefebvre’s interactive spaces can be viewed as being constitutive parts of consciousness). In his *Preface to a Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Karl Marx indeed wrote that (2000:425) “The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process generally” (See also Mészáros, 2010). In other words, as cogently argued by philosopher Merab Mamardašvili, Marx emphasised that the way objects are materially positioned in space (in experiential relation to each other) is a critical factor in the formation of modes of thinking and being (Mamardašvili, 1986:106-107).

It is thus possible to argue that Lefebvre’s modes of production are directly related to modes of being. In other words, one can infer that modes of production not only produce space, but also that in doing so, they produce modes of being in space, or rather modes of being-in-the-world (which I interpret, in an animist sense, simply as ‘beings’). Second, Lefebvre contends that a society (or, as he puts it, “groups, classes or fractions

of classes”) produces its ‘own’ space insofar as it is able to transform senseless matter into semiosis (i.e.: meaning is given to physical objects and space thus becomes morphology). Furthermore, signs serve as the dialectical conduits of transformation in this process since it is precisely because some are “invested in an appropriated space” and others remain “stranded” or “useless”, that a confrontation of meanings and practices occurs and new modes of production (and new ‘beings’) emerge. Finally, Lefebvre proposes to view these successive metamorphoses (I use this term rather than transformations because it better expresses the idea that traces of the past always remain) as having no other *origin* and *telos* than praxis (praxis is “man’s practical activity” comprehended in its totality, see Lefebvre, 1968:82) only constrained by the earth itself (1991). This implies that the dialectical movement that Lefebvre sees in praxis’ internal conflicts is a progression towards modes of production that are spatial expressions of the planet, or put in different terms, towards “Ideas, representations or values” which *represent* planetary limits in spatial terms (ibid, 1991:417). From this discussion, I argue that it is possible to view geopolitics as a dialectical process. I also conceive, as argued in the introduction, space as being socially produced and infer from the above discussion a direct relationship between social actions, meanings and the production of spaces. I apply these conclusions throughout the analytical section of this dissertation (part III).

## **Conclusion**

Lefebvre’s concept of *production of space* lies at the core of the theoretical roots of critical and urban geopolitics. However, what does this mean for this thesis’ endeavour? In this chapter, I have suggested that geopolitics enables the *materialisation* of what

Lefebvre has called the *urban fabric* -the infrastructural, architectural, built-up forms that are characteristic of the city and that continuously expand to encompass the entire earth-. This urban fabric renders the semiosis of capitalism present in the daily lives of individuals across the planet. In its current historical form, it subtends the spatialisation of neoliberal (but in Tulita, also settler colonial and industrial) modes of governmental rationalisation. This materialisation is concretised through objects, buildings, and constructions whose architectural, aesthetic and infrastructural forms serve to convey, in space, neoliberal geopolitical visions, cultures, icons, identities, ideas, or concepts.

As this diffusion occurs in the everyday, the quotidian, and the intimate, these visions are metamorphosed into embodied non-representational habits, movement-affects, particular physical performances, or cognitive attitudes linked to specific emotions, feelings or psychological drives. However, this process is not unidirectional. Individuals, societies and peoples positioned on the 'receiving end' of geopower *will* transcend the geopolitical cultures, visions and identities that are imposed on them by producing alternative architectural/infrastructural forms, other modes of spatialisation, different modes of being (or simply *beings*) and thus different types of geo-politics.

For these reasons, I have argued that geopower should not only be defined as the relations of power that shape the earth but also, in a geo-historical sense, as an ontological force, that is contingent to place, and to the *epochal* nature of the dialectical movements of social progress' (and in a Lefebvrian sense, *planetary*) praxis as they are expressed in, through, and by space. In this sense, and as noted in the introduction, the approach that I am proposing is close to Povinelli's "geontopower" (2016). However, in deliberately following a geopolitical perspective in my understanding of this concept,

I aim to show that in addition to the question of *what* late “liberal modes of governance” count as life and nonlife (Povinelli, 2016:chapter one), the emphasis should also be put on *how* this happens, *who* can counter it and in *what ways*. It is at this point that the Lefebvrian notion of *production of space* becomes particularly useful in this discussion. It is indeed possible to infer from this concept the idea that not only does geopower -as the system through which a particular geo-politics is spatialised (i.e: geo-power)- operate dialectically, but also that this occurs through the exchange of signs. In other words, geopower’s dialectics proceeds through a processual, never-ending commutation between signs that are expressed materially because they are part of a dominant mode of production/being (a dominant geopower), and signs that are remnants of a past mode of understanding of a place- and are as such in a state of quasi-immanence.

In the first chapter, I have argued that Dene animism is grounded in an empirical and speculative relationship with the geophysical parameters of Dene dwelling-place. Signs are produced through speculative interpretations of supernatural encounters that occur in the bush, some of which are transformed into meanings. In this way, this system of thought fits neatly Lefebvre’s *production of space*. In this interpretation, Dene spaces (the bush, places where human, other-than/more-than-human beings dwell and so on...) can indeed be viewed as being the products of Dene social relations (not only between humans but also between human and other-than/more-than-human beings). Yet, the speculative twist mentioned here adds an important *ontological* dimension. It is, not only that for the Dene, other-than/more-than-human beings bear on the manner in which spaces are produced (they act as possible futures in this process), but also that these spaces are inherently free of metaphysical limits: new signs, new beings, new

realities, *can* and indeed *must* emerge because they can be perceived and read by these beings.

It is precisely because of this element that in Tulita, geopolitics -which, as can be inferred from chapter 2, serves to operationalise the *telos* of settler capitalism (again at once in its colonial, industrial and neoliberal forms) in space- acts as a system of ontological enframing (and is, *inter alia* an ontological force). Thus, from a Dene animist perspective, to *represent* geopolitics is arguably to speculate as to its ontological implications, that is, to think about geopolitics's sign-beings, and the possible futures they create. As I will show in part III of this dissertation, given the central role of metamorphosis in both geopolitics's operations and Dene animist epistemologies, these sign-beings transform Dene spaces -and the human, and other-than/more-than-human beings that people them- in ways that fit settler governmental rationalities. This is most visible in the manner in which settler temporalities now factor in Tulita Dene ways of being. Yet, these attempts are not always successful since, as will become clearer, for some in Tulita, they also serve to emancipate Dene spaces from settler (EuroCanadian) time (to reuse a dichotomy proposed by Deloria, 1977; 2003). It is precisely in these transcending practices that one can find traces of Lefebvre's dialectics and to infer solutions to move geopolitics in the direction of social subversion.

From a general perspective, applying the notion of dialectics in the context described above furthers progressive geopolitics' transformational aim of "serving the cause of making a better world" (Kearns, 2009:295; Megoran, 2014; Megoran et al., 2015; Müller, 2013; Sharp J, 2011). This is because this dialectical interpretation enables an exploration of "the potentialities for localised *and* collectivised" re-interpretations of

geopolitics so as to suggest ways to initiate “an ontological and epistemological shift in our understanding of the social body” (Daley, 2015:85; 99). Indeed one of the implications of the above discussion is that it brings to the fore the fact that space itself (as a socio-symbolic construct, as architecture, infrastructures, buildings), and Indigenous communities that have no *normative* say in dominant networks of power/knowledge, can also play a role in the making and unmaking of understandings of social progress as deployed in a settler context. Furthermore, and as cogently put by Kearns (2009), by attempting to view geopower as an ontological problematic, this project follows progressive geopolitics’ aims since it posits that it is necessary to interrogate the “vision of the world that counts as reality within conservative [but one could also add critical] geopolitics” (2009 :266).

In the following chapter I detail the methodological framework used in this thesis. In particular, I further explain why I consider that this dissertation follows progressive rather than decolonising aims.

## **PART II – METHODOLOGICAL DESIGN**

*Chapter four - Methodology: ethnography, and a progressive  
engagement to unsettle geopolitics*

As cogently argued by Cameron (and others, see Watkins, 1977; Coulthard, 2014a; Battiste, 2013; Smith A, 2013), and as I hope I have made clear throughout the first part of this dissertation, colonialism in the Canadian Indigenous North cannot be considered a thing of the past. For example, drawing inspiration from Maori academic Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999), Mi'kmawa scholar Marie Battiste argues that research conducted in and on Indigenous communities should “contribute to empower Indigenous peoples” (2013:76). This entails providing:

“Critical frameworks for addressing issues of inequality, inequity, gaps in education among diverse groups, colonial conscientisation, and hegemony in politics, organisations, and institutions” (ibid:69).

Whilst this does not mean that “colonial relations wholly define the lives of Northerners. [since] This, too, is a colonial conceit”, (Cameron, 2015:17), it does imply a critical obligation on the part of the researcher to take the colonial problematic into account when doing fieldwork in small Indigenous communities of the NWT. For her, decolonisation in the context of research on Northern Indigenous communities is a “critical mode of relating to pasts, presents, and futures that cannot be wholly defined in relation to the colonial, and [a] dismantling of colonial institutions, laws, claims and occupation.” (ibid:18). Or, as cogently put by Linda Smith in *Decolonizing Methodologies*, it “is about centring our [Indigenous] concerns and world views and then coming to know and understand theory and research from our own perspectives and for our own purposes.” (Smith LT, 1999:41, quoted in Battiste, 2013:35; see also

Martin T, 2013; Katz, 2007; Haggerty, 2004; Simpson A, 2008; Johnson et al., 2007; Simpson and Smith, 2014; Sundberg, 2014). For Cameron however, a decolonising approach does not necessarily bring the benefit of preventing the possibility of falling into the trap of epistemic dispossession. Indeed, for her, decolonisation does not refer to the same experiences, the same ways of relating to the future, the present and the past, for actors of governmental rationality or for an Indigenous, or a non-Indigenous person living in Canada, and one can infer, even less so for a non-Indigenous non-Canadian national. She writes that decolonisation:

“Necessarily means something different for Indigenous peoples than it does for the state, for the descendants of settlers, and for those who continue to profit from the dispossession of Indigenous lands and resources.” (2015:17).

Cameron’s solution to this problem of incommensurability is, from the perspective of a settler epistemology, to adopt an attitude of radical *unsettling*, an unsettling of the assumptions that lie at the core of settler coloniality. In her words, “For settlers, unsettling - imaginatively, materially, politically – is an essential and ongoing task. We must learn to know less, claim less, to listen, and to stop.” (ibid:19). In this thesis, I attempt to follow this view and argue, that it is necessary to approach the question of decolonisation cautiously (ibid). In other words, I do not argue that this thesis aims to follow a decolonising agenda. As cogently put by Cameron, this would imply that I participate in settler reconciliation attempts, that is, in settler attempts to assert power over Indigenous identities, through their recognition as already decolonised subjects (ibid), whilst remaining grounded in the Western episteme. Instead, I argue that, following the example provided by Cameron, this dissertation seeks to “join in the process of critical interrogation [to] ask questions together” (Simpson A, 2012, quoted in Cameron, 2015:19) about some of the principles that lie at the core of Canada’s

settler project, here those that pertain to the issues of settler geopolitical visions and cultures (settler geopolymer) in the Indigenous NWT.

As can be inferred from the preceding chapters, I believe that the process of *unsettling* (settler geopolitical visions) imply first an attempt to shed an illuminating light on the manner in which settler geopolymer functions as a *passive* system of spatial subjectification in an Indigenous community. This subtends re-placing apparent benign elements of the everyday (materialities such as objects, infrastructures, or buildings) in their settler geopolitical context. Second, it also means that I seek to question dominant Western understandings of geopolitics by bringing Tulita Dene representations of geopolymer to the fore. One way that I do so is through the concept of speculative geopolitics which aims to further socially emancipating and empowering goals within dominant conceptualisations of geopolitics. As such, I contend that it is more appropriate to call the approach I am following in this thesis, *progressive*, rather than decolonising.

However, from a practical perspective, doing fieldwork in Tulita has meant being confronted with a problematic dissonance between, on the one hand, “scholarly traditions” and expectations that “erase place, belonging and identity, but also the power relations attendant to these” (Coburn et al., 2013:332) and on the other hand, the realities of everyday life in settings that tend to be not only geographically but also (geo)politically ignored in these traditions. Here, I am referring to (critical) geopolitical scholarship, which remains conceptually not only disengaged from local socio-historical and cultural contexts (Kuus, 2007b; 2008; Timár, 2004; Nicley, 2009), but also, arguably detached from the ontologies that animate them. This implies that a

problematization of the role of the researcher, and of her social situation and personal background in the production of her scholarly work is necessary. Thus, investigations of representations of geopower in Tulita cannot be disentangled from a reflexive positional interrogation about the epistemological, political and ontological implications that such an analysis entails. In this sense, it is also necessary, as noted in the introduction to this thesis, to bring to the fore the structures and relations of power (and *inter alia* of resistance) implied in, and generated by, its production.

For instance, I argue in this chapter that Tulita's unequal socio-political structure impacted the manner in which my project became enmeshed in the various narratives used by competing groups and individuals to identify themselves<sup>73</sup> (which influenced the manner in which *I* was perceived differently by these groups) so as to solidify their political legitimacy or to challenge that of others within the social spaces of the settlement and *beyond* (that is in the politics of interpretation and representation of ethnographies, see Clifford, 1986). Furthermore, because of the tensions this created, and since this project aims -like any other scholarly work- to *produce* knowledge, it became entangled in already existing fears, among some of my acquaintances, of epistemic appropriation and in expectations, among others, that I would voice their perceptions and experiences of socio-economic, environmental and political issues in the community and beyond<sup>74</sup>. Thus, like the nahani mentioned in chapter 1, my presence in Tulita was *disruptive*, not only in a more-than-human (it generated speculative networks of affects and emotions), but also in a material, sense (it created

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<sup>73</sup> Namely, Métis, Dene, pro-/against- hydraulic fracturing, pro/against outsiders (and relatedly pro/against non-Indigenous academics and graduate students), seasoned academics, graduate students, consultants, non-Indigenous government and oil/gas employees, marginalised groups/elites, substance abusers/former alcoholics, pro or against non-renewable resource-based development strategies, and so on...

<sup>74</sup> For example, an acquaintance asked me to represent the Tulita Dene and Métis as a people of the land.

new signs and meanings). For this reason, I have considered that data collected for the completion of this thesis is *sensitive*, not only in a political, but also in an ethical sense and have implemented strategies to take this factor into account in the writing of this dissertation.

In what follows, I detail these strategies. I begin by situating myself within the broader geopolitical nexuses of power that have given birth to and sustained this project since its inception. This is followed by a review of the analytical limits that pertain to the nature of the empirical data I have collected and the ways through which I have sought to address these limits. I then reflect on the ethnographic approach I have taken during and after my period of fieldwork. I delineate in particular my application of the participant-observant approach, and my use of ethnographic data collected in Tulita and interviews conducted in Yellowknife. I conclude by delineating this project's analytical method.

### **Coming from somewhere: positionality and reflexivity<sup>75</sup>**

At the outset, it must be said that prior to a period of fieldwork undertaken in 2013 for the completion of a MSc degree, I had no experience of Indigenous cultures, problems and ways of being, let alone in the Canadian context. My own background is a postcolonial mixture of French, Mauritian and Australian identities, interweaved with

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<sup>75</sup> My purpose in going through this reflexive exercise is to acknowledge the fact that I am “shaped by structural forms of oppression” (Smith A, 2013:264). I am also recognising that the very construction of my self as a subject in the context of this research entails “claims to have privilege” in the dominant order of production of knowledge that can only be accommodated with the position of marginality of the Tulita Dene within that order by simultaneously seeking to “disrupt” it (ibid:265, 272).

a British postgraduate education<sup>76</sup>. However, I grew up for the most part in La Réunion, a small French overseas island department located south of Madagascar, and which is best known in France for its active volcano, and multiethnic postcolonial society. My commitment to this doctoral project stemmed from a long-standing interest in non-Western modes of being and production, and also because of a childhood fascination for the Arctic and its Indigenous peoples.

However, because of my current position, as a postgraduate student in a major British university, in other words, an important global nexus of power/knowledge, my project is by epistemological design *geopolitical*. This is the case also because, first as feminist geoliticians have reminded us, the personal (my own identity, personal questioning, and ways of seeing) is also geopolitical (Hyndman, 2004). Second, this is also because this project imposes upon the Tulita Dene, a mode of *framing*, of *questioning* and *analysing* the world that is intrinsically foreign to them (Smith LT, 1999) and that potentially furthers dominant networks of knowledge production (Mignolo, 2002). In other words, from a reflexive standpoint, the power embedded in the dominant Western episteme, embodied in my way of being/knowing, in part ‘constructed’ the object of my research (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992; Smith LT, 1999).

Issues of positionality and reflexivity are in this sense critical to the way qualitative research (such as ethnography) operates since it is primarily the researcher who *subjectively* frames what constitutes her/his fieldsite, and what information she/he collects (and from whom). It is also her/him who reviews this information, gives it the

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<sup>76</sup> Which followed from undergraduate/postgraduate studies in France, time spent working in sub-Saharan Africa and North-East Asia and several years of unemployment in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis.

form of analytical data and draws conclusions, ideas and concepts from it. For instance, her/his gender/race/class/nationality, or more generally her/his phenomenological closeness to the field researched may (or may not) allow her/him, to “find some doors open more readily than others” (Van Maanen, 2011:4; Townsend-Bell, 2009; Al-Natour, 2011). Existing power relations within the fieldsite may also preclude the possibility of accessing certain groups or categories of individuals once a rapport has been established with other members of the community studied (ibid). The level of openness to outsiders of the group studied can either facilitate or prevent rapid access to particular types of information (rituals, beliefs, traditions) (ibid). Additionally, access, on the part of the researcher, to financial and logistical resources determines the length of stay (and as such the depth of her/his relationship with the field) but also the scope and nature of the topics investigated, (ibid:5). Finally, the particular ‘traditions’ of the discipline from which the researcher’s study originates (ibid), and her/his style, way of speaking, writing, expressing, reporting and narrating, influence what she/he is able to see/hear/experience in the field but also how her/his ethnographic work is perceived by audiences in her/his discipline and/or beyond (ibid).

Thus, not only did my own (personal) biases and beliefs influence the nature of the data I collected, but they also impacted the type of analyses, and conclusions I was able to reach subsequently. Therefore, before explaining in more details my methodological/analytical framework, in what follows, I begin by delineating its limits.

## **Limits to generalisability: the particularity of Tulita's socio-economic and political structure**

Five parameters had a direct impact on the nature and scope of the data I was able to collect whilst in Tulita: a suspicion towards outsiders accrued by the fact that I stayed for four months and that I did not speak Tulita's slavey dialect<sup>77</sup>, difficulty to access female informants, the political impact of the non-renewable resource economy on the community's socio-political fabric (in particular with regards to how I viewed hydraulic fracturing, see below), and differences in economic and political positioning, within Tulita's society, between the Dene and Métis (and other groups including consultants/experts, government workers or researchers).

The first point is that middle-aged Dene women tended to be less willing to speak to me<sup>78</sup>. My notes, observations and interactions thus reflect more the ways of being and knowing of Dene men, rather than those of Dene women. The political context of Tulita, the patriarchal legacy of colonisation in Canadian Indigenous communities, as well as strong suspicions against outsiders, also influenced my ability to access certain kinds of informants and thus certain kinds of information. The nature of my observations and of the ethnographic work that emerged from them are therefore also influenced by this factor. Furthermore, the rather short duration of my stay (four

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<sup>77</sup> On this point, see in particular the issue of the outsider/insider dialectic (Caine et al., 2007) and its problematic impacts on the configuration of the field researched and observations produced (Al Natour 2011).

<sup>78</sup> I have only a set of hypotheses as to why this happened: timidity/lack of interest, fear of/resentment against outsiders, or a postcolonial patriarchal kinship system that construes male outsiders as potential threats, even more so in cases where the question of race/nationality is added. An investigation of the gendered nature of the structures of personal and political power and violence inherited from colonisation, is beyond the scope of this thesis (but see for example: McIvor, 1994; Barker, 2008; Stark, 2013; Kuokkanen, 2014; Razack, 2016).

months) did not allow me to develop enough familiarity to get past these barriers. I was however not able to stay in Tulita for more than four months as per the terms of my research authorisation. The question of money has also been an important issue during my period of fieldwork. Residents seemed to be accustomed to the idea that researchers are very wealthy and generous (perhaps because of past experiences). Since my research project is self-funded, some misunderstandings arose.

The language barrier also prevented me from fully experiencing the meaning of some key Dene concepts. Although all my conversations were in English, my acquaintances used their dialect (a local variant of North Slavey) when they did not want me to understand them (which also showed strategies on their part to resist the epistemological implications of my presence in the settlement). Another important element is that major disagreements between the Dene and Métis and between those who are pro and against resource-based industrial development within the settlement, impacts the way outsiders are interacted with, depending on which group they are perceived to favour and/or as regards their opinion on the extraction of resources (or rather what their opinion is understood to be).

For example, the question of whether I was pro or against hydraulic fracturing was raised during a public meeting I attended at the community's cultural centre. A representative of the Sahtu Land and Water Board had organised a presentation which aimed to offer residents information on potential future oil/gas exploration projects in the vicinity of Tulita. At mid-point, the organiser, who had kept staring at me since I sat down, suddenly asked who I was and what I was doing there. As I explained that I was a doctoral researcher who was staying in the settlement to complete my fieldwork,

he required that I tell him (and all the others in the attendance) whether I was in favour or against hydraulic fracturing. I replied that I was neither for nor against it but that I trusted scientific publications on the subject, including regarding potential environmental impacts. He watched me taking notes on a small piece of paper for the next 10-15 minutes. At this point, he asked me to leave the meeting as he felt uncomfortable with my presence. My understanding, which was later confirmed by the couple who rented the small trailer in which I had been staying for 2 months until then (at the time of my stay, they also owned several small businesses), was that the information that was communicated during this meeting was too sensitive for an outsider to hear<sup>79</sup>. A similar ‘tension’ between members of Dene and Métis groups existed in the settlement at the time of my fieldwork. As already mentioned briefly in chapter 2, the relationships between the Dene and Métis in the NWT are relatively complex, and have been at times conflictual, since the period of Treaty 11.

Most Métis families in the Sahtu region are direct descendants of Scottish, Scandinavian or French independent trappers who, after having moved in the area during the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, married with Dene women and settled down permanently (Abel, 2005; Slobodin, 1966). Because of their bicultural identity, at the frontier between White and Dene societies, they have often served as relays of information, negotiators, interpreters, traders, and advisers to both (Abel, 2005), whilst also being the victims of prejudices from both worlds (Slobodin, 1966). By the time of

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<sup>79</sup> It is possible to view this as another example of *resistance*. I argue however that this interpretation needs to be nuanced given the implications that my presence in this meeting could have been perceived to have for those who were presenting. A speculative reading of this event is more appropriate, since what triggered this reaction was a *disruptive* questioning about what I -an outsider, with a graduate education, but no clear political positioning- would think of the calculative projections used to convince Tulita’s residents of the economic viability of future oil/gas exploration/extraction activities in the immediate vicinity of the settlement. After all, none of the socio-environmental risks associated with hydraulic fracturing (see Vengosh et al., 2014) were mentioned during the time I attended this event.

Treaty 11, Ottawa's colonial agents had begun to consider the Métis living in what later became the provinces of (Northern) British Columbia, Saskatchewan, Alberta, and Manitoba (as well as in the NWT) as a group culturally distinct from the Dene. Thus, as part of the negotiations of Treaty 11, Ottawa's representative offered them a choice of taking "treaty or money scrip" (paper certificates redeemable for a single payment in cash) (Abel, 2005:176). Those who took cash payments later became the aboriginal Métis community of the Sahtu region.

During the early years of the 'decolonial era' that culminated with the Dene declaration, several attempts were made by Métis leaders to create an organisation that could serve as an equivalent to the Dene Nation for the Métis of the NWT (Hamilton, 1994). In *Arctic Revolution*, NWT-based journalist John Hamilton recounts that this was not an easy process (ibid). The Dene (considered status Indians) were indeed initially against the idea of sharing the benefits they had obtained as part of Treaty 11 with them (ibid). Yet, the Dene Nation attempted to merge its claims with theirs in the early 1970s (ibid). At first, Ottawa did not agree and demanded to negotiate separate demands, but subsequently asked the opposite (ibid). Contrary to the Dene Declaration's quasi-secessionist tone, the Métis Association of the NWT (now the NWT Métis Nation) resolutely asserted the Métis to be "loyal citizens of Canada" (ibid). Crucially, perhaps because of their historical involvement in the wage economy, they were also more inclined than the Dene to view a non-renewable resource-based model of development in the North as a necessity (ibid). Because of this and also because Ottawa maintained constant financial pressure on them and on Dene negotiators in the years leading up to the signature of the SDMCLCA, their united front with the Dene Nation fissured. This contributed to opening the way for community-by-community agreements, the model

of governance that is now at the heart of Ottawa's relationship with the NWT's First Nations.

Disagreements between the Dene and Métis stayed on in Tulita until the signature of a 'unity accord' in 2007 which aimed to reconcile both groups in view of future economic challenges (CBC News, 2007). However, my own interactions with acquaintances who either considered themselves Métis or Dene led me to believe that these disagreements have not completely disappeared. One Métis acquaintance for instance told me that he could not understand why outsiders were systematically more interested in learning about the Dene (and not the Métis). A non-Indigenous acquaintance who had been staying in the community for several decades at the time of my fieldwork viewed both problems (the issues of resource-based development and differences between the Dene and Métis) as central to understanding the socio-political fractures that mark contemporary life in Tulita (identified as CI). It is worth quoting him at length as his views, I believe, provide a clear (and to my mind, accurate) description of the underlying conflicts that I noticed in my own observations:

'Fracking [i.e.: hydraulic fracturing] will hurt who they are because of the land. [So.] that's what I have been afraid of, that they'd lose what they are when they lose their land... Some groups are allowing it to happen because they have an interest in it... I think that's dividing the community as it is now, because the ones that allow fracking have a personal interest in it. There's a few people who haven't been in the open... There are certain people that have companies who earn profit out of these activities, but they are not saying that, they are just saying that fracking is ok, but they know they are saying that because they have a personal interest in it... That's I think what's dividing the community right now. There are other divisions, but I know that's the main one. Some families have an interest and they are able to support a candidate because they are the ones that are the more educated and they have the money and they are the ones that want to get into leadership and in Tulita I think that people are very friendly, they are open to people more than other communities but at the same time, they don't have the leadership that other communities might have. They don't have the strong leadership that you need to say no, we don't want fracking and the

leaderships that want to get in, because a lot of them are pro-fracking. The chief, over the years, since they have started to develop the self-government, his powers have diminished... Even the Hamlet [mayoral authorities] has started to have more power than the band. So, the power [now] comes [more] from the hamlet than the band and the finances too, the land corporations also have a lot of control over land development... I see a lot of families are divided - families that have their sons or daughters that are involved on the business side of fracking-... The Métis have their own society, their own organisation, when something happens, they all work together.”

(Recorded, unstructured interview with CI, Tulita, 14/11/2014)

For two other non-Indigenous acquaintances, what indicated the difference between the Dene and Métis is the latter’s ability to embody what they called a ‘white mentality’, that is, a kind of symbolic whiteness which I believe represented in the minds of these acquaintances, the ability to master the capitalist ethos (described in chapter 2 in relation to Max Weber’s *Spirit of capitalism*). This, they thought, is what allowed the Métis to operate Tulita’s businesses. In my own observations, I have noticed that this was not entirely true (for instance, a Dene acquaintance owned a small construction company). However, the two major businesses that most often serviced (and benefited from) outside industrial activities were effectively owned by Métis individuals. As mentioned in the quotation above, the same individuals were also involved in local politics. Whilst this is not enough to conclude that these differences subtend a conflictual understanding of reality, particularly in relation to traditional beliefs and practices, it does imply that the *world* that accompanies non-renewable resource development activities (and the expectations and possibilities it entails) operates as a political line of division within the community. This division is all the more consequential in the political context created by the SDMCLCA. Indeed, as observed by anthropologist Carly Dokis, the SDMCLCA entrenched the political disagreements that existed between the Dene and Métis, prior to 1993 into the everyday spaces of Tulita’s political life (2010:41). By creating two land corporations, the Tulita Dene and

Fort Norman Métis Land Corporations, whose buildings are located at opposite sides of the settlement, it generated a political antagonism between two ‘parallel’ bureaucracies with overlapping responsibilities. Their interactions could only now be a competitive one (i.e. competition for the membership of Indigenous residents and the attention of external industrial actors). Writing about fieldwork conducted between 2005 and 2007, Dokis observes:

“After the SDMCLCA, however, with the establishment of two distinct Land Corporations, and the requirement that individuals identify and enlist as either Dene or Métis, these political fissures were entrenched into the land claim itself. While many of the divisions between Dene and Métis families were and continue to be only slightly palpable on individual levels, frustration with community divisions is growing, and has become very obvious at the level of community politics. This discord is evident [in] some community meetings where one Land Corporation might be in the process of negotiating business contracts with a proponent while the other has no knowledge of the proposed activity” (ibid:41-42).

I will come back to this point in part III of this dissertation. At this stage, however, it is important to note that it is this factor that most impacted my fieldwork in Tulita, and thus the nature of, and limitations to, the data I was able to collect. For instance, it is perhaps because of this situation that I could more readily access those individuals that were not part of the community’s non-traditional networks of power and *inter alia* that other individuals were less inclined to interact with me.

It is however also because of these elements that Tulita offered a particularly fitting setting for this research. The community sits at the ontological border between the farthest point at which settler geopower extends in the Sahtu region and a world where bush-based (or land-based) Dene modes of spatialisation still operate. Whilst this point certainly applies to the three other Dene communities of the Sahtu region and indeed to

most remote Indigenous communities of the Canadian North, it rings particularly true for Tulita, since it is near this settlement that oil was first extracted for industrial purposes in the NWT. Norman Wells' oil fields (located about 70 kilometres north of Tulita) have indeed been in industrial operation since the early 1940s. The construction of a pipeline from Norman Wells to Zama city in Alberta in the 1980s has further transformed the area into a major industrial hub.

Since its creation, the settlement has thus always been in close geographical contact with settler industrial-capitalist materialities. Tulita has also experienced several resource commodity cycles, which have had direct impacts on the lives of its residents (Dokis, 2010). I have for example observed that the community is highly hierarchised along such factors as access to social, political or economic capital. I observed the effects of this disparity on the way Tulita's Dene and Métis residents perceived the effects of the Sahtu Dene and Métis Land Claim Agreement differently. Whilst for some, the agreement opened the way for the community's prosperity, for those who could not retain long-term forms of employment or who experienced the effects of resource exploitation activities negatively, it reproduced "the very configurations of colonial power that Indigenous peoples have historically sought to transcend" (Coulthard, 2007:439; see also Dokis, 2010).

Furthermore, the fact that the settlement is the first point of entry into the Mackenzie valley's oil and gas exploration/extraction fields for southern goods and peoples (via the winter road in the cold season and the Dehcho/Mackenzie river during the warm months) further substantiates the importance of the effects of these commodity fluctuations in the community's everyday life (Auld and Kershaw, 2005). Yet, Dene

and Métis residents have not lost their attachment to land-based modes of production/being as traditional hunting, fishing and hunting activities continue to be actively practiced (Kuokkanen, 2011). Finally, from a political perspective, the settlement has also been involved in the decolonial activism of the 1970s<sup>80</sup>.

### **‘Framing’ the field: authorisations, locations and duration of fieldwork**

Prior to beginning my period of fieldwork in Tulita, I received ethical approval for my project from the University of Oxford’s Central University Research Ethics Committee. In the conduct of my research, I have followed the Association of Canadian Universities for Northern Studies’ ethical guidelines for the Conduct of Research in the North. I have ensured that my research approach respects the “privacy and dignity” of the people I interacted with, in particular by implementing specific measures to protect the anonymity of my acquaintances and interviewees and the confidentiality of the information they communicated to me (I discuss this point further below) (ACUNS, 2003). I also ensured that I obtained the “informed consent of those who might be unreasonably affected or of their legal guardian” (ibid, 2003:6). By “informed consent”, I mean that I communicated the purposes of my research, sources of financial support (I am self-funded), and the names of the investigators responsible for it (myself and my supervisors) (ibid). Participants were also informed that they could, at any time, choose to retrieve their contributions. I have also followed the International Arctic Social Science Association’s call to allow participants to “express their interests and to participate in the research”, by communicating results in a non-technical manner and

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<sup>80</sup> Several leaders from Tulita (such as Paul Baton, and Paul Andrew) were part of the first Dene decolonial movements of the NWT.

by providing “meaningful experience, training and economic opportunities” (IASSA, 1998). A written summary of this research will also be sent to participants, individually (along with their individual transcripts). However, in order to protect the anonymity and confidentiality of my informants, these transcripts will be removed from the version sent to the community’s authorities and the ARI.

In practice, I have followed these guidelines in the following way. Before my departure, I obtained a research authorisation from the Aurora Research Institute<sup>81</sup> for a period of two months. Upon my arrival in the settlement, the Tulita Land and Financial Corporation further confirmed that the community had been made aware of, and agreed to, my project. An extension of this authorisation for another two months was granted to me in December 2014. The authorisation thus gave me permission to do research in Tulita for a period of four months. As such, I stayed in the community between November 2014 and March 2015. More precisely, I arrived in Yellowknife on the 29/10/2014, where I stayed until the 03/11/2014, on which day I left for Tulita. I returned to Yellowknife on the 7/03/2015 and went back to the United Kingdom on the 28/03/2015.

In addition to information regarding my research project, purposes, design and aims, in my ARI application, I emphasised that the project could bring the following benefits to the community: (1) give geospatial backing to traditional and non-traditional land-use practices vis-à-vis future land-related conflicts with oil/gas companies or other institutions (specially through the use of GPS tracking devices) (2) empower Dene ways of being and knowing by bringing their expertise to the fore in academic productions

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<sup>81</sup> The ARI handles all licensing permissions for researchers seeking to conduct fieldwork in the NWT.

(as regards their understandings of nature, space, place and power) (3) better identify their strengths and weaknesses in relation to the use and building of infrastructures.

Upon my arrival in Tulita, I confirmed verbally with the community's power holders (chief, elder, Tulita Land Corporation) that they agreed to my presence in the community and to my research project. As part of their approval, I was tasked to offer to present my project (and any early results) to community residents whenever possible. This was done during two public meetings. The first was held at the community's hall, normally used for public consultation meetings, during a research results workshop organised on the 22/01/2015 by the Sahtu Renewable Resource Board. The second took place at the settlement's high school on the 17/02/2015. In both cases, feedback provided by participants was positive. I have also deposited electronic copies of all the cartographic data I collected during my stay in Tulita at the Band's Renewable Resource Council office (along with a GPS tracking device and the software required to operate it) and trained a local employee to use it.

### **Research framework**

I approached my period of fieldwork in Tulita through an ethnographic perspective (an ethnographic journal of approximately 220 pages was written during my stay). It is this perspective (and my fieldnotes) that has informed my analysis of the interviews I have conducted in the settlement and in Yellowknife with representatives of Indigenous organisations, and of the Territorial and Federal government. In total, 8 formal unstructured interviews were conducted in Tulita (6 were audio-recorded, the other 2 were not recorded at the request of the interviewee, all were transcribed) and an

additional 9 semi-structured interviews were realised in Yellowknife (all 9 were audio-recorded and transcribed). In Tulita, consent<sup>82</sup> was obtained at the start of each interview using a verbal consent script. In Yellowknife, questions were sent by email prior to the interview date. Information regarding consent was enclosed in these emails and repeated in verbal form at the beginning of each interview. To ensure the anonymity, and confidentiality of these interviews, no names are used when references are made to them in this dissertation, and only minimal (and slightly altered) information about the interviewees are provided in order to aid in their comprehension. All information pertaining to individuals I met during my fieldwork period and that are recorded in my ethnographic fieldnotes have been anonymised in the same manner in this dissertation. The third research method used in this thesis was based on GPS tracking devices. However, due to poor returns and personal interrogations regarding the representations conveyed by this data (in particular, the rationalist, calculative ontologies that underpin it), I have decided not to utilise it.

### **Ethnography as participant-observation**

My choice of ethnography stems from the contention that this methodology can provide thick and detailed descriptions of how the “spatiality of [geo]political” processes are generated and understood by an individual and/or her community (Megoran, 2006:625). For instance, for political geographers Benwell (2017), Hyndman (2004),

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<sup>82</sup> For all informal conversations referred to in this thesis, I ensured verbally that acquaintances were informed of my identity, and of the purpose of my presence in the community, and thus of the purpose of my research. I also informed them that they could, at any time, choose not to speak to me or let me know verbally or by email/facebook messaging (after my departure) whether they wanted me to retrieve their contributions. The public presentation organised on the 22/01/2015 by the SRRB also allowed me to ensure that this information was communicated to those of my acquaintances who attended it (a majority of the references made to acquaintances in this thesis are individuals who were in attendance that day).

Salazar (2013), O’Tuathail (2010), and Rech (2015), ethnography offers a convincing method to investigate the way the banal events and things of one’s quotidian lifeworld convey geopolitical visions and representations and thus contribute to sustain identities and practices that are subservient to these visions. Ethnography, as opposed to other qualitative methods is a “powerful way of illuminating” the way in which meanings and representations emerge and are structured by members of a culture, since it seeks to understand, through relatively long-term experiences of the everyday lives of these individuals, the manner in which etic phenomena are perceived (Megoran, 2006:627). However, by focusing on the local, experiential scale, it tends to produce insights on geopolitical phenomena that cannot necessarily be generalisable (Salazar, 2013). Ethnography is nevertheless critically relevant -and uniquely positioned- to serve as research method in attempts to respond to calls to investigate the ways in which the “little things”, situated in the spaces of the everyday and the intimate, participate in geopower’s operations (Thrift, 2000; O’Tuathail, 2010; Mamadouh, 2010; see also Powell, 2018). From an ontological perspective, it can also provide detailed insights on the practices and representations that subtend subaltern geopolitical (or alter-geopolitical) modes of categorising beings (Koopman, 2011; Sharp J, 2013). In this thesis, ethnography is understood as:

“A method of research, [which] denotes an extended sojourn amongst a group of people where the researcher immerses himself or herself in daily life, continuously reflecting on meticulously kept fieldnotes, to learn the social understandings of the group in its own terms.” (Megoran, 2006:625).

In deliberately beginning from the perspective of a political geographer, my intent is to signal that in this thesis, I do not use ethnography to analyse an *ethnological* but rather a *geographical* phenomenon (again Tulita Dene representations of geopower).

Following Megoran, I thus view ethnography as proceeding primarily through participant-observation, whereby “the researcher patiently listens and takes part in social interactions that he/she has not created and does not control” (ibid:626). This does not imply, as noted at the beginning of this chapter that participant-observation - by essence a subjective endeavour- is devoid of power relations or that the ethnographer is somehow able not to alter the geographical, social (and political) relations of her/his site of study. However, participant-observation does enable the researcher to be practically, directly, and *sensuously* engaged with the field in a manner that allows her/him to be transformed, touched and *psychically* involved with the world that she studies (Ingold, 2014:387-388). A second element of ethnographies is the act of writing *about* the observations recorded during fieldwork in order to provide a coherent narrative. Ethnography is not in this sense:

“Intrinsic to the [field] encounters themselves; it is rather a judgment that is cast upon them through a retrospective conversion of the learning, remembering and note-taking which they call forth into pretexts for something else altogether.” (ibid:386).

A third important dimension of doing ethnography is the process of *symbolic interpretation* implied (and involved) in the analysis of these recorded observations. In *The Interpretation of Cultures*, anthropologist Clifford Geertz indeed observes that the object of ethnography lies in:

“A stratified hierarchy of meaningful structures in terms of which twitches, winks, fake-winks, parodies, rehearsals of parodies are produced, perceived, and interpreted, and without which they would not [in] fact exist, no matter what anyone did or didn't do with his eyelids.” (1973:7).

Before reviewing this analytical step in more detail, particularly in relation to the way in which I have problematised the notion of sign in this thesis, I would like to discuss a little longer the first two dimensions. In doing so, I aim to better delineate the way I have applied the ethnographic method in this thesis.

First, I contend that participation and observation cannot be disentangled in the process of a researcher's involvement in the experience of ethnographic fieldwork. Indeed, one cannot be somewhere (and become a part of its reality) without also simultaneously knowing (by observing, hearing, touching and/or smelling) to some extent, *how* and *what* that somewhere is (see for instance Goffman, 1991). In this sense, the intersubjectivity involved in the researcher's entanglement with others' lifeworlds necessarily entails an ontological opening to, or at least a phenomenological implication in, the ways of being of these others. In *Lifeworlds: Essays in Existential Anthropology*, anthropologist Michael Jackson (2013), for example proposes a phenomenological approach to ethnography that emphasises the role of place-based contingencies and relations, experiential encounters and existential understandings in the participant-observant study of individuals and their community's everyday life. Jackson's approach also recognises the importance of the researcher, her self and her transformational role in shaping her interactions with the field (ibid). More precisely, he views the field as a holistic site of "co-presence", made of a multiplicity of connections, nexuses of relationships and physical-experiential encounters (ibid). In his understanding, Jackson borrows heavily from Heidegger's work, particularly the notion of being-in-the-world (ibid, 1998). Jackson's being-in-the-world is one through which the researcher incorporates the reality of the field, of her/his informants and makes it her/his own (ibid).

One example of the way in which I have applied Jackson's approach in this thesis is by developing a narrative that draws from the 'extra-ordinary' encounters I had during my fieldwork period (as defined in the context of Dene animism/supernature in chapter 1). More precisely, I have sought to structure my analysis of the observations I recorded during this period of fieldwork using the semiotic insights that the dreams (and the extra-ordinary experiences) I had whilst in Tulita provide about Tulita Dene lifeworlds. Dreams are, in Jackson's phenomenological approach, of the order of the extra-mundane, but constitute, like the mundane activities in which we are actually embedded on an everyday basis, "appearances that arise from different circumstances, serve different interests, and have different effects" (Jackson and Piette, 2015:9). They belong to areas of one's experience that do not fit dominant categories of analysis but nevertheless can provide critical insights as to their meaning, particularly the context in which these meanings are deployed. For instance, in *What is Existential Anthropology*, Jackson and Piette write:

"What characterises the existential-phenomenological perspective is not only a refusal to reduce human experience to a priori categories such as the social, the cultural, the biological, or the historical, but a determination to open our minds to domains of human experience that fall outside of or defy the rubrics with which intellectuals typically seek to contain or cover [them]." (2015:11).

Dreams (and other extra-ordinary moments) reveal that "things as they are have no stable or essential 'isness' or 'selfhood' but appear and emerge quite differently for us depending on our situation, interest, and perspective." (ibid:12). In this sense, they provide indications on these situations (or contexts) that "fall outside of or defy" classical categories of analysis about actual experiences (ibid). They reveal epistemological gaps in the researcher's own appraisal of her/his informants' reality and can thus shed an illuminating light on the manner in which these informants

construe that reality from their own ontological perspectives.

For this reason, Jackson and Piette define phenomenology as “a method for exploring the tension and dialectic between immediate and mediated experience” (ibid:11). It is precisely in this sense that the phenomenological ethnographic approach followed in this thesis serves, as noted in the introduction, to bring to the fore, and investigate, the semiotic gaps that not only mark a separation between my ways of being/knowing and those of the Tulita Dene (as in dreams and other extra-ordinary encounters), but also to reveal traces of transformative states (conflicts/refusals/alterations/subjectification) in the latter’s ontologies (or how the beings of geopower bear on these ontologies). In other words, I contend that a phenomenological ethnography enables the researcher to identify and investigate these gaps precisely because they emerge in the “tension and dialectic” (ibid) that connects her/his immediate experience of the field to the manner in which it is (or appears to be) mediated by its members.

Practically, this was done through a commitment to be involved in events, activities, discussions, but also with people, at different times and places (Blommaert and Dong, 2010) in order to determine how they formed part of a coherent *spatial-political* whole. In particular, for the four months of fieldwork during which I stayed in Tulita (end of October 2014 to beginning of March 2015), I spent several hours at the end of each day writing my notes (following guidelines provided in Emerson et al., 2011). Approximately 220 pages of field notes were thus written by the time my stay in Tulita was ending. These focused on describing my experiences (about peoples, events, places, and practices that I observed), as well as the phenomenological contexts of these experiences: with whom, what was said, my feelings, sensations and thoughts towards

them. I approached Tulita's residents through a "big-net approach [mixing] and mingling with everyone at first" (adult men and women), before narrowing down to "specific portions of the population studied." (Fetterman, 2010:35-65). This meant that I spent the first month getting accustomed to the community's everyday life (and also hoped that local residents do the same with me). Once a certain familiarity was established, I kept regularly in touch with those acquaintances with whom I had a positive relationship. I visited them as often as possible, asking to observe them or participate in activities that they were routinely undertaking and which were related to space, place (e.g. nature, the land, walking or using a snowmobile or a car to travel along certain paths or roads, fishing, trapping, hunting and so on...) and to medicine (or EuroCanadian understandings of), and power (e.g. deaths, accidents, public consultation meetings, recreational events, traditional celebrations, events involving local or outside leadership members, resource extraction activities).

Second, I have also conducted a total of 8 formal unstructured interviews in Tulita and 9 semi-structured interviews in Yellowknife (see figure 4 below for a list of interviewees). By 'formal' I mean, following anthropologists Martyn Hammersley and Paul Atkinson, that these interviews were set up in advance with the interviewees, "out of earshot of other people" and that the interview followed a topic guide (2007). Consent<sup>83</sup> was obtained, and information about my research project and about the topics of the interview provided, beforehand in Tulita in verbal form. In Yellowknife I also sent my questions by email to the interviewees before the interview. I have chosen to follow strict confidentiality rules to ensure the anonymity of my informants (and to

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<sup>83</sup> Emphasis was put on the interviewee's right to refuse to take part or to choose to withdraw from the study.

respect the private character of Tulita Dene society). More importantly, this choice stems from the fact that, as noted previously, the community's political-institutional dysfunctions apparently bear on the socio-political structures of its everyday life (and thus on the lives of its residents). Because of this context, I consider some of the topics investigated in this thesis -issues of power over processes of spatial production including medicine power, institutions/practices that convey settler geopolitical control over the Sahtu region, power differences and inequalities within the community linked to the organisation of the settlement's urban fabric- to be sensitive. Sensitive topics are topics that:

“Have a higher probability of causing distress than others. These topics include those that delve deeply into the personal life or experiences of persons. Also included are topics [that], expose the vested interests of powerful persons or persons engaged in coercive or domineering behaviours, and are of a meaningful religious nature.” (Corbin and Morse, 2003:337).

In this sense, personal information communicated to me during interviews (or as part of my participation in the everyday life of the settlement) could potentially have an impact on my informants, and *inter alia* on the community itself. One of the way interviews conducted on sensitive topics can nevertheless be used as part of research projects, is through “the concealing of identifying information” (ibid:336). In line with this recommendation, in this dissertation, no names are used to identify informants (either from interviews or as part of my ethnographic field notes). Use of these interviews is made to substantiate specific arguments but with minimal (and altered) information about the individual identities of my interviewees<sup>84</sup>. To remain consistent, I have also applied this approach to the interviews I have conducted in Yellowknife.

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<sup>84</sup> A male interviewee (or informant when the reference stems from my field notes) may be presented as female and vice versa. Her/his social position or role will also be modified. Only the institutional context of her occupation will remain the same.

	<b>Type of interview</b>	<b>Institutional function</b>	<b>Date/location</b>
DEF	Tape-recorded, semi-structured	Dene political leader	26/03/2015- Yellowknife
AR	Tape-recorded, unstructured	Relative of Ayah	27/11/2014 - Tulita
DN	Tape-recorded, unstructured	Dene youth political leader	16/03/2015 - Yellowknife
IMF	Written notes, unstructured	Entrepreneurial leader	31/01/2015 - Tulita
RRO	Tape-recorded, unstructured	Renewable Resource monitoring	26/11/2014 - Tulita
CI	Tape-recorded, unstructured	Worked for one of Tulita's administrations, under the authority of the GNWT	15/11/2014 - Tulita
FEMNLA	Tape-recorded, semi-structured	GNWT's Legislative Assembly	19/03/2015 - Yellowknife
RCNDA	Tape-recorded, semi-structured	Federal government's Canadian Agency for Northern Development	27/03/2015 - Yellowknife
OENR	Tape-recorded, semi-structured	GNWT's Environment and Natural Resources department	18/03/2015 - Yellowknife
SITI	Tape-recorded, semi-structured	GNWT's Industry, Tourism and	25/03/2015 - Yellowknife

		Investment department	
SUE	Tape-recorded, unstructured	Worked for one of Tulita's Land Corporations	18/11/2014 - Tulita
SUE 2	Written notes, unstructured	Worked for one of Tulita's local administrations	13/12/2014 - Tulita
TCP	Tape-recorded, semi-structured	Community liaison for an oil company operating in Tulita	02/12/2014 - Tulita
YDA	Tape-recorded, unstructured	Dene youth involved in decolonial education networks	03/03/2015 - Tulita
HO	Tape-recorded, semi-structured	Environmental NGO	17/03/2015 - Yellowknife
IR	Tape-recorded, semi-structured	NWT Chamber of commerce	26/03/2015 - Yellowknife

**Figure 4**

List of interviewees

My sampling strategy in Tulita and Yellowknife was purposeful and representative in the sense that all interviewees were chosen on the basis of their belonging to political or economic decision/influence-making institutions. In Tulita, these individuals were recommended to me by other informants. These interviewees were thus selected on the basis of a snowball technique. In Yellowknife, in some cases, emails were sent to the contact addresses of local administrations, found on their respective websites (Indigenous, Federal, Territorial and business and civil society representatives). These indicated the nature of my research, the conditions of participation and the types of questions/topics that would be discussed during the interview. Specific individuals, willing to participate in the interview, were then identified internally by members of these administrations. They then either contacted me directly in response to my request, or when their contact information was forwarded to me, I took the initiative of writing to them to set up the date and time of the interview. In one case, reference to the interviewee was made by a common acquaintance who resided in Tulita. This person was then contacted by email and a time/date was set up for the interview. In another case, I walked in directly in the office of the interviewee and asked if she/he was willing to take part in an interview. The individual then offered a date and time for the interview. Thus, in Yellowknife, my sampling strategy was based on the typical and well-informed character of my interviewees (due to their relatively high-level positions within their administrations, these individuals illustrated their respective institution's point of view on geopolitical discourses and visions of the North's Indigenous groups). It was also 'opportunistic' insofar as they were the ones who accepted to participate in the interviews. Interviews in Tulita and Yellowknife varied in length from 20/30 minutes to about two hours, depending on how much the interviewee was willing to share.

Interviews conducted in Tulita were unstructured and informed by my prior ethnographic observations. Unstructured interviews are open-ended so that no expectations can be imposed on the responses of the interviewees (Hockey and Forsey, 2012). Unstructured interviews follow general topic guides established by the researcher but have the advantage of offering participants more freedom to express their own views, their own ways of knowing/being, precisely because they are able to lead the direction of the interview if they choose to do so (Corbin and Morse, 2003). In an unstructured interview, informants are indeed able to “determine where to begin the narrative, what topics to include or exclude, the order in which topics are introduced, and the amount of detail” they want to provide (ibid:339). Thus, in the context of the aims pursued in this thesis, unstructured interviews offered a way of reaching an understanding of Dene views on space, power and place “on their own terms” (Spradley, 2016:59).

All 9 interviews conducted in Yellowknife were semi-structured and tape-recorded. Each of the 9 interviewees was sent a list of 7 to 8 questions in advance. In semi-structured interviews, the researcher “determines the structure” and the agenda of the exchange (Corbin and Morse, 2003). Although semi-structured interviews have more explicit research goals (Fetterman, 2010), they nevertheless seek to put particular understandings, in relation to specific topics, “in the context of common group beliefs and themes” (ibid:41). However, semi-structured interviews are also open-ended inasmuch as the interviewee becomes more comfortable during the interview and is able and willing to lead the narration (Corbin and Morse, 2003:340).

Because of their open-ended nature, each interview provided unique information. However, all 17 interviews aimed to probe the same research problematics: (1) understandings of the relationships between power, space and place, and inter-relatedly (2) individual experiences of place (3) representations of geopolitical visions, identities and practices of production of geopolitical scripts and discourses, (4) what these interviews revealed about my own ontological positioning vis-à-vis my interviewees and their lifeworlds (i.e.: were my questions perceived as being in conflict with these lifeworlds? And if so why?).

Thus, because “all interviews are reality-constructing, meaning-making occasions” (Gubrium and Holstein, 1995:4), and because all of the interviews I conducted are open-ended (and thus cannot reveal generalisable insights as such), I contend that it is necessary to view these interviews as being part of the subjective phenomenological ethnographic endeavour that lies at the core of this thesis. As such, I have chosen to analyse them *within* the context of this ethnography (that is, using the same analytical categories). Before delineating this analytical aspect, I first end this discussion on the methods I used to collect data during my fieldwork period with a presentation of an exploratory attempt to employ GPS tracking devices to map the everyday movements of Tulita Dene and Métis residents.

The third method used as part of the phenomenological-ethnographic methodological framework of this project is *exploratory* in the sense that it sought to further investigate, via an innovative cartographic mapping technique (the use of GPS tracking devices), the links that exist between physical, infrastructural-architectural environments and

modes of being<sup>85</sup>. However, the results were relatively poor<sup>86</sup>. Of the 18 maps I collected (participants were remunerated to carry the device), I was able to obtain further explanations from 5 participants, only two of whom accepted to draw mental maps of the settlement to explicate their respective use of the trackers. Furthermore, all participants except one refused that any information pertaining to their hunting/trapping practices be featured in any way in the maps. All these 17 individuals also stayed inside the settlement when they carried one of the four GPS trackers with them. Some repeated the same movements (mainly by moving in circle around their respective houses) voluntarily to give me the impression that they actually used the tracking device I gave them (with the sole purpose of receiving the remuneration I offered in exchange). Others asked if they could use them longer to be paid more. Finally, in one case (but this could also have been done by others), the participant asked a relative to carry the device in her place. These strategies not only clearly show forms of resistance to my project, they also reveal that for participants, *mapping* (and the calculative, ocular-centred view of space that it subtends and that subtends it), *represented* a potential geopolitical threat. In other words, for these acquaintances, the GPS tracking devices I brought into the community subtended the geo-coding/spatially rationalising operations of geopower. Thus, their deployment as *signs/things/beings of geopower* needed to be resisted precisely because they embodied a settler-based extractive epistemology which speculatively entailed the possibility of further losing control over the intimate spaces of everyday life in the settlement (a problem which is however already present in the SDMCLCA, see chapter 2). However, this threat was not only perceived to originate in

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<sup>85</sup> This method has, to my knowledge, not been used with these specific theoretical concerns in mind in the context of Indigenous geographies (see however Aporta, 2003; Hirt, 2012; Christensen et al., 2011).

<sup>86</sup> It is also possible that participants did not understand how to use the devices. Furthermore, they could have chosen to show certain aspects of their everyday lives in the belief that I was more interested in these aspects (thus biasing the results).

Western institutions of power/knowledge (which I incarnated) but also in the community itself. For instance, an acquaintance who refused to take part in the GPS tracking study explained to me that he did not want to share maps of his hunting and trapping grounds with other hunters in the settlement (as I had explained that I would provide electronic copies of each map to the Tulita Renewable Resource Council, formerly the Hunters and Trappers Association)<sup>87</sup>. In this sense and as noted previously, this GPS tracking study also became entangled in the community's internal socio-political struggles and confirms that my presence had simultaneously a disruptive and a transforming effect.

#### *Data analysis*

In this thesis, I follow Geertz hermeneutic analytical approach. In the *Interpretation of Cultures* (1973), Geertz viewed anthropology as a hermeneutic discipline, that is, as a social science which seeks to reach an understanding of cultures through the study of the meaning of social actions that take place within the geo-historical settings of that culture. Ethnography is subservient to this endeavour insofar as the anthropologist can use it to develop thick, detailed descriptions of these social actions (ibid). In this sense, Geertz argues that culture should be viewed as “interworked systems of construable signs”, that is as a context through which “social events, behaviours, institutions, or processes” can be “intelligibly” described (ibid:14)<sup>88</sup>. He writes:

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<sup>87</sup> Thus, because of the sensitive nature of information pertaining to individual hunting and trapping grounds, I have not been able to collect extended data on this topic, nor have I discussed what I was told by some of my acquaintances on this subject in this thesis. There are also practical and financial reasons for this. I discuss them in chapter 6.

<sup>88</sup> See also, Henry Sharp's *Loon: Memory, Meaning and Reality* (2001).

“The concept of culture I espouse, [is] essentially a semiotic one. Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretative one in search of meaning. It is explication I am after.” (1973:5).

The purpose of analysis in this perspective is to investigate social actions (which I understand as practices/discourses, that have another individual’s behaviour as its dialectical counterpart<sup>89</sup>) to determine and bring to the fore the semiotic relationships that subtend particular meanings, within a specific societal context. Geertz writes:

“Analysis, then, is sorting out the structures of signification [and] determining their social ground and import.” (ibid:9).

However, signs, in Geertz’s hermeneutic approach take a more specific sense than in Kohn’s *How Forests Think* (2013), whose approach is followed in this thesis. To repeat, for Kohn, signs encompass not only *symbols*, that is associations to conventional meanings that take behavioural sense in reference to specifically *human* representational systems such as languages, alphabets, images, or numbers, but also *icons* (“signs that share likeness with the things they represent”) and *indexes* (“signs that are in some ways affected by or otherwise correlated with those things they represent”) (2013:8). Crucially, Kohn argues that such a characteristically broad understanding of the term enables one to make ontological claims about other-than-humans, in particular the possibility that non-human living beings are also capable of semiotic thought, and thus of communicating with humans (ibid:9).

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<sup>89</sup> Weber defines social action in the following terms: “Action is social in so far as, by virtue of the subjective meaning attached to it by the acting individual (or individuals), it takes account of the behaviour of others and is thereby oriented in its course.” (1968:88).

The other implication of such an understanding of signs is that an analysis of the structures of signification that subtend social actions in the context of Tulita Dene animist ontologies must consider not only the interplay of human-to-human exchanges but also, at an individual level, human-to other-than-human intercommunication (in other words, the agency of other-than-human beings). In the context of the topics being investigated in this thesis, the analytical question then becomes: what does *this* practice, *this* behaviour, *this* discourse (in other words, a social action) tells us about the manner in which geopower is represented in Tulita (in other words what are the structures of signification that subtend the operations of geopower in Tulita)? Or to reuse Geertz's formulation, how geopower's "acts are signs" in the "imaginative universe" (1973:13) of the Tulita Dene?

Preceding discussions (in chapters 1 and 3 in particular) can help in determining what categories of analysis can be used to provide responses to these questions, in particular by specifying how geopower (generally) *appears to others elsewhere*. Povinelli provides an example of such an approach in *Geontologies: A requiem to late liberalism* (2016). Her logic is deductive in the sense that she begins from three conceptual figures that for her cluster the operations of settler late liberal governance into analytical categories. She then shows, using several empirical examples, how these conceptual figures render geontopower present in the everyday lives of these groups. She writes:

"My object of analysis, in other words, is not them [aboriginal groups], but settler late liberalism. As a result, the primary evidence for my claims comes from the kind of late liberal forces that move through their lives and that part of our lives that we have lived together."

"For the purpose of analytical explication, I cluster this proliferation around three figures: the Desert, the Animist, and the Virus. [These] figures, statics, and discourses are *diagnostic and symptomatic* of the present way in which late

liberalism governs difference and markets in a differential social geography.” (2016:23; 15).

In this thesis, I follow Povinelli’s example and apply a deductive logic. From chapters 1, 2, 3 and 4, it is possible to infer the following analytical ‘clusters’ through which representations of geopower in Tulita are mediated (and can as such be investigated): (1) *visions/images/discourses/ideas* that convey settler liberal (and industrial) capitalist identities and genres of place; (2) everyday *objects* and tools; (3) *infrastructural* and *architectural* structures (the built environment); (4) *practices* that produce, reproduce, subvert, transcend or resist settler modes of spatiality. In part III of this dissertation I provide an analytical reading of the social actions I was able to observe (and record) during my fieldwork using these four clusters.

To the extent that my ethnographic data, collected using what Geertz called “thick descriptions”, does not *inductively* relate to these four clusters, there is, in the analytical exercise that follows in part III, an interpretive process that mediates the field (and the observations recorded there) into the ethnographic ‘product’ on which this dissertation relies. This interpretive process proceeds through a dialectical movement that allows one to “use theory and ethnographic material” in order to “think one through the other” (Cerwonka, 2007:19). This involves some form of ethnographic *bricolage* with data collected during fieldwork, that is, the necessity to improvise theory on the basis of whatever was at hand there, knowing that what it contains does not always bear a direct “relation to [this project but] is the contingent result” (Lévi-Strauss, 1966:17) of all the interactions I had with the beings of Tulita. A phenomenological-ethnography cannot indeed “separate the ethnography as written from the place as sensed” (Hastrup, 2010:193).

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I have described my research framework. I have, discussed the authorisations, methodological approach and research methods I have used to collect empirical data during a five months long period of fieldwork in the Dene and Métis community of Tulita and in the city of Yellowknife in the NWT. I have noted that my use of ethnography proceeds, in this thesis, through a phenomenological perspective. This phenomenological interpretation places the dialectical tension between my own experiences of being-in-the-world among the Tulita Dene and the way *they* live and act in this world (that is, through their own ontological categories), at the heart of the narrative and argumentative structure of this thesis. Data collection in Tulita was done primarily through participant observation (and the writing of detailed field notes). However, I also used GPS tracking devices (with limited results) and conducted unstructured interviews in this community, as well as semi-structured interviews in Yellowknife. Analysis of this data was conducted through a semiotic lens and focused on the meaning awarded to signs produced via social actions, following the example provided by Geertz (1973), Kohn (2013), and Povinelli (2016). In part III of this dissertation, four analytical clusters, identified through this process, are investigated.

Ethnographies like the one on which this dissertation relies are partial truths, since they are limited by their intersubjective character. Because of their emphasis on thick descriptions, most relevant in the case of this thesis are problems of generalisability (or external validity)<sup>90</sup>. For instance, because of the intrinsically personal and inter-

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<sup>90</sup> I am including in this, issues of biases inherent to interviews, which also act to limit the validity of information communicated in them. For instance, for Hammersley and Atkinson, “The information people receive through their networks may be false. Equally, we cannot assume that anyone is a

subjective nature of this methodological approach, the informants I was able to speak with (and the types of discussion I had with them), as well as the places I was able to visit, are the subjective result of my own self's interactions with the lifeworlds of the community's residents. These intersubjective products can only provide a partial view of Tulita (this 'setting' is after all also co-constructed through the observations, descriptions and analyses I have chosen to convey in this dissertation), and only a particular interpretation of their representations of geopower (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007:32). However, as cogently argued by Geertz, the purpose of ethnography is precisely to get at a *deeper descriptive* understanding of a *specific* phenomenon in *specific* settings, with *particular* parameters, through repeated studies (1973:25).

As such, issues of generalisability do not diminish the analytical contributions made by ethnographies, insofar as their goal is not to provide generalisable results per se, but rather detailed information about how groups of people experience specific problems in particular ways. In this thesis, I contend that this is precisely the form of empirical contribution I am making, since I am investigating the way a specific phenomenon, geopower, operates in a particular 'setting', Tulita. In doing so, I seek to participate in attempts to move the field of geopolitical studies away from their Western-based (and state-centred) focus, and towards subaltern beings, including other-than-human persons. In this sense, my research design follows *progressive* geopolitics' goal to problematise the dominant ontological bases of geopolitics through detailed

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privileged commentator on his or her own actions, in the sense that the truth of their account is guaranteed." (2007:182). Yet, interviewees generally also have a better knowledge of the local context and can as such provide valuable insights on the manner in which the phenomena that are under investigation, operate in this context (ibid). For issues of internal validity, I rely on secondary data published by governments (GNWT/Federal government), para-academic organisations or in academic journals and newspapers to ensure the reliability of my observations.

descriptions of the manner in which these bases are mediated into socio-political changes *differently*, depending on “local conditions” (Kearns, 2013).

In this sense, this thesis contributes to attempts to *unsettle* dominant (neo-colonial and capitalist) settler rules regarding the organisation of Indigenous spaces (Cameron, 2015). It does so by suggesting ways to conceptualise these spaces, not as irrational beliefs, or as abstract cultural symbols (which would act to ‘contain’ them within the realm of liberal recognition), but as practical *norms* capable of organising human political actions. For instance, for political geographer Gerry Kearns, “to develop a new conception of space for a Progressive Geopolitics”, it is necessary to consider that:

*“There are more than states [I] am thinking [of] those many Indigenous peoples who struggle to retain or recreate spaces of albeit compromised and fragile autonomy within territories claimed by nation-states. [The] Indigenous peoples have care for perhaps the last reservoir of non-commodified resources. In the long story of the proletarianisation of peoples, this Indigenous redout is not only a majestic source of non-capitalist reasoning, but also now humanity’s last best hope for the preservation of species diversity. The first element of a conception of space that might serve a Progressive Geopolitics might be respect for the distinctiveness and fragility of Indigenous stewardship of this 20% of the earth’s land, currently under threat from the modern versions of those companies that Hobson saw extending commodification and colonialism into the resource-rich lands of the tropics.” (2013:926).*

Thus, my use of ethnography to investigate representations of geopolitics in Tulita also responds to progressive geopolitics’ call to “shine light upon the actually existing alternatives to imperialism, so that these might be built upon rather than dismissed with indecent haste as both ineffective and impossible.” (Kearns, 2009:31). This is precisely what the conceptualisation of an Indigenous (or speculative) geopolitics attempts to achieve. In part III of this dissertation, I seek to develop this approach.

**PART III – ANALYTICAL OBSERVATIONS: TOWARDS A  
SPECULATIVE GEOPOLITICS**

*Chapter five - Spatialising settler temporalities/materialising capitalist futures or how the beings of geopower colonise Dene time*

Geopolitical visions are by essence ocular-centric, cartesian, rationalised constructions of space (O'Tuathail, 1996). In this chapter, I investigate the way this rationalisation operates in the NWT using interviews I conducted in Yellowknife and observations that pertain to the images, sounds, ideas, and symbols more generally that circulate in the everyday spaces of Tulita's quotidian life. I will show that here, as among Povinelli's aboriginal groups of the Australian Northern Territories (2016), geopower's "politics of signification" (O'Tuathail, 1996:143), function to separate "life" from "nonlife" (Povinelli, 2016). Similarly to Povinelli, I contend that the division between bios and *Zôê* not only extends to beings, but also to the materialities that people space itself.

In other words, through geopower, settler capitalist distinctions between spaces that qualify *economically* for political recognition (the closer they are to becoming a capitalist urban-industrial form), and others that do not, are materialised -and thus become semiotically agential- in the everyday life of Tulita Dene residents. What distinguishes these spaces is that the latter can only support what philosopher Giorgio Agamben called "bare life" (1998) (or Povinelli's "nonlife"), where all modes of being (including human beings) are reduced to the status of mere biological, and by extension geophysical, resources. However, the material-semiotic enactment of this distinction via geopower enables settler temporalities to direct the manner in which the space of Tulita is produced and reproduced. The settler capitalist chronological telos -an inevitable *future* towards which all beings progress through the dialectical movements

of the spatialisation of calculative rationality- indeed becomes the dominant force behind the way local categories of signification are structured. In this sense, settler geopower in the NWT, as it is mediated semiotically in Tulita as well as in the manner in which it is represented by my interviewees in Yellowknife, is distinctively *urban*. By this I mean that it conveys a mode of spatiality that is distinctively metropolitan, that is, it materialises a geopolitical vision of space that is rationalised, bureaucratised, mathematical (or geo-coded), commodified and has the specific forms of industrial matter (including, infrastructural buildings such as roads, airports, warehouses and so on...). As I show in this chapter, my interviewees in Yellowknife, all of whom were at high- to mid-level positions of Territorial and Federal administrations, represent the NWT's Indigenous spaces using the jargon of anticipatory expertise. These discourses take shape in Tulita through events, institutions, and industrial projects that not only structure the material conditions of everyday life in the community (even creating the conditions for economic classes to emerge), but also crucially, they determine what counts as legitimate knowledge *about* these conditions.

Furthermore, the underlying logic of these geopolitical visions is consistent with settler governmental narratives (Stephen Harper's Northern Strategy is used as an example) that aim to present the industrialisation and the development of a capitalist base in the Indigenous NWT as the only ways to *save* communities like Tulita from socio-economic oblivion. The infrastructural extension of modernity to these remote areas becomes an epistemological materialisation of the bureaucratic order that not only subtends the extension of the urban-industrial world in the NWT, but also its transformation into manageable spaces. Roads, grocery shops, businesses (and their necessary entrepreneurial bases) are viewed as the [geo-]political machines (Barry,

2001) of that order. They operate like infrastructural symbols of “things and also the relation between [those] things” (Larkin, 2013, p. 329) that incarnate the spatial order of industrial capitalism in the lived reality of Tulita, so that the signs (associations of meanings) that are prevalent in the settlement can operate as self-disciplining forces. Thus, as I show, in Tulita, the operations of settler geopolitics are distinctively systematic in that they *enframe* Dene and Métis residents into the binary system described above: a system where settler capitalist signs, conveyed via the discursive, visual and symbolic constructs of Northern bureaucratic jargon, decide what counts as bare life (or nonlife) and political life (or life). However, as will also become clear, these operations are not entirely successful as different semiotic devices indicate that the Dene are not only aware of, but also able to, resist and transcend them.

## **Narratives of settler futures: the case of the Mackenzie Valley Fibre Link**

### **Project**

#### *The Mackenzie Valley Fibre Link Project: making a capitalist future present*

In January 2015, Tulita became once again entangled in a major industrial development project. The Mackenzie Valley Fibre Link Project (MVFLP), worth a total of CAD 82 million, and which entailed the installation of a 1,154 kilometre-long cable from Alberta’s northern border to Inuvik, aimed to “provide state-of-the-art fibre optic telecommunications for communities in the Mackenzie Valley and Beaufort Delta regions” (MVFL, 2017). It was completed in June 2017, two years after the beginning of the construction phase. In the hamlet, between November 2014 and February 2015, activities connected to the project brought a sudden influx of workers, industrial

equipment and monies. A temporary camp, complete with catering and housing services, was built in its immediate vicinity along with a dedicated access road. Yet, this was not sufficient to provide for the extra demand put on the settlement's housing infrastructure. By the end of the month of December, I was asked to leave the small house I had rented until then, as Leducor (the company contracted to lead the implementation of the project) was offering a significant amount of money (significantly higher than what I could afford) to its owners to rent it. Another house, which I had been told a few weeks before, I would be able to stay in for CAD 2000 per month, was also rented away a couple of days prior to my moving in it. Other contractors working for the project had offered twice the amount I had paid, and to the person to whom I had already given a month in advance, this was what mattered the most.

I ended up staying in the only 'emergency' accommodation left in the community for the remaining two months of my period of fieldwork: a 20 squaremetres half of a trailer which had not been used by anyone for a few years. The other, more modern section was occupied by a man who was flown in from Ontario in the early weeks of January to do night shifts at Leducor camp's catering facilities. My new landlords were a Métis couple who had managed to take advantage of the opportunities brought by similar activities in the community in the past. Towards the end of my period of fieldwork, they were on the verge of opening two additional small businesses: a grocery store (the third in the settlement), and a second catering service which was to service the hotel. They had put high hopes in these new projects which would respond, they expected, to the increased demand that would come with the construction of an all-weather road between Tulita and the rest of the NWT. The spatial configuration of the community

gave them an important advantage since their new grocery store was to be located only a few metres away from the future road. Nearing my departure from Tulita, the man took me to a large abandoned building, an old warehouse only a short distance from the airport, where he intended to bring in additional goods in preparation for the economic transformations he (and his wife) expected the future would bring to the community. And clearly, the atmosphere of Tulita at that time could only give weight to the impression that those who had the ‘right’ kind of spirit, an entrepreneurial spirit, open to *opportunities*, would continue to thrive in the future.

However, on a day-to-day basis, the MVFLP’s existence, and its entanglements with the lives of Tulita’s residents were strangely distant, yet very real as they bear, almost like a collective unconscious, on the community’s spaces of the everyday. For instance, an opaque dome shaped structure, approximately 100 meters in diameter and at least 35 metre-high at the centre, and closed to the outside, was built on the north-eastern edge of the settlement to allow for drilling and construction work to continue night and day without interruption. Environmental disturbances thus seemed minimal insofar as they were hidden from the public. At the same time, communication on the project’s aims and nature was limited to one group visit, organised at a pre-agreed time and date by the hamlet’s municipal administration, the Métis Land Corporation and Ledcor. However, some of the MVFLP’s declared purposes such as supporting resource development, shipping and navigation activities, and contributing to further Canada’s Northern sovereignty and facilitating military surveillance via high-speed links to remote satellite technologies (GNWT, 2017) went beyond simple improvements (and disruptions) to local life because of their settler geopolitical nature. It was never clear to me whether my acquaintances had any awareness of these multi-scalar geopolitical

connections, or more prosaically, whether they had any interest in them, despite my repeated attempts to inquire about their opinions. However, these absences, that is not so much the existence of signs of opposition or resistance, nor proofs of willful participation, but rather their *lack*, betrayed the prevalence of settler temporalities in the semiotic economy of the community.

In this sense, the semiotic actions of the ‘beings of geopower’ were, during this period more than before, clearly palpable. The ‘future’, a settler neoliberal future, had again taken *affective* shape through the material congealing of signs in the *present*. This took the form of a workers’ camp, a dome-shaped drilling facility, both hidden away from the eyes of the everyday Tulita Dene and Métis man and woman but conveyed through to them via the capitalist value-system of quick monetary gains (in the form of houses being rented out en masse for double or triple their normal price). In a matter of a few weeks, the sensory characteristics of everyday life in the community were subtly altered. Certain *absences*, or rather traces of absence, of people, of cars, that could have indicated the invasive presence of this massive event, marked by opposition, its imbrication with the normal *temporal* positioning of Tulita -as a space of *present* financial gains and thus of tangible expectations regarding *future* capitalist opportunities, *future* industrial modernisation, *future* socio-economic development and so on... At the other end of this dichotomy was of course a particular settler framing of Tulita’s past which serves to legitimise it as a *backward* space, lost, to reuse a Sartrean expression, in a kind of *nothingness* (2003)<sup>91</sup>.

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<sup>91</sup> This resulting metaphysical separation between space and time stems from the fact that at this moment, *competing realities* interacted in Tulita, with on the one hand a reality conveyed by geopower (which spatialised settler temporalities in the form of particular materialities and their associated signs) and on the other hand Dene practical forms of appropriation of that reality (still more or less driven by land-based modes of spatialisation of time) (by this, I do not mean that I understand space and time to operate

The following example illustrates this point further. For a non-Indigenous worker coming in Tulita during the period of the MVFLP's construction (like my next door neighbour) the community is nothing other than an extractive space. Although this was not the first time that he had come to work for my landlords, he had almost no knowledge of the past of this community, nor of the culture of its native inhabitants (apart from the fact that they were Indigenous). I never saw him spending time with his Dene or Métis co-workers, nor did I hear him making any mention of them outside of topics related to work itself. Whilst this is no proof that he did not do so, the fact that his primary focus was on making as much money as possible, as quickly as possible, so that he could go back to his native Ontario with enough for a year, does indicate that his experience of the community was almost exclusively informed by fly in/fly out-based short periods of stay<sup>92</sup>. Thus, for him, what mattered the most (in other words what led him to Tulita) was the *temporality* of settler capitalist (and more generally EuroCanadian) wage-based activities, not prosaically, the spatiality of the settlement, or of its Indigenous residents. However, this logic also applied in the community. The MVFLP was indeed never a major topic of discussion with my acquaintances, nor was it, it seemed to me, an important source of concern for them as all that appeared to matter was how much money and work opportunities the project would bring.

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distinctively in the actions of geopower in Tulita. I only seek to amplify the fact that geopower's spaces are produced predominantly by social temporalities).

<sup>92</sup> Limited interactions between fly-in/fly-out workers and communities located near where extractive activities happen is a problem that has been raised in the literature on the geographies of mining (see for example, Storey, 2011).

## *Anticipation*

In *Resource Temporalities: Anticipations, Retentions and Afterlives* (2017), Kårg Kama (a political geographer) and Gisa Weszkalnys (a cultural anthropologist), argue that resources need to be viewed “as something with a conceptual and affective presence” (ibid:1). According to them, the manipulation of emotions and affects linked to the meanings attached to particular resources is inherently tied to the manner in which not-yet realised industrial activities are socially constructed not only as tangible realities but also as reconfigurations of the past, thus rendering “specific futures present” (Anderson B, 2010:777; Kama and Weszkalnys, 2017). This process also plays out in the way governance policies deliberately ‘frame’ certain questions in anticipatory (using notions like expectations, probabilities/possibilities, predictions, risks, projections, conjectures, potentials and so on...), rather than evidence-based, terms. In doing so, political actors are indeed able to use “the unknown to launch new potentials into the present, and therefore reconfigure what can be known” (ibid:8-9; see also Adey and Anderson, 2012; Anderson B, 2007). In other words, by determining what counts semiotically as possible futures (i.e.: what meanings are associated to specific experiences) and what does not, political actors are not only able to structure the temporal logic that subtends (the when, for how long, and since what moment) the creation of industrial resources but also to normalise that temporal logic as the only legitimate way of spatialising them (for instance as part of regional, national, or international geopolitical logics). Examples of this process are provided in the way important political decision-makers I interviewed in Yellowknife viewed not only Indigenous communities, but also the future of the NWT. For instance, a prominent politician involved in devising policies for the economic development of the NWT viewed Tulita in the following terms:

‘Tulita will never be a Yellowknife. The lack of capacity comes down to the fact that the community just does not have the people, and they never will. They have to change and what we’ve seen here in the NWT is that a lot of these communities don’t want to... So, when they try to take the practical applications of the machinery of the bigger world into their communities, they don’t fit. I mean, let’s just take something simple for example: if we stimulate someone to become a business person, we seed them with financial capability, we create internal wealth in that community, they don’t have the customer base to do this. And so, you live in communities that don’t have the wherewithal to understand, you know that you need a meat shop, a bread shop, you need a gas station. Those simple elements, that are the fundamental cornerstones of a community... So, government continues to sustain communities in their non-sustainable ways... As we unify the NWT with stronger transportation routes, I often say be careful of watch what leaves. Part of the sustainability of these communities is: they are small, and they are tight and there’s very little leakage from them but that’s actually been part of their problem to which is, without the opportunities of the influx of transportation and accessibility, it’s also created a sense of dependency, as it’s difficult to integrate them with other economies... What they want to do is to develop individual regional community plans in order to tap into what the industry wants to do. If we can help the affordability of these areas, then sovereignty can be ensured.’

(Recorded and semi-structured interview with a former elected member of the NWT Legislative Assembly -FEMNLA-, Yellowknife, 15/03/2015)

Similarly, for a representative of the Federal government, the future of NWT’s Indigenous communities lied primarily in their ability to anticipate future economic opportunities<sup>93</sup>:

‘One of things that we do with communities in general or that is available for communities is our community readiness opportunities, and we work with communities and I know we have a couple version of it but we’ve been working with communities in the North to put together the plan of what the future looks like and what opportunities might be on the horizon for them, whether resource

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<sup>93</sup> Because FEMNLA’s and RCNDA’s capitalist (as in rationalising, and calculative), anticipatory representations of the NWT and of its Indigenous peoples also featured strongly in HO’s (an official from an important environmental NGO based in Yellowknife) and IR’s (a representative of the NWT Chambre of Commerce) responses, I do not discuss their respective interviews in detail. These interviews have however also contributed to determine and structure the analytical themes and conclusions presented in this chapter. For instance, for HO, the main problem was the almost exclusive emphasis put by the GNWT on exploiting non-renewable resources. The issues identified by IR revolved around the NWT’s limited and costly infrastructure (and relatedly, what she called uncertainty with regards to how the GNWT would choose to develop it), the absence of entrepreneurial spirit among Indigenous groups (and how to foster it through training and education programs) and the small population of the NWT and of its remote communities (her assumption being that a small population base does not offer a sustainable customer base for businesses to grow).

extraction or not. And then how they can... For them to develop a plan on how they can be prepared to respond when the opportunities present. So, in the case of...we have some communities that would like to stimulate traditional harvesting and so we can work with them to develop a plan on how they would, get some economic benefits from that as well. So not just economic benefits, and training and skills transfer, so transferable skills that they can use in other areas, you know you may learn to use a hammer to build a road, you could be helping to build the road into your community, or you could be helping to build a road into a mine or your could be helping to build a road into a park. It's about creating that space to help people to be ready for what comes on the horizon because we don't know everything that is on the horizon.'

(Recorded and semi-structured interview with a representative of the Canadian Northern Development Agency -RCNDA-, Yellowknife, 27/03/2015)

It is possible to notice the anticipatory logic revealed by Ben Anderson (2010), and Kama and Weszkalnys (2017; see also Sejersen, 2015a) at work in both responses. Clearly implied in both discourses is the temporal dichotomy between *backward*, inadapted Indigenous spaces and *future-oriented*, modernising, settler material (FEMNLA's 'machinery'), and semiotic (RCNDA's plans, programmes, and opportunities) infrastructures. There is also, at the heart of both ways of depicting Northern Indigenous communities, an economic jargon which tends to view local realities through the grid of prospective costs/benefits. Not only does this 'above-ground' perspective or god's-eye view (to reuse Donna Haraway's (1988) expression) facilitate representation of these spaces for bureaucratic purposes, it also transforms them. This takes place via their discursive commodification and rationalisation, and via the semiotic devices that subtend these discourses (maps, diagrams, technical and administrative jargon, mathematical symbols and so on...).

For instance, RCNDA's and FEMNLA's points of view are reminiscent of the Conservative Party of Canada's Northern Strategy. In a document entitled *Canada's Northern Strategy: Our North, Our Heritage, Our Future* published in 2009 by

Ottawa's Indigenous and Northern Affairs department, Stephen Harper's government established a direct relationship between the assertion of the country's sovereignty over Northern lands and the future economic valorisation of its natural resources, including in particular those located on Indigenous lands. The underlying spatial logic of this document is, as conveyed in both interviewees' responses, that exercising "sovereignty includes maintaining a strong presence in the North", by encouraging infrastructural modernisation and the implementation of "sustained economic activity", presented as being "key to building prosperous Aboriginal and Northern communities" (GOC, 2009:8,9,14)<sup>94</sup>. Indeed, whilst this political narrative primarily aimed to assert the country's sovereignty over Arctic lands (CBC News, 2010; GOC, 2009), it also relied on a representation of its Northern Indigenous peoples that is at best disempowering (and at worst neo-colonial). For instance, similar to the ideas conveyed in the quotations above, the Northern Strategy's geopolitical vision subtends the narrative that Northern Indigenous peoples must acquire the necessary skills and knowledge to further the transformation of their lands into profitable commodities (GOC, 2009). Implied in this narrative is the capitalist temporality of socially produced future exchange-values, or as accurately put by geographer Noel Castree "the temporally determined dictates of surplus value realisation." (2009:27)<sup>95</sup>. Indeed, the Northern Strategy interprets improvements in Northern governance structures as necessary only insofar as they

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<sup>94</sup> Justin Trudeau's Liberal government announced that it would replace Harper's *Northern Strategy* in December 2016. It launched a year long campaign of consultation with northern communities (in Manitoba, Newfoundland, Labrador, Nunavut, the Yukon and NWT and Northern Quebec) in the same year. This campaign is due to conclude in 2018. Although it is perhaps too early to analyse the effects of this change, Trudeau's "Arctic Policy Framework" seem nevertheless to follow in the steps of his predecessor's approach, albeit with a stronger emphasis on local input (see Sharp G, 2016) and whilst attempting to decrease the pace of oil/gas exploration and extraction activities in the NWT (he declared a ban on offshore oil and gas activity in the Arctic in June 2016) (CBC News, 2016).

<sup>95</sup> In this sense, this document also further solidified the idea that industrial development is needed to ensure the social and economic realisation of Indigenous communities.

respond to the resource industry's demands for regulatory simplification (and with only limited input from Indigenous peoples) (Abele, 2011:224).

During an interview, a mid-level officer of the GNWT's Environment and Natural Resources department (OENR), confirmed this view by observing that, contrary to Ottawa, the GNWT's primary focus was its aboriginal population. However, the emphasis on future-oriented settler temporalities, notably through the narrative of economic development, remains also present:

'In the development of the Northern strategy, Government of Canada puts its thoughts on the table and then asked the governments of Nunavut, Yukon, NWT: what do you think? So, there was opportunity to influence that. But, we do not live by the Northern Strategy. That's an Ottawa strategy. [It] had significant development aspects in there, it had significant sovereignty aspects in there, to do with the northwest passage. It was all about how the world looks at Canada from a Federal in Ottawa perspective. That does not mean that's what Nunavut, Yukon and the NWT live by, no.

'As I mentioned before: half of the population are Aboriginal so regardless of the what or who does what, we have the commitment, we have to have the commitment to respond to our public, so the public of Canada, holistically is not our public, Our public is 50% first nations and then a whole bunch of other folks that are here generally because they like the land, being out there, their intrinsic heart, soul, innards, tied to the lands is felt by most northerners...

As a GNWT, we don't, we are not perpetuating the practice of strictly a traditional lifestyle and working at ways to preserve that. Rather what we are working at, are ways to allow people into the future and into future generations, to have the ability to choose how they are going to, what lifestyle they are going to choose, and what mix of wage economy and traditional lifestyle they are going to have and that leans that we do have to get better at managing natural resources and understanding natural resources...

We are really at a cusp there, it's that push/pull notion of how much do you want to change? What's nice, we are in a circumstance in the NWT that because of economics, there's opportunity to change that at a pace that for the most part people can be comfortable with.'

(Recorded, semi-structured interview with OENR, Yellowknife, 18/03/2015)

A second example of symbolic device through which settler capitalist temporalities structure the spatiality of Tulita is the community readiness initiative (CRI) mentioned by RCNDA. Whilst in Tulita, I was able to observe the deployment of this programme and the manner in which residents responded. Tulita's CRI was implemented by a fly-in/fly-out two-person consultancy company based in Calgary (identified as AFD). A local resident was also employed on a part-time basis to serve as a liaison, along with a steering committee (also composed of members of the community remunerated to offer advice and to monitor the process) whose aims were to ensure that the initiative's objectives were effectively communicated to other residents. In December 2014, they flew in for a couple of days to analyse this data and prepare the organisation of a public meeting during which they presented some of their results (a second similar meeting was organised in early March 2015). This took place two weeks after their arrival in Tulita, as they had planned to travel to Norman Wells during their stay in the Dene settlement. Questions asked in the studies they conducted aimed to assess the level of preparedness of Tulita's Dene and Métis residents to the prospect of future industrial development activities (resource exploration/extraction, and infrastructural projects). They also sought to determine the economic strengths and weaknesses of the community and the way it envisioned its future in relation to these changes. As I observed (AFD stayed in the same house as the one I had rented until then)<sup>96</sup>, in addition

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<sup>96</sup> I was asked by the community's authorities (who rented this house to me) to give space to AFD. Their *material* and *spatial* association with me was thus also a *semiotic* one in the eyes of the people of Tulita (i.e. I was, like them, represented as a member of the outsiders/consultants/EuroCanadian experts' epistemic community). As this association was imposed on me, it also contributed to solidify this representation (without my behavioural input). At the time of AFD's second visit, I had already been moved to a different accommodation and had grown closer to the acquaintances I had begun to befriend 3 months earlier. When they came back, AFD may have perceived me as a competitor, precisely because individuals who were not part of the settlement's dominant networks of power were more inclined to speak to me and because, relatedly, as AFD had made clear to me during their first visit, they did not see value in my research project. One can arguably see in this attitude yet another example of the political tensions (and competition between groups) that characterised life in the community at the time of my fieldwork (mentioned in the introduction and in chapters 1 and 4).

to information communicated via surveys and focus groups, the CRI provided community residents with details about their work/results through public meetings organised, at the time of my stay, at an interval of two months between each visit. During these meetings, AFD used maps, diagrams, photographs, drawings and powerpoint slides. The community was encouraged to provide input by submitting 'their own' photographs of Tulita, or by giving their oral feedback on these presentations. Participation in these meetings was facilitated by the local. Concretely they took the form of very 'classical' consultation meetings, that is, these meetings were similar to the types of events oil/gas and mining companies usually organise to ensure that residents of Indigenous communities are made aware of their activities. Participants were offered a meal, and soft drinks. It is my contention that, as with resource-focused consultation events, an important fraction of those who attended the CRI meetings were there in large part because of the availability of free food and beverages. This can be for cultural reasons -gatherings of the sort are after all a critical element of bush and community rituals among Dene groups (be they linked to kinship ties or social obligations stemming from rules of reciprocity). It can however also be because some Tulita Dene families still struggle to make ends meet and cannot always eat properly. For instance, for one individual who worked for one of Tulita's land corporations and who was in regular contact with a significant number of families in the community because of professional responsibilities (identified as SUE)<sup>97</sup>:

'I got a big family to support and there's even days when I don't have anything in my fridge. But what I do have is moose meat, fish, rice, so I can make my

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<sup>97</sup> This can also be substantiated with the following evidence. Several acquaintances came to me to request my financial help during my stay in Tulita. In two separate cases, this was because they, or close members of their families, had nothing to eat (at least, that is what they told me). Other acquaintances with whom I stayed in regular contact throughout the duration of my fieldwork never really had much food available in their kitchen. In one example, the person had to rely on food donations made by other members of the community (that is outside of kinship-based food sharing networks).

own food without having to rely on the northern store. That in itself, I am really thankful for that. I know of a lot of people who are a lot less fortunate than myself who have that same situation, they have fish, moose in their freezer, but that's thanks to us [support provided by the land corporations] because we are able to fund these programs to get on the land.'

[Asked about whether, and to what extent people in the community relied on food bought from the local Northern Store:]

'Heavily. Like I said before, there 's really three or four times in the year when we can really go hunting and even that in itself, we don't go overboard on how much we have.'

(Unstructured, recorded interview with SUE, Tulita, 18/11/2014)

Furthermore, the fact that AFD came from Calgary -from what can be symbolically associated with settler Canada's urban industrial south-, participated in the semiotically unequal pattern that continues to subtend the relationship between capitalist industrial forces (and of governmentalisation) and Indigenous groups in the NWT. It placed Indigenous participants in a subservient position, since the "expertise" remained in the hands of external (fly-in/fly-out) non-Indigenous stakeholders. Furthermore, as can be inferred from RCNDA's quotation, the underlying political aim of the CRI was to determine the ways through which the community could be steered towards accepting the idea that settler forms of modernisation, that is socio-economic progress based on economic development, and the commodification of lands, peoples and natural resources, is inevitable. In the CRI's mode of deployment in Tulita, one can clearly view the semiosis of anticipation revealed in Ben Anderson's (2010) and Kama and Weszkalnys's (2016) work, at play. By design, the CRI envisions Tulita as a space of *future* possibilities, and opportunities, that is as being *en route* towards modernity. This is confirmed by the fact that in their presentations AFD relied on spatial-analytical categories which represented, in rationalising terms, an Indigenous 'them' -backward, static, geographically remote, lacking skills- in need of an outside 'modernising us',

dynamic, changing, developing, that is predominantly characterised by futurity. Indeed, the two CRI consultation events I have been able to attend made use of large AO and A1 posters. On them, words like *internal*, *local*, *land* and *community* were associated with culture, tradition, well-being, family, youth ambition but also poor governance, ageing population, and natural environment including natural resources. The term *external* was linked to such concepts as increased communication (roads, internet), training, employment, industry and development. During the meetings mentioned above, images of happiness, and youth engagement were used to represent what lied ahead for Tulita. This dichotomous geopolitical vision is also present in RCNDA's response regarding the impacts of resource exploitation activities on Indigenous communities:

'Communities have, and it's been heard many times that there's always capacity issues in communities, in terms of insufficient number of people who have certain skill sets, so there's often a reliance on outsiders to help fill the void, which does not necessarily increase community capacity, so I think the relationships are reasonably good. It just becomes a challenge of competing priorities. Do you support the development of a tourism initiative or a park? Or do you support a mine? Like what's got the longer shelf life, what's got the bigger benefit for your community and recognizing that the interests of the community are often split as well. You've got some people in the community who would like to see things remain as they are and then others who are looking to the future, not always looking to the future with the same lens though, in terms of sustainability.'

(Recorded and semi-structured interview with a representative of the Canadian Northern Development Agency -RCNDA-, Yellowknife, 27/03/2015)

From the perspective of a local resident in Tulita, these representations of the community conveyed from the outside, not only reinforces the experience of spatial isolation and exclusion from the Canadian North's centres of political, economic and symbolic power but it also furthers the sense of economic backwardness already implied in the settler narrative of modernisation. Furthermore, as ideas about political

emancipation and economic empowerment are conveyed through the prism of settler (capitalist, urban-industrial) spaces, EuroCanadian temporalities are solidified in their symbolic functions of distant but inescapable forces of industrial modernity. This arguably reinforces the sense of groundlessness, that is of being dominated by settler (a predominantly white, as AFD were) Canada, whilst remaining trapped within the here and now of the settlement. However, in the semiotic functioning of the beings of geopower in Tulita, the relationship between settler temporalities and geological matter is not unidirectional. For instance, in the eyes of RCNDA, this relationship is not only about the fact that settler technologies *assemble* a resource semiotically and then seek to confirm its *material* existence, it also concerns the types of geological configurations of the land and how they dictate settler anticipatory territorialising logics (the geographic location of a resource, how it is organised in the subsoil, in what quantities and so on...). In this sense, and as can also be inferred from the contents of the *Northern Strategy*, settler geopower's rationalising temporalities also stem from the way Northern landscapes -including Indigenous spaces- are made normatively, into an *economic* potential that is subservient to settler Canada's geopolitical visions of the future (and the manner in which it asserts its sovereignty). For RCNDA:

'We have diamonds, we have opportunities, and we are traditional as a frontier land, and our unique geography and landscape has allowed for that. So, the fact that we have 3 operating diamond mines itself plays well in this process and as the landscape gets mapped and as resource potentials get understood than different decisions get made. So, I think it is a factor of the territory is not inhabited, as completely as it is in other areas. There's lots of oil and gas opportunities across Canada, and on the east coast as well. It's just more challenging 'cause there's people living on that property already, whereas here that's been primarily crown land, and the understanding of what's beneath the surface is better understood here. And we've made significant investments in geoscience activities that enable us to understand what's under the surface, CanNor has invested significantly in mapping and geological work to support that base. Prior to that, Aboriginal Affairs as part of the land use planning activities in areas of protected activities did a significant amount of mapping

and we have a whole geoscience office in our territory and Nunavut has one as well, that spent a lot of time trying to understand the landscape so that people can make the right decisions that they have the right information to make the right decisions for that land use activity...

It's a big space, [here] in the North, it is a frontier landscape, [All] those limitations actually serve to create an environment where resource extraction might be an option because you have got a larger base of open space that somebody could tap into...

'[on sovereignty:] I think that primarily, as any region or territory or country would do, they would look to home, to support their own people first; [So] finding meaningful work and meaningful ways to use the skills that have been here forever, you know I think that is something that we work towards.'

(Recorded and semi-structured interview with RCNDA-, Yellowknife, 27/03/2015)

### **A bio-anticipatory logic: mathematical symbols and the future of territory**

A second aspect of the CRI's mode of deployment is the fact that it relied on biopolitical technologies of governmental rationalisation. For instance, in their presentations, AFD quantified the information provided to them by community residents through surveys and focus groups (in the form of percentages conveyed through pie and bar charts) to argue that one of the main difficulties facing the future of Tulita was its ageing population. Not only does the reduction of political lives to their bare biologicality enables their rationalisation for administrative purposes, it also normalises their exclusion from the ability to determine what symbols become dominant in the networks of power/knowledge of their administered spaces (what Agamben called the "sovereign ban") (see Agamben, 1998). Indeed, numbers, in other words mathematical symbols, are not mere abstractions, they have a very concrete geopolitical function. They are the devices that subtend, inform and infuse the semiotic operations of the beings of geopower.

For instance, for political geographer Christian Abrahamsson, contemporary modernity is characterised by what he calls a “mathematical unconscious”, a “mathematisation of the everyday” composed of everything from “computational technologies, ranging from GIS to finance along with everything from architecture to statistics” (2012:310). In fact, numbers form the backbone of the historical complicity between industrialisation and calculative sciences, particularly when it comes to subjectifying the colonial (Indigenous) other to the geopolitical rule of industrial modernity (Mitchell T, 2002; Alkenhead, 2006). As symbols of a second-order, numbers function as *imagines agentes*, agents of imagination that forcefully transform particular kinds of symbolic associations into mental automations (Severi, 2015, p. xv; Olson, 1994). Much like written forms of communication, they impose a commensuration of the experience of the real, so that it can be standardised as an epistemic corpus and the *idea* of a political structure be established and/or solidified (Martin H-J, 1994, pp. 79-82). More importantly, mathematical concepts provide a sense of temporal stability out of a world of chronological chaos and can be used as such to simulate and anticipate the occurrence of particular configurations of matter in the future (this is after all the essence of modern physics).

In this sense, and to follow Rose-Redwood (2006), it is precisely because the beings of geopower operate to materialise mathematical symbols in space (or rather that they *are* those mattered mathematical symbols, recall AFD’s charts and statistical analyses) that geopower subtends biopower (i.e.: the reduction of political life to bare life through the use of mathematical concepts, such as statistical studies that transform citizens into faceless populations). Put simply, to be able to operate successfully, biopower must rely on a particular space, a particular mode of spatiality (with operative signs, capable

of responding to the heuristic stimuli of biopolitics). Whilst it is not the role of geopower to produce these spaces, it is its function to solidify them materially and semiotically. An example of this is provided in the manner in which the Canadian Rangers programme operates in Tulita. As a Federal initiative whose purpose is the defense and surveillance of the Canadian North (Lackenbauer, 2013), it relies on settler geopower's production of spaces that fit the narrative of Canada's *future* sovereignty assertion in the Arctic. Indeed, in this narrative, the anticipation of *incoming* security threats, risks and dangers, socially amplified by the Canadian military for geopolitical purposes, legitimises a vision of the North as a space which necessitates ever-increasing human entanglements with the land, with nonlife (a space that must be monitored, put under regular surveillance, known, and so on...) (ibid; Griffiths, 2004). This justifies the biopolitical role given to Indigenous peoples, such as the Dene and Métis of Tulita. As bio-anticipatory tokens of sovereignty, their hunting traditions are not only given a political function (and are thus brought into the metaphysical fold of *Zôê*) in the eyes of the settler state but are also viewed as performances (and thus as reproductions) in the present, of the materiality of geopower's temporalities (here those stemming from the assertion of sovereignty).

The Canadian Rangers (CR) are well imbricated in the socio-political fabric of Tulita and serve, like the CRI, to convey these temporalities in its residents' everyday life, and thus in the processes of subjectification that enable the structuration of their identities as Canadian citizens. As two acquaintances explained to me, participants understand that the initiative aims to assert Canada's sovereignty in the North. They are however also conscious of the fact that most of the threats they are trained to identify, and report are exaggerated. The CRs are not allowed to engage a target

directly, nor are they trained or equipped by the Canadian military to do so. However, for both, it was the sense of national belonging, the pride of feeling Canadian, whilst at the same time being able to express one's Indigeneity (by practicing hunting activities, being on the land, making fire and so on...) that mattered. This became clear to me during the ceremonies that were held in Tulita on Remembrance Day<sup>98</sup>. Each year's Remembrance Day is celebrated during an official ceremony that takes place at the community's school. At the time of my fieldwork in 2014, on a cold November morning, members of the CR, dressed in their uniforms, raised the Canadian flag and sang the country's national anthem whilst in the presence of the Junior CR and of representatives of the Canadian military. The settlement's higher ranked Indigenous CR officers also proudly spoke about Indigenous soldiers who died in World War I and about those that were currently fighting abroad. It is then that I noticed that most of the high-ranked officers present that day were from the most economically and politically important families in the community. In this sense, the semiotic operations of settler geopower underlies the bio-anticipatory logic that subtends the CR programme. Indeed, it is only because in the first instance, the North is represented geopolitically by the settler state as a space of unknown threats, that groups like the Dene can then see socio-political value in themselves fulfilling the identity of the Indigenous hunter-soldier proudly asserting settler sovereignty over this space (which is then henceforth reproduced). Indeed, for them, belonging to Canada, being a Canadian citizen in the North, that is producing a space in constant need of social actions asserting the sovereignty of Canada in the Arctic, *is* participating in the Canadian Rangers' programme (and not the other way round). It is perhaps for this reason that socio-

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<sup>98</sup> See Powell (2009) for a similar argument regarding the nationalist, ritual-like, function of Canada Day celebrations at the Inuit community of Resolute in the Canadian High Arctic.

economic hierarchies in the community tend to mimic those of the settlement's CR unit, as well as those of settler society. Indeed, as I was told by one of the two participants mentioned above, to be accepted and to be able to remain in the programme, one has to follow certain rules of behaviour (following orders, not drinking alcohol or taking drugs, following set schedules and so on...), that in many ways resemble those applied to the settler wage-based work environment. I was also told by one of these participants that the programme had been closed in Tulita for this reason for a long time before being re-opened in the mid-2000s (also following Harper's election in 2006 and his decision to expand the CR). He explained that at that time, participants were unruly, sometimes absent, or intoxicated and did not take their CR duties very seriously. For him, an additional factor was that the programme offered some form of free logistical/material support for hunters (ammunition, a rifle, camping gear and so on...). Participants would use these for themselves rather than to contribute to the programme. Thus, similar to the CRI, and beyond its geopolitical function, the CR programme also serves to create clear semiotic boundaries between what counts as acceptable life (or political life, *Zôê*, here the work-disciplined hunter-soldier who asserts his country's sovereignty) and bare life (or *Bios*, the sometimes drunk, unruly, subsistence hunter who spends time on the land mainly for his or his kins' benefit) in the existential spaces of the Dene and Métis. It also shows that settler strategies of political subjectification are never entirely successful.

A connection can also be made between this bio-anticipatory logic, numbers and time through the mathematical principles of statistical inferences. Probabilistic inferences are the core types of calculative actions that enable governmental rationalising forms of anticipation, in particular those used to develop predictions about geologic

potentials, or for the establishment of infrastructural grids (in particular for the management of populations, the calculation of distance/cost ratios, and of gains in terms of speed) (Elden, 2007). In Tulita, this probabilistic logic is present in the manner in which policing is organised across the NWT. As a Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) spokesperson I was able to speak briefly with in Yellowknife explained to me, the number of officers stationed in each Indigenous settlement is determined on the basis of a statistical calculation which takes into account the number of calls received from these communities and the average speed at which an agent is able to respond. RCNDA's semi-structured interview also shows (and as can also be inferred from FEMNLA's quotation above), that from the perspective of the state's above-ground view, geopolitics's temporalities rely on these probabilistic inferences to *territorialise* settler sovereignty over Indigenous spaces<sup>99</sup>. Indeed, among RCNDA's metaphoric interpretations of Northern spaces, one is particularly striking: it is the idea of the NWT as 'an open space' waiting to be 'tapped into'. In the following excerpt, RCNDA applies the same future-oriented commodifying vision to Indigenous peoples:

'You've got people here in the territory who have been here forever and who have developed some pretty awesome skills as a result of being here forever and those skills are transferable, and they are useful for other people to learn and so the knowledge transfer can go both ways. [So] it's tapping the potential of the population to map out what the going forward looks like.

I think there's great opportunities ahead and through collaboration and partnerships we will be able to make progress in really having the north meet its complete potentials and it's up to all of the governments at play to kind of define what that potential is. What it looks like and how they are gonna get there; There are a number of risks. There is infrastructure shortcomings. There is world markets. We have a lot of the things that are in our underground, that are kind of unique and are important to the world in terms of trade but those are subject to world markets and availabilities.'

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<sup>99</sup> To repeat, territory can be viewed as a "political technology" (Elden, 2013b) that enables the governmental management of Indigenous spaces (via their bureaucratic systematisation and the semiotic fabrication of land as technical resource, and as administrable space).

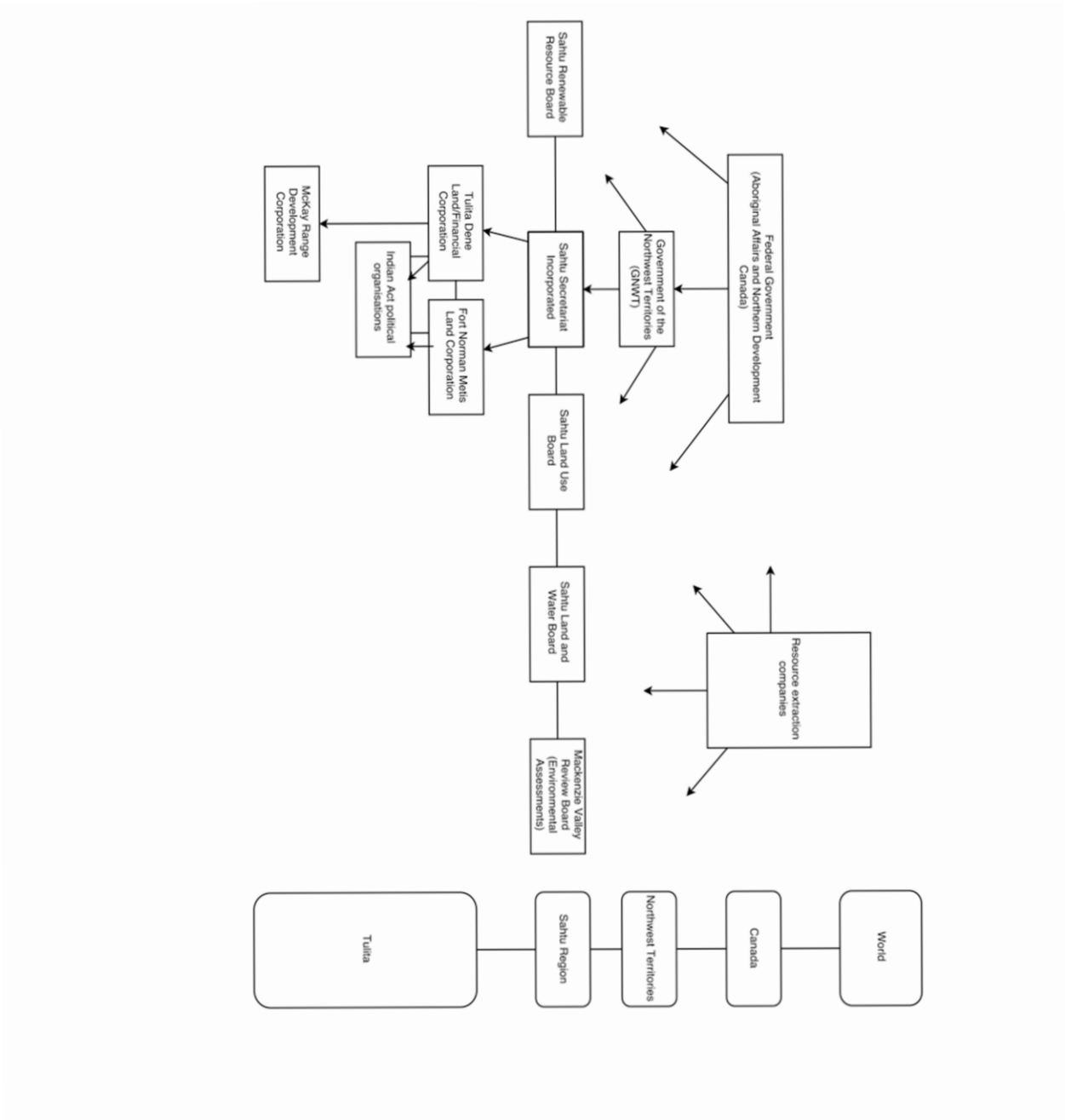
(Recorded and semi-structured interview with RCNDA, Yellowknife, 27/03/2015)

These aspects of RCNDA's response further substantiate a bio-anticipatory reading of settler geopower (i.e.: a population becomes a *potential* social-economic capital once the space in which they live is itself systematised, rationalised and also made into a *potential* through the actions of government). Indeed, for RCNDA, once infrastructural shortcomings are overcome, Indigenous peoples *will become* potentials (they are now skills waiting to be valorised, waiting to be put to their 'proper' economic use), as soon as the 'right' persons, the right resource, the right policy is able to 'tap into' global market demands.

### **Bureaucrats, experts: the territorialisation of settler power's rationalities and its discontents**

However, for both RCNDA and FEMNLA, this is clearly accomplished through the use of specialised bureaucracies (experts), whose sole task is to uncover, measure, commodify, and administer Northern lands' resource potential. In my interview with OENR, I was for instance given details of the extent of processes of bureaucratisation in the NWT, here in the case of environmental management. She cites no less than 18 institutions and pieces of legislation involved in the management of renewable resources in the Sahtu region -the population of the region was approximately of 5000 peoples in 2016.

This bureaucratic and regulatory complexity appears all the more significant given the fact that although the NWT's size is of 1,144,000 squarekilometres, the GNWT's ENR had only five officers to monitor the entire length of its landmass in 2016. Furthermore, and as noted in chapter 3, there are, in addition to the 18 regulations and administrative structures described by OENR, several regional and community-level institutions, that interact (and sometimes compete) to govern Sahtu spaces. The layer of administration created as part of the Indian act regulatory system has not been suppressed. Those put in place with the SDMCLCA and after (as part of legislative changes implemented during the devolution of powers from Ottawa to Yellowknife, or with the more recent negotiations for community-based self-governments) have been simply added to what existed prior to 1993. Figure 5 shows the political-economic hierarchy of this structure of governance.



**Figure 5**

Tulita’s political-economic governance framework. Lines indicate working relationships and arrowheads indicate directions of capital flows.

I have counted a total of 19 organisations involved directly or indirectly in the management of Tulita's lands and environment (for a population of 500 to 590 individuals). Those are, first, at the community-level, the two land corporations, the band office and council, the hamlet office (with several sub-departments dealing with such issues as water distribution, cultural activities, education and so on...), organisations dealing with power/housing issues (under the parallel authorities of the hamlet, the band office, and the GNWT), the Renewable Resource Council (formerly, the Hunters and Trappers Association), the Tulita Yamoria Community Secretariat (in charge of negotiating self-government), and the McKay Range Development Corporation. At a regional level, these include the Sahtu Secretariat Incorporated, the Sahtu Land Use Planning Board, the Sahtu Renewable Resources Board, and the Sahtu Land and Water Board.

At a territorial level, representatives of the GNWT are involved in the administration of the Sahtu region through the Mackenzie Valley Land and Water Board, and the Mackenzie Valley Environmental Impact Review Board. Different Territorial ministers also often liaise directly with regional and community-based organisations to determine particular policies, specifically in the areas of land, wildlife, transportation, and water management as well in issues of environmental monitoring more generally. However, mining regulations are under the direct authority of the GNWT. At a national level, the Federal government's RCMP (policing), Environment/Parks and Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development departments (management of treaty money/institutions) as well as the National Energy Board (oil/gas) still have jurisdiction over important aspects of land management issues in or around Tulita.

As I was able to observe, all these latter (GNWT-based and Federal) organisations operate in the background. For instance, none of these administrations had offices in Tulita. However, given that the presence of the Federal and Territorial governments in this part of Canada is relatively recent (50 years for the GNWT and less than a century for Ottawa, with the arrival of the first RCMP officers around 1916), their geopolitical function as *enactors of territory*, that is, as providers of administrative and governmental rules of functioning in space (or as agents of settler spatiality), play a quasi-infrastructural role in geo-coding the manner in which regional and community-based organisations are able to operate in the everyday spaces of Tulita. The example of the Sahtu Land Use Plan described in chapter 2 is a case in point. Furthermore, the governmental rationalising function of these bureaucracies is reinforced paradoxically by the fact that most of them (those that are Sahtu-based or GNWT-based) are co-management institutions.

As argued by Nadasdy (2003) in the case of the Yukon's Kluane First Nation, co-management institutions tend to be anchored in the epistemological bases of EuroCanadian scientific categories. For him, bureaucracy “entails the institutionalisation of ‘rationality’” and subtends the operations of the “money economy” (ibid: xxv). In other words, they do not aim to integrate EuroCanadian science-based approaches into Indigenous traditional knowledges per se (which would in fact give Indigenous communities epistemological autonomy with regards to the management of their lands and resources), but rather seek to rationalise Indigenous knowledges so as to enable, strengthen, facilitate and more importantly, legitimise, the political-economic power of the settler state over Indigenous spaces (ibid). As this institutional process unfolds, Nadasdy argues, it is indeed the ontological validity of

Indigenous modes of knowing that is not only deligitimised but also placed in a politically subservient position with regards to EuroCanadian heuristic categories (ibid). Indeed, through this system of appropriation, what is recognised as meaningful language, words, expressions, becomes that which has political valence in the science-based, rationalising ‘eyes’ of the bureaucracies of settler governments, that is, what Nadasdy refers to as fact-informed, evidence-based *expertise* (ibid).

Within Indigenous communities, the “‘objective’ intellectual authority” of experts “threatens or even displaces the authority of the pre-bureaucratic” knowledge/power holders, such as elders, prominent hunters or medicine men (ibid:xxv). Thus, at a semiotic level, the consequence of bureaucratisation is to metamorphose the manner in which certain phenomena are represented in communities like Tulita, since, *inter alia* they must be conveyed along the linguistic lines on which EuroCanadian experts’ institutions rely, to be heard by settler political institutions. Nadasdy includes in the category of EuroCanadian experts (and bureaucrats) lawyers, biologists, geologists, engineers, but also those Indigenous individuals who have learned to integrate the symbolic, linguistic and social capitals of the latter in their day-to-day work responsibilities as they are deployed within the community. For this reason, Nadasdy also argues that bureaucratisation leads to “social stratification” within Indigenous communities (ibid). I will come back to this point. For now, however, I would like to show further why Nadasdy’s observations apply in Tulita’s case.

I have already demonstrated how the CRI’s experts-based framing of Tulita furthers, in the everyday spaces of its inhabitants, settler representations of the community, by re-fashioning its past and present existence in ways that can be integrated into

EuroCanadian capitalist temporalities. At a higher level of government, the following quotation from OENR's interview also shows that Nadasdy's rationalising ethos is effectively at the heart of the GNWT's environmental and natural resources management policies:

'Because the differences in the observations and the difference in for instance in animal structure and taste as you say etc... Those are things that can be anecdotally or otherwise acknowledged and recorded and brought into the evidence-based world...

Way back from 1997, two very key GNWT policies that were put on the table were the traditional knowledge policy which very much acknowledges the benefit and advantage of using local and traditional knowledge to contribute to the understandings of the environment in the area...

These two, these guys down here have also used that herd. And as the resource becomes scarce, people become more possessive of their historic use of that resource. That decrease is due to multiple factors. From global scale factors, down to perhaps, industrial, and perhaps just natural cycles... So, it would be like trying to manage something that's at a much larger scale, if that was only being used between those two communities, absolutely. And some of the cases that at certain times, could have been true, that for instance bluenose east which largely is in this area. Those might have been -those two communities- [the only users, but] when you look at the bathurst, that's not true anymore. And even in this particular case. Even though that was done traditionally, it's more of a 'could you nurture in some way that relationship such that it could contribute more to the knowledge base? perhaps. But most of the traditional interactions between these communities is now more on a social recreational scale. So again, it's the loss of, unfortunately, traditional management means between communities, and any resource is going to have to be managed from a big picture scale. That does not mean that on a much more local scale, that the understanding of the dynamics of that herd or water resource or whatever the case can't be enhanced and grown by the ability of people to contribute their knowledge to the picture, but it will be very presumptuous to think that only one community had the full understanding of the entire herd or water resource.'

(Semi-structured and recorded interview with OENR, Yellowknife, 18/03/2015)

The 'god's eye' perspective present in RCNDA's and FEMNLA's understandings is also in OENR's responses, albeit in a more scientised form. Bureaucracy, and its built-

in capacity to rationalise local experiences and perceptions from a above-ground standpoint for the purpose of making experts-based political decisions, is legitimised for its unique ability to address issues of resource scarcity (or, put in other words, to ensure the preservation of common goods). For instance, in OENR's responses, one can detect traces of Garrett Hardin's *Tragedy of the Commons* (1968) in the manner in which past and present Indigenous modes of engagement with caribou herds are interpreted.

In *Critical Political Ecology*, political geographer Tim Forsyth cogently shows that in some instances, there may be “political advantages to various parties” in “portraying an ecological crisis” in certain ways by using a “variety of scientific evidence” to substantiate “the presumed ecological changes” and legitimise the epistemic expertise of these parties (2003:12). Similarly, whilst OENR's response is not overtly alarmist, it does argue that only scientific evidence, provided through the GNWT's experts' god's eye perspective, can help manage caribou herds' harvest levels sustainably. More importantly, this implies that in OENR's (and settler) rationalising views, caribou belong to the category of bare life (or Povinelli's nonlife): a pattern of biological existence to be managed (that does not reciprocate, or react to, human thoughts or activities), for the purpose of human extractive and economic use. By opposition, for the Dene, animals are political beings, capable of interpreting human thoughts, body movements and actions. This ontological gap became clear to me during a workshop on the issue of dwindling bluenose and bathurst caribous organised in the Sahtu in January 2015. A Dene leader expressed his concern for the fact that over the years, less and less caribou had been seen traveling around the western shore of Great Bear Lake. He asked a GNWT environmental scientist whether this was caused by the fact that

‘caribou was upset’. As I learned later during the workshop, his understanding was informed by the fear that the generalisation of non-Dene ways of thinking and acting towards nature in the Sahtu region was making ‘caribous go away’. For him, behaviours that showed a lack of respect for Denendeh were generating a reaction from all Denendeh’s other-than-human beings. Here this reaction was taking the form of a punishment. Caribou, the political being, had decided to withdraw from Denendeh, and in doing so, attempted to discipline the Dene. The environmental scientist present that day offered a rational explanation for this phenomenon, which was similar to OENR’s. She insisted that changes in the herds’ migration patterns were in part caused by over-harvesting. At the end of the workshop, the same conclusion was nevertheless reached: the number of caribous was decreasing, and something needed to be done. However, whilst for the GNWT’s expert, the idea of imposing hunting quotas became evident, for the Dene, the issue was clearly one of changing their ways of acting towards caribous, so that they would come back. Although the same end results would be expected from these solutions, two different ways of categorising animal life were involved. On the one hand, the GNWT’s bureaucratic, experts-based approach, rationalised caribou patterns of being to the point where it was forced to view them as nonlife to be able to control them. Indeed, what matters in the use of quotas (or quota-like measures) is the management of the number of dead caribous, not how they behave whilst alive. On the other hand, for the Dene, Caribou’s actions had to be reciprocated, and Denendeh and its caribou had to be treated with more respect. In the end, it is the expert’s view that was prioritised, and hunting quotas were imposed on the bluenose east caribou herd and a quasi-ban on the bathurst caribou herd.

However, from within the ontological boundaries of Tulita and its surrounding other-than-human worlds, the disappearance of caribou is represented by some as a semiotic indication of the domination of settler capitalist temporalities, a mark of the metamorphic effects of the beings of geopower (and thus of the necessity to *resist* them). For example, for Tulita's renewable resource officer (in charge of monitoring the use of renewable resources) (RRO):

'Personally, I think that when you say the wildlife, few years ago, I mean when I say a few years ago, 5 or 10 years, we used to have lots of animals, before all these exploration activities began, the caribous they just disappear, nowadays in the last five years, I notice that you don't see as much animals as you used to. And one time, I went on the river for whole day and counted 27 moose, just running around. Now, I can go all this week and not see one moose. I don't know where they went... I guess they just, I don't know, a lot of activities now... It's good and it's bad but you can't stop progress, you know, progress is just some thing that can't stop. You can try to delay it, but you can't stop things moving on... Because few years back when nothing happened in here, the progress is happening with the oil company drilling here and there and now they are looking at coal and with more activity happening up here... So, you know it's coming through our area where our livelihood 10 years ago will never be the same again. [It might] slow down but it will come... We could say no to a lot of things but still we can't stop things happening, you know. Eventually they come up here, in my life time, in your lifetime, you may see things up here that we don't know.'

(Unstructured, recorded interview with RRO, Tulita, 26/11/2014)

As noted in chapter 1, these metamorphic effects are arguably more clearly visible in the way Dene prophecies have made settler temporalities 'their own', transcending in this way their non-endogenous nature by giving the Dene the ability to have semiotic power over their meanings. Thus, for RRO, whilst the transformative effects of settler futures on Dene spaces are inevitable (where future progress is equated to industrial development, itself viewed through the prism of present negative experiences, such as the disappearance of wildlife, environmental changes and the loss of land-based livelihoods), they are also part of Dene ontologies. Indeed, what the socio-political

importance given to Ayah's (and others') prophecies indicate is that, how the Dene are, how they think, what they think in the *present*, is part and parcel of the manner in which Dene spaces have *always* been envisioned. In other words, even in the context of heightened *temporal* changes, these prophecies provide spatial stability, that is, a sense of control over the meanings attached to past, present and future settler materialities.

For RRO:

'What he [Ayah] said at that time... What he said is happening now... Yes, there are people doing things about it. Like fracking, people opposed that, their fight got it slowed down but eventually after a while it's gonna happen. Some understand it, some of them don't really fully understand what it is but what you see is that information that we get here which says that [but] what I get from the news is... For me fracking I have no idea, I have a general idea of what it does... Some people say it causes earthquake [but] I think things will come slowly but still it's gonna come. Like Ayah foresaw something is gonna happen, what he said it's happening now, not in a clash, but progress slowly happens. There are things that I worry about too, I worry about what people say, we want it like a highway. Once that opens up, we might say goodbye to our livelihood... I grew up on the land but when that happens to my kids, grand kids they did not experience that livelihood that I grew up in [but] for them it will be great after all.'

CI's interview also provides some indication of the extent of the influence of Ayah's teachings in Tulita, whilst also substantiating the above analysis further:

'He [Ayah] was born in Deline, apparently his grandson lives here and he tells us that he never could speak english, but as soon as he opened the bible, he could read it in english, slavey and dogrib, he's the one that helped Deline to - he told them prophecies, what it's going to be in the future, he also taught them right from wrong, about God so he worked alongside the priest that was there at the time. They have a house in Deline that used to be his that they call the prayer house. His inspiration came from the bible because christianity already had come when he was there. [It] seems that there's a lot about the world is going to end with fire, the world is gonna end with this and that. I believe that people have to be ready because right now, because, particularly the elders are so afraid about the drugs and the alcohol, probably more the drugs than the alcohol cause they see what happens... Few people in town, maybe more than a few are doing drugs and they mix it too with alcohol, I know the elders are afraid and so they rely on Ayah, on his teachings, because he said that that was going

to happen so that's the reason why I think they are so afraid of development and of a road coming through, 'cause that's gonna bring a different world. I think that's what they are afraid of, that they are gonna lose what they have and that they are gonna become mixed in, with the drugs and alcohol and money.'

(Unstructured, recorded interview with CI, Tulita, 14/11/2014)

### **Settler capitalist temporalities and the birth of classes: establishing a distinction between sovereign and bare life in the spaces of the everyday**

The connection made by RCNDA between the future of the NWT and global networks of formation and circulation of knowledges about commodities -what makes a resource a highly valuable, or worthless, commodity (and where it is exchanged, how it is exchanged and by whom)- is not insignificant. It ties into the way settler geopolitics has been able historically to transform the socio-economic (and political as noted in chapter 4) structure of everyday life in Indigenous settlements like Tulita. As can be inferred from the fur trade example, global commodity cycles do have an impact on Dene ways of being. For instance, in *The Subarctic Fur Trade*, anthropologists Arthur Ray, Sheperd Krech III, Robert Jarvenpa and Hetty Brumbach observe that it is in part because of the economic exchanges that developed between Dene groups and 'white' traders (or trading companies, in particular the HBC and NWC) during and after the period of contact that the former slowly began to rely on the selling of fur to provide for some of their economic needs<sup>100</sup> (1990: 1-20; 99-183).

This relationship endured in the form of wage-labour, and seasonal employment provided by infrastructural and industrial projects such as the MVFLP. Here again, it

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<sup>100</sup> A note of caution should however be provided. They also observe that this relationship evolved over a long period of time and was as such complex and multidimensional.

is mediated in the everyday spaces of the Tulita Dene through a particular congealing of signs and matter, settler geopower. This is clearly exemplified by the presence of maps of the Sahtu's oil and mineral potentials I have been able to observe hanging on the walls of the offices of some of Tulita's business and political leaders. The continuation of this relationship is also visible in RCNDA's assessment of the benefits created by the MVFLP for remote Indigenous communities like Tulita:

‘A fibre link access can connect people in a different way and allows them to access other parts of the information world, which also supports a non-traditional economy. There are a number of businesses in the North who have web, do web sales and web stores. The fibre link opens that. These kinds of non-traditional opportunities. The opportunity to sell online in the e-world to people who may not normally have it.’

(Recorded and semi-structured interview with RCNDA, Yellowknife, 27/03/2015)

In this sense, the MVFLP also marked a continuation in the temporal frame of everyday life in Tulita. This frame revolved around the settler logic of inevitability (Heynen and Robbins, 2005:6, quoted in Chapman, 2013:97), that is, a geopolitical vision that has, since the time of first contact, equated the future of the Tulita Dene and Métis with modernisation, resource extraction, territorial sovereignty, global market fluctuations, development and the expansion of the urban-industrial world (Alfred, 2009a; Piper, 2009).

Viewed from this perspective, being able to “watch Netflix unhindered” thanks to a high-speed Internet connection, as put by a representative of Northwestel (the NWT equivalent to British Telecom) in an attempt to explain the benefits brought by the MVFLP to small Indigenous communities like Tulita (CBC News, 2017b), can only be described as a *normal* expectation, a constitutive part of the *telos* subtended by the

settler narrative of modernity. Yet, as my entrepreneurial landlords explained to me, their choice to bring people in from southern Canada was motivated by the fact that they believed they could not find local Dene employees willing to commit to work at fixed hours, for fixed periods of time. The case of one common acquaintance illustrated this point. This man had found employment at the project's workers camp's catering facility. After only one month there he decided he had earned enough and simply stopped coming to work. Thus, reactions like this (or again, their lack thereof) also showed that the ideas conveyed by the project, that is ones in which non-subsistence (capitalist, wage-based) modes of production order reality, continue to be in conflict with the manner in which some Dene existences are lived. In this sense, the MVFLP also functions like previous resource mega-projects, that is, as forms of internal colonialism. One example of past industrial mega-projects is the Pine Point Mine (located south of Great Slave lake), which environmental geographers John Sandlos and Arn Keeling contend, was used by the Federal government to:

“Promote internal colonisation of its Northern regions through planned and controlled industrial resource extraction, extending planning support, infrastructure and generous subsidies so that large private companies could be enticed to invest further in the economic salvation of what was perceived as an underdeveloped region.” (2012:9).

As I determined (and as already noted), the deployment of the MVFLP in Tulita also took place within a socio-political context structured along *competing* experiences of industrial and infrastructural development processes and their impacts on nature. This is confirmed by existing census information on the community. For instance, according to a survey conducted in 2014 by the Government of the Northwest Territories (GNWT) in Tulita, 57 % of the community's residents declared that they had spent nights on the land and 20 % that they had gathered wild berries (NWT Bureau of Statistics, 2014). A

majority declared that they were unemployed. In other words, some residents still had to rely on hunting and gathering for their subsistence needs whilst others did not have to do so because they were fully employed.

Industrial projects like the MVFLP exacerbate these socio-economic differences (between employed and unemployed, rich and poor, educated and uneducated), by creating the conditions for already existing ontological fault lines to endure, since these fault lines revolve around differing ways of being with, and knowing, settler materialities (such as urban, industrial and infrastructural structures). In other words, they strengthen the heuristic validity of signs that associate those individuals that are able and willing to comply to the rules of functioning of the settler capitalist economy to the ideas of opportunity, development, enrichment, and those who cannot or do not, to the possibility of being further left-out, marginalised, disempowered.

In this sense, events like the MVFLP not only reveal and crystallise existing disparities in wealth and power within the community, they also legitimise for its residents, dominant meanings attached to settler forms of being. Thus to re-use the dichotomy introduced at the beginning of this chapter, industrial and infrastructural materialities and the signs they produce, in other words, the beings of geopower, *enact* settler capitalist distinctions between bare life/nonlife (the subsistence hunter, the unemployed, the renewable resource sharer) and political life/life (the entrepreneur, the salaried worker, the bureaucrat, the hunter-soldier, the expert elder as traditional knowledge-holder).

However, modes of being that span over this ontological boundary not only show Dene ability to transcend the subjectifying operations of settler geopolitics for their own benefit (for example the subsistence hunter who is also a successful entrepreneur), they also demonstrate that, *dialectically* this distinction cannot be considered definitive. I discuss this aspect further in the next chapter. For now, however, I would like to substantiate this point with evidence obtained during my fieldwork. The first relevant example is the difference in understandings of the effects of industrial development I observed between those of my acquaintances who were involved in decision-making processes and those who were not. Whilst these differences cut across families and even individual perceptions -in some cases individuals involved in resource development activities may themselves be torn between the fact that they or their relatives may benefit from petro-revenues but that doing so will impact their children's ability to use the land, or to hunt or trap- it remains a central line of division in the political-economic structure of everyday life in Tulita. For instance, to those members of the leadership I was able to talk to, what mattered the most was the ability to create the conditions of a *balanced development*, which entailed the possibility of opening the way to hydraulic fracturing, and resource extraction more generally. For some of those who were not part of these political institutions, these pro-industry visions were perceived as not only going against Dene traditional decision-making institutions (in particular elders but also traditional land-use practices and knowledges), but also to be short-sighted political strategies, motivated by personal economic interests. CI described this issue in the following terms:

‘One thing when I came in, the political structure was more within the community. The community had more say in their day to day living and they had more say in what happened and the band especially had more power, they were able to, when people came in, they were able to say yes or no on whether

the non-aboriginals could go out hunting or stay, they had power, or if someone transgressed against something they didn't like. The chief had power when I first came, he could tell that person to either leave or go to a different community or to give them some kind of punishment or consequences. But now the government of Yellowknife and Ottawa are more the ones from which the power come from, even though we have different organisations like the land corp and self-government, they are given so much money, but their power is really coming from Yellowknife and Ottawa. So, the structure in that way has changed for the people within the community. Now it seems like a lot of the ones who do have power are the ones who are in control of the businesses, if the oil or any construction came through...they are the ones that will profit from it because they have the equipment or the catering for the companies. So, to me, they are the ones that hold more power and we are just having an election for mayor and two of the three that are running, they have a personal business which will affect the governing if they get in.'

(Unstructured, recorded interview with CI, 14/11/2014)

Several other acquaintances highlighted the fact that the different institutions created as part of the SDMCLCA had the negative side-effect of rendering local decision-making processes more complex, opaque and thus more prone to non-cooperative (or profit-oriented) behaviours. For two individuals (one Dene and the other Métis, identified as SUE and SUE 2) working at various hierarchical levels of different community administrations, this problem was exacerbated by the fact that local politics was primarily a family-against-family issue. In other words, and as can also be inferred from CI's quotation above, access to decision-making positions (either via public elections or nominations) within local administrations and businesses was made on the basis of which family one belonged to and how big and powerful that family already was. For one of the above individuals, who had grown up in a southern urban environment, and had a university degree (identified as SUE):

'That's something that actually plagues a lot of these native communities and these bands, BC [British Columbia], Alberta, Saskatchewan, any of these places. They have their own aboriginal groups, their own bands and they elect their own members. That's something that plagues each and every one of them. It's basically who has the bigger family. Who is the most influential. The ones that have the bigger family will always be in office and they'll always get paid;

They'll have first access to everything, to company vehicles, to the mediums to make the decisions for themselves, but those who don't have families are just dying out, these ones are the less privileged, these are the ones who are dying out, with no decision-making. Me and my family is one of the less privileged here in Tulita. It's very small. The only influential person of my family was my grandfather and he passed away. So, we are all left in the dark. But as we get older, as myself I get older, I came back. I brought something more valuable than anything they had in there: a university degree. So now I am here, I am at the meetings. I make decisions for my family, not just the family, but for everyone, people who are less privileged, who don't have the amount of people in their lives to help them get these things that other people have. I am really hoping towards a new type of election process, by change or something but that's something that really plagues aboriginal groups in Canada is the fact that you are in the office because you have the biggest family. Some them are there people actually voted into political leaderships because they were actually good, and they don't have the bigger family. I really do feel for the people who don't have these types of privileges. Like I said, I am myself one of them, but I grew up through that wall. I did something about it instead of complaining about it. So, if people really want to do something about it, they actually have to get out and do something about it...

The mayor does not really make the decisions. It's really the land corporations, the Tulita Dene band and the Métis Land corporation, the Tulita Land Corporation, the Renewable Resources Self government office, the SRRB. Everyone manages themselves, and their own groups and their own people, we never really had, like a hierarchy kind of thing, like someone who is on the top who manages everyone of these offices to make the decisions. No, everyone of them has their own board members, who are elected through the members to be the leaders of the corporations.'

(Unstructured, recorded interview with SUE, Tulita, 18/11/2014)

In addition to to the size of one's family, the second individual (identified as SUE 2), indicated that favours could be promised in exchange for votes (being given certain jobs, or access to certain programmes). This, in itself allows the biggest families to keep and even grow their symbolic, political and economic capitals.

It is because of these factors that economic, political and social classes<sup>101</sup> emerged and endure in the community. Whilst the three sometimes overlap (for instance, several entrepreneurs can simultaneously have the same economic and political interests and belong to the same socio-material spectrum), what clearly distinguish them are competing visions of decolonisation. For some, decolonisation can only be achieved through the exploitation of non-renewable resources and rapid industrial development. This view is epitomised in NWT Premier's Robert McLeod's recent declaration regarding Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's ban on oil and gas exploitation in the Arctic: "The promise of the North is fading, and the dreams of Northerners are dying as we see a re-emergence of colonialism." (CBC News, 2017c). For those who share this position, resource development offers an opportunity to "complete the process of decolonization" started in the 1970s, as stated by former Indigenous NWT premier, and former leader of the Dene Nation, Stephen Kakfwi in 2000 (Sarkadi, 2000, p. 25, quoted in Abele, 2005, p. 224). For others, the priority should be given to economic diversification, the valorisation of traditional subsistence activities and the preservation of the land.

The following example of two interviews conducted with Dene and Métis residents in Tulita can help illuminate this point. The first is from an important Métis figure in the socio-economic life of the community (identified as IMF). At the time of my stay, she

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<sup>101</sup> Here, I understand 'class', following sociologist Max Weber, as a group characterised by similar *economic* interests, in particular those "involved in the existence of a market" (1978:928). Sociologist Nicholas Gane cogently describes Weber's view on class in the following terms: "Weber insists that classes are not communities, even if class (or market) interest might guide social action in some way... For Weber, this feeling of belonging is simply not present in situations of economic interest, which nearly always involve action motivated by profit-making (i.e. instrumental action)." (2005:216). This definition is particularly fitting in the case of Tulita where it is primarily along the *material* effects of economic and bureaucratic transformations that groups have been structured. For instance, drawing from Weber's contention that there is a contradiction between bureaucracy and democracy, in *Hunters and Bureaucrats* (2003), Nadasdy argues that bureaucratisation led to social stratification in Indigenous communities.

was one of the most prominent members of the community's business elite. Her entrepreneurial achievements are symptomatic of the ability of this group to appropriate successfully the ontological imperatives of settler capitalist temporalities. However, as became clear to me during my period of fieldwork, this appropriation can only function for an integrated and educated few. For instance, IMF owned two businesses in Tulita in 2014-2015. One of these often served as an important contractor for oil and gas companies in need of a local workforce (the 'local content' being a legal requirement for non-Indigenous owned companies) and/or of various small to medium-size industrial machinery. The other operated the community's water services. She was also a prominent member of the settlement's Canadian Ranger unit as well as of the Fort Norman Métis Lands and Financial Corporation. Thus, her entanglement with global petro-capitalist economic networks explain that her primary concern, when it came to the community, was *future* commodity fluctuations:

‘When the price of oil changes, it affects all of us here. A lot of people will lose their jobs. So, what we need is to be able to control the production of oil from here. We should set up our own refinery, so we can sell our oil. We should also build an all-weather road, so we could bring more products at a cheaper cost from down south. That way we can ensure that everybody, especially the younger generation, will get a job. I don't think it matters if they leave at first, because I think that they will come back and bring the skills and knowledge they have acquired into the community. I respect our elders, but I don't think that their opinion should matter that much when it comes to our future. What is important is what the younger generation wants for the community.’

(From notes taken during an unstructured interview with IMF, Tulita, 31/01/2015)

The second quotation is taken from an interview with a young Dene woman who had close relatives in Tulita (YDA). YDA had a university education and had travelled to several places around the world. At the time of the interview, YDA had just come back from Yellowknife where she had spent time studying at, and then working for, the

Dechinta Centre for Research and Learning -DCRL- (formerly the Dechinta Bush University). The DCRL offers land-based curricula which, in 2014-2015 focused on providing bush-oriented decolonial teachings primarily to Dene (but also non-Indigenous) students (this included traditional Dene knowledges and practices). Thus, in many ways, YDA had very similar social and political interests to IMF. Yet, she did not agree with those like IMF who viewed non-renewable resource development as the only potential economic future:

‘I think a big misconception when people think about oil and gas -I am myself against hydraulic fracturing- is that people are against economic development, which isn't true, we definitely want economic development but we also need the ability to choose which type of economic development we wish to see in the community and not have various forms of development, sort of pushed on us. And I think that if you are looking at remote Indigenous communities, not only in Canada but around the world, who have been traditionally held back from participating in settlers' economy to a point where the conditions in which they exist are so tragic and in poor conditions and you come to situations where you simply cannot say no to development, which is something that I believe is happening and in the North where you have Indigenous communities that have been starved over decades and decades until they can't say no to an opportunity like fracking [hydraulic fracturing] because they need the jobs so badly. So, I guess that for the future of the Sahtu region, what I would like to see is economic diversification rather than focusing on this boom and bust industries like oil and gas development, which the communities carry all the risks and all the rewards are exported to places like Yellowknife or Calgary or Ottawa. I would rather see us put something in place that ensures us economic sustainability with responsible tax and development. So, we need to be looking at renewable resources, we need to be reducing our dependency on diesel, on imported goods, imported foods, we need to build those systems locally in this region so that if anything were to happen, we wouldn't be so dependent on the South for survival... We can do all sort of any matter of things and participate in the global economy in a way that does not limit our ability to use the land in ways that are culturally relevant and meaningful.’

(Unstructured, recorded interview with YDA, Tulita, 03/03/2015)

However, as noted previously, this is not to say that those who shared either IMF's or YDA's respective position were not aware of their implications. For instance, for SUE, who, during the interview I conducted with her indicated that she was in favour of some

form of industrial development, also expressed strong emotional distress as regards the environmental impacts of resource exploration activities. The following quotation from this interview illustrates this paradox. It also presents traces of the politics of inevitability mentioned previously, here in the form of the inescapable advance of urban infrastructures:

‘Nowadays, we are talking about fibre optic lines, development through the oil and gas industry. The government of Canada is facilitating these things. They are funding these projects and stuff, this is the stuff that we never asked for and is happening. The thing that we did ask for was just an all-season road from Tulita to the south and we did not get it.

[Asked whether she thought an all-seasons road could have any impacts] Oh yeah definitely. Our way of life has already changed... I really do think that people want change, but they don't really want to affect the way they live... So, something like an all-seasons road, with new people coming in and with goods and services being delivered and a cheaper way of life. That's fine. That's something we've had for a long time and it's already taking hold of us that change is a good thing, but we are definitely scared of it...

The only way that I can see fracking [hydraulic fracturing] can do to mess things up would probably be the amount of seismic lines. I myself had the experience. There 's a very popular trail that I go on for chicken hunt, that's where my grandpa took me, that's where I take my child now chicken hunting. This time I went up there. I haven't been there for two years because I have been at university and stuff, before that four years. I go up there and now it's a seismic line. There's a seismic line now. It was all cut, all cut. And this is the time where chickens go there all the time but this time, there's nothing. I was really sad about that. I know that's because of the seismic lines, cutting lines for exploration and really measure the topography and stuff. But that's what they were doing: they cut it. So now it's going to be cut every few years to maintain it and there's a station up there; I was deeply sad about that. As a child, my grandparents, his dad and my aunties and uncles and mom they used to go on that trail and that was not there anymore. Now my daughter will not experience that. I was the last generation to experience this trail of my grandparents walked on. That really hit me where it hurts. Maybe one day when they get rid of whatever they are doing up there, the chickens will come back. The change for me, without my input, they did that without asking. It hurts people: the things that we hold to ourselves will be changed.’

(Unstructured, recorded interview with SUE, Tulita, 18/11/2014)

Some of the factors behind the economic and political disparity that now characterise

social life in Tulita can also be found in the architecture of governance introduced by the SDMCLCA itself. Indeed, as already noted in chapter 2, the SDLMCA created the *normative* environment for a capitalist mindset to become the rule among the Sahtu Dene and Métis so that the paradigm of economic development as progress could be viewed as the *only* viable strategy for decolonisation (SDLMCA, 1993). This in itself opened the way for economic classes to appear. Indeed, by entrenching the idea that the profit-oriented exploitation of non-renewable resources would lead to the political empowerment of Sahtu communities, as well as to their economic self-sufficiency, it encouraged the formation of groups of interest centred on the accumulation of profit<sup>102</sup>. In other words, it made the entrepreneurial capitalist spirit a *condition* for the continuation of the traditional subsistence economy.

At an institutional level, the SDMCLCA's decolonial-capitalist model operates through three organisations in Tulita, already briefly described in chapter 2 and above. The first two are Tulita's land corporations. These administer money transfers from the Federal and Territorial governments, as well as compensations received in exchange for rights of access and/or use of land parcels given to resource exploitation companies (the Access/Impacts and Benefits Agreements). They transfer the community's share of these financial payments to Dene/Métis beneficiaries. An additional key organisation of this architecture is the Mackay Range Development Corporation (MCR). The MCR was created as a community-owned subsidiary for-profit company to take advantage of the opportunities generated by the investments made in the community by external

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<sup>102</sup> This is also substantiated by the fact that the agreement clarified the rules and regulations pertaining to projects taking place on Sahtu lands (Anderson RB et al., 2005; Dokis, 2010; Dalton, 2006; Northwest Territories Board Forum 2015; SDLMCA, 1993).

financial capital holders (Mackay Range Development Corporation, MCR, 2015). It is, in other words, the capitalist/corporatist arm of this hybrid institutional structure.

This structure made the model of the for-profit corporation the main apparatus of Dene development. In doing so, the SDMCLCA strengthened the economic and symbolic capitals of individuals already involved in the negotiation of the SDMCLCA, or in the resource or government economy more generally. Because of this, a bureaucratic class could emerge and endure. The bureaucratic character of Tulita's newly formed economic classes is all the more real that the organisational structure of the land corporations loosely follows those of Territorial and Federal administrations. One example is that member-shareholders elect rather than select their respective corporations' president and board members. However, since land corporations' board meetings are held in secrecy, their members are often chosen among those who are or have already been in these positions. These individuals are indeed the only ones that possess the necessary skills, knowledges and are willing to exert these responsibilities (Dokis, 2010). This intrinsically limits the ability of other residents of the community to participate actively in the management of natural resources. In this sense, the practices and procedures of the resource industry tend to further entrench already existing power disparities by exacerbating the factors that lead to the dispossession of some and the enrichment of others. At a macro-structural, long-term level, this happens through a process of unsteady, unequal growth characteristic of the history of capitalist forms of progress (Harvey, 2006; Smith N, 2008; see also Sejersen, 2015b). For instance, in small isolated communities like Tulita, the strong dependency on governmental and industrial capital to provide employment reduces the incentives for economic diversification (Dana et al., 2009, pp. 105-110; Taylor et al., 2004). Indeed,

in addition to public loans and fundings provided by the Territorial and Federal governments, the A/IBAs are the sole points of entry for resource industry companies seeking to work on Sahtu lands, including those located within Tulita's surroundings (Irlbacher-Fox, 2009; Kulchyski and Bernauer, 2014).

The dependent relationship of Tulita's residents, and its effects on the formation and perpetuation of economic classes, became clear to me as I observed Tulita's residents interactions with representatives of oil/gas companies. For example, in December 2014 two representatives in charge of community relations for Conoco-Philips, an oil company which operated exploration projects in parcels located near Tulita and Norman Wells in 2014, visited the community for a few days. They were liaising with residents and with the community's leadership to ensure that information regarding their activities were properly communicated to them and that no concerns existed. During their stay, both sat in a meeting room in the community's hotel and received residents who wished to speak with them. Some asked for jobs, others for funding for various kinds of activities. This took place for almost an entire day. I was able to interview them (identified as TCP). In their responses, they noted that residents in Tulita were divided as regards to the effects of oil and gas activities. They also observed that the political structure of the community had to be considered in their understanding of, and interactions with it:

‘[Their] concerns? we generally get varied questions. Some of them are in line with business opportunities. A lot of people are looking for a new commerce. They see that they don't rely on the traditional economy anymore and they want to partake so they want opportunities to work for us along with the training, the education support and the things necessary to get them able to qualify and then obtain work with us... From the social side, I have heard a lot of the existing problems in certain segments of the community with potential alcohol or drug problems... Some people think that oil and gas activity will help to get people

a meaningful purpose and have some questions about how we can get people to work and others have concerns about the amount of activity, what that will do to the social problems like, will it increase them, will it increase the amount of available income to spend on recreational drugs and alcohol. There are also a lot of question about how this can benefit this whole area...

We want the leadership to be aware of our plans, so we always meet with them to discuss what we are doing and get their feedback but I think it's weighted equally with public input and so we want to make sure we provide adequate opportunities in public meetings and sometimes leadership is present, sometimes they are not but we think it is important to have a full perspective and not rely on leadership to be a voice for community'

(Unstructured, recorded interview with TCP, Tulita, 02/12/2014)

It is clear from TCP's observations that not everyone in the community had the same type of access to them. Furthermore, here again, traces of settler rationalising anticipatory "geo-logics" (Kama, 2016) can be found:

'Seeing the future of this region as 100 % oil/gas would be completely speculative at this point. We've only drilled several exploitation wells. We are still analysing the data that we collected from those wells. So, we still don't know if we have profitable site here and that analysis will continue for another 5 to twenty years or more. So, we don't know...

There are still a lot of activities from other sectors too. Mining is very active in the region, fibre optic brings other kinds of development, and hydro-electric. There's a lot of different opportunities for growth in the region I think.'

(Unstructured, recorded interview with TCP, Tulita, 02/12/2014)

I have also participated in two different community consultation meetings organised by resource extraction companies whilst residing in Tulita. As I was able to observe, these events take advantage of the community's economic, political and geographic isolation, as residents are generally desperate to attract and retain these companies. However, the exact conditions of their installation often become the subject of heightened conflicts during the meetings themselves. For instance, during those meetings, residents who were not part of the groups who had negotiated with the companies were unable to

express their concerns (or to have any say on what was going to happen) as the A/IBAs, in both cases, had already been agreed upon. Furthermore, the terms used by the industry representatives were very technical. This intrinsically limited the ability of residents, some of whom are illiterate or simply not used to complex jargon, to provide any meaningful input. Finally, industry representatives are well aware of the vague nature of what is entailed by the duty to consult. As such, they equate attendance of such meetings with acceptance of their proposed resource development project. In one of the meetings, for instance, I observed one of these representatives taking written records of the number of people who were present that day (including me and one of the other two doctoral students doing their fieldwork in Tulita at the time of my stay<sup>103</sup>), with no regards for who they were and as such of whether those in attendance actually were from the community. Second, as with the CRI, it is easy to transform a community feast, where an abundance of free food and beverages is provided to a population that remains predominantly poor, into a successful consultation exercise. Through this, habituation takes place and a certain experience of processes of settler industrial development, sustained by the ideas, meanings and practices conveyed by resource companies, and community, Federal and Territorial bureaucracies, become embedded (and begin to dominate) within the community's material-semiotic fabric.

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<sup>103</sup> During a workshop which we both attended (and in which we both presented our research), this person (identified as PH) explained to residents of the settlement that he was doing anthropological research on resource exploration/extraction activities taking place around Tulita. A non-Indigenous Canadian national from a relatively well known Northern Canadian university (known for having solid curricula on Northern Aboriginal cultures), PH had already been in the community for 6 months when I arrived in 2014 and aimed to stay for a year or more. He lived together with his partner. They both had jobs in one of Tulita's local administrations and appeared to be accepted by the community. However, by the end of my stay, they had been robbed twice. I discuss this point and residents' perception of, and interaction with, graduate students in the introduction to this thesis. I also relate these perceptions to existing political tensions in the settlement and to competing attempts, by different groups, to solidify their (or challenge others') control over dominant networks of power/knowledge in Tulita.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I have showed that settler geopolitical visions of the NWT's Indigenous spaces are tied to particular temporalities. The first of these temporalities is a capitalist one, structured around the anticipatory logics of land/resource commodification, capital accumulation and the wage economy. The second stems from governmental rationalising bureaucratic processes of territorialisation of settler sovereignty and is centred on the idea that progress, modernisation and development are inevitable *futures*. Through the medium of geopolitics, these temporalities congeal in the form of industrial and infrastructural materialities and events in Tulita. These phenomena play a structuring function in the everyday life of the Dene and Métis, in that they legitimise the spatial, visual, semiotic and conceptual representations of the settlement that are produced by settler governments. In this sense, they are also entangled semiotically, since, through their materialisation, they convey the narrative that, as Tulita resembles more and more the urban fabric of southern Canada, it is also brought closer to being a space of economic opportunities. However, these opportunities can only benefit the Tulita Dene and Métis insofar as they, as a population to be administered, are able to perform the identity of what constitutes political life in settler capitalist society. In Tulita, this identity is embodied in the forms of the worker, the hunter-soldier, the entrepreneur, the businessman and the bureaucrat (and relatedly, the expert). However, this biopolitical categorisation, that is the distinguishing of human patterns of existence into either bare lives or political lives, cannot take spatial shape without the prior categorisation of space itself into life or nonlife. Whilst the two modes of categorisation overlap, the latter must precede the former. It is indeed precisely because Indigenous spaces such as Denendeh (and the animals and other-than-human beings that inhabit it), are envisioned as forms of nonlife (or geological/biological bare lives) through

geopower (and thus that resources are viewed as such) that settler modes of being can not only take ontological primacy, but also order the political hierarchy of forms of life.

This discussion has three implications. First, it confirms the analytical validity of a speculative reading of the semiotic operations of geopower in Tulita. One of the possible consequences of settler anticipatory geo-logics (and of the politics of inevitability that they subtend) is indeed that they create expectations about future possibilities that may never come to be. For instance, in the above quotation, TCP explains that for Conoco-Philips, what mattered in the end was whether their operations were profitable. This is never certain. This aspect is accrued by the fact that global fluctuations in commodity prices affect these operations' profitability (and the types of resources that governments choose to develop). Similarly, when national policy orientations are altered, as with Prime Minister Trudeau's recent ban on offshore oil and gas exploration in the Arctic (CBC News, 2016b), expectations of how fast, and in what forms, industrial development will take place become uncertain, mere speculations. In this sense, representations of geopower in Tulita cannot be conceptualised without this speculative element in mind.

The second implication is that by legitimising materially certain representations, certain meanings and ways of conceptualising the future, the beings of geopower metamorphose the manner in which the spaces of Tulita's present are experienced. This is particularly visible in the fact that the MVFLP operated simultaneously as a spatially transformative (i.e. new structures were built, including access roads, a workers camp, and a construction facility), but temporally ordinary, event (it was also a practical incarnation of the settlement's inevitable progression towards settler futures).

Geopower can in this sense be viewed as an ontological force: it transforms modes of being by producing (and enabling the reproduction of) beings, meanings, signs, and modes of spatiality.

The third implication is that global political-economic processes are tied into the fabric of the settlement itself. Indeed, one element can be assuredly established from the above discussion: this is that the expansion of urban forms into the NWT's Indigenous spaces is the consequence, rather than the cause, of colonial, industrial, and neoliberal forms of global and settler capitalism. However, whilst governmental rationalisation subtends this process, it cannot be effective without an appropriate material base -an urban base. In other words, the birth of an effective bureaucracy of experts and administrators capable of governing Tulita's lifespaces, follows from the spatial-transformative effects of colonial (I include in this the missionary actions of the Roman Catholic Church), industrial and neoliberal agents and processes, rather than the other way round. In this sense, the action of geopower in Tulita is not the exclusive prerogative of government but is rather the result of the interactions of multiple state and non-state agencies, operating within different spaces (capitalist, environmental, traditional Indigenous, and so on...), with sometimes competing interests. As noted previously, these agencies are nevertheless *temporally* consistent with settler governments' narratives of *future* modernisation, territorialisation (or sovereignty assertion) and development. Geopower is precisely this congealing in space of particular temporalities, it (re)produces particular *chronoscapes* and is in this sense able to enframe beings, and to metamorphose them. As mentioned in this chapter, I do not mean by this that the Dene are not able to resist, transcend or even subvert this power, but only that no matter the end result, it *has* a transformational effect.

In the next chapter, I substantiate this idea further by analysing the way the architectural, infrastructural and objects (or things/tools) base (the built environment) of Tulita are represented by the Dene and Métis.

***Chapter six – Reshaping matter, organising space: Tulita, geopower, and the formation of a settler sovereign order***

In a special issue of *Architectural Theory Review* published in 2017 and entitled *Designing Commodity Cultures*, several architectural and urban planning scholars argued for a stronger consideration of architecture as a geopolitical device that regulates populations by producing spaces that act as “disciplinary technologies” or that “organise them according [to] aspirational typologies” (León and Vicario, 2017:278), such as Western modernity, capitalism, the language of technological/technical expertise, or consumerism, rationalisation, and innovation (ibid; Nolan, 2017; Hein and Sedighi, 2017; Moncada, 2017; Goh, 2017; León and Vicario, 2017).

At the heart of their endeavour is an attempt to demonstrate that architectural/infrastructural aesthetics -the principles of taste that underpin what counts as beauty in the external form of a building- are also imbued with the power of producing representations, representations that are meant to convey particular political imageries (e.g.: *monumental* visions of a conquering state, of an ideal, domination of a mode of production/exchange, and so on..) (Nolan, 2017). More important for this thesis is the contradiction identified in this relationship between, on the one hand, forms of plannification that proceed on the model of “quasi-urban” types of development processes and discourses that attempt to suppress the visibility of these processes for political reasons (ibid:293).

As well as such aspirational typologies as modernity, sovereignty, economic development, or industrial-infrastructural integration, that as shown in the preceding chapter, serve to legitimise the representation of the North as a settler rather than an Indigenous space, it is the notion of *concentration* that best characterises Tulita's suburban identity. By concentration, I mean the aggregation, for functional purpose, of administrations, economic services, and activities on a small surface area. Yet, at the same time as this spatial concentration now appears to be a normal part of the everyday lives of the Tulita Dene and Métis, it in fact results from, and continues to subtend, settler geopolitical narratives of sovereignty assertion over Arctic lands and transformation of the NWT's Indigenous cultures.

Indeed, from the perspective of the Canadian state's establishment in the North, the industrial transformation of the NWT cannot be disentangled from its concomitant militarisation and urbanisation (Farish and Lackenbauer, 2009). For political geographer Matthew Farish, this began during the Cold War, when the Federal government, under the direction of John Diefenbaker's Northern vision, began to establish a direct relationship between Canada's *material* presence in the Arctic and the geopolitical territorialisation of its *Northern* national identity via the increased presence of the military and of state civil servants, scientists, land surveyors and planners (2008; Farish and Lackenbauer, 2009). Crucially, this materialisation had to take shape in the form of towns, hamlets and settlements that could mimic southern Canada's predominantly urban way of life to ensure a permanent but more importantly, a *governable*, Canadian presence in the region (Farish and Lackenbauer, 2009). The idea was that not only could the military operate out of these spaces in case of attacks, but similarly, agents of the state would now be able to use them to map surrounding lands

(ibid). In this context, these proto-urban spaces had to be planned, organised and imagined from above, from Ottawa and Yellowknife, to ensure the unhindered advance of what Farish and historical geographer Whitney Lackenbauer call “state-driven high-modernist urbanism” in the North (2009:520). High-modernist planning and urban designs, operate, after James Scott’s *Seeing like a state* (1998), through “a sweeping, rational engineering of all aspects of social life in order to improve the human condition” (Scott, 1998:88; quoted in Farish and Lackenbauer, 2009:518). They involve the “design of cities, and the organisation of transportation” as well as the creation of “a standard grid whereby” local, social practices can “be centrally recorded and monitored” (Scott, 1998:2; quoted in Farish and Lackenbauer, 2009:519). In the NWT, Farish and Lackenbauer situate the beginning of the concentration of Indigenous populations in government-planned settlements (most already existed under the form of fur trading and/or missionary posts) at the moment of the enactment of the Family Allowances Act in 1944 (2009). This act forced Indigenous families to remain permanently in these artificial environments as children had to attend school for their parents to receive the allowance (ibid)<sup>104</sup>. This, they argue, combined with the decline in fur trade revenues, and the generalisation of the residential school system, achieved to make Indigenous children less and less capable of living on the land (ibid).

Initial high-modernist visions for these ready-made settlements involved the combination of colonial policies of social engineering, utopias of outer space colonisation, and the deployment of techno-scientific architectural and infrastructural forms based on the scientific organisation of the distribution of populations in space

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<sup>104</sup> In practice however, this process was implemented incrementally over a period of more than a century. It began at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when lands located around the early trading and missionary posts were surveyed, so as to mark those parcels “at the settlements that Natives used for camping or permanent dwelling sites” and to create “legally definable lots” for them (Abel, 2011:171).

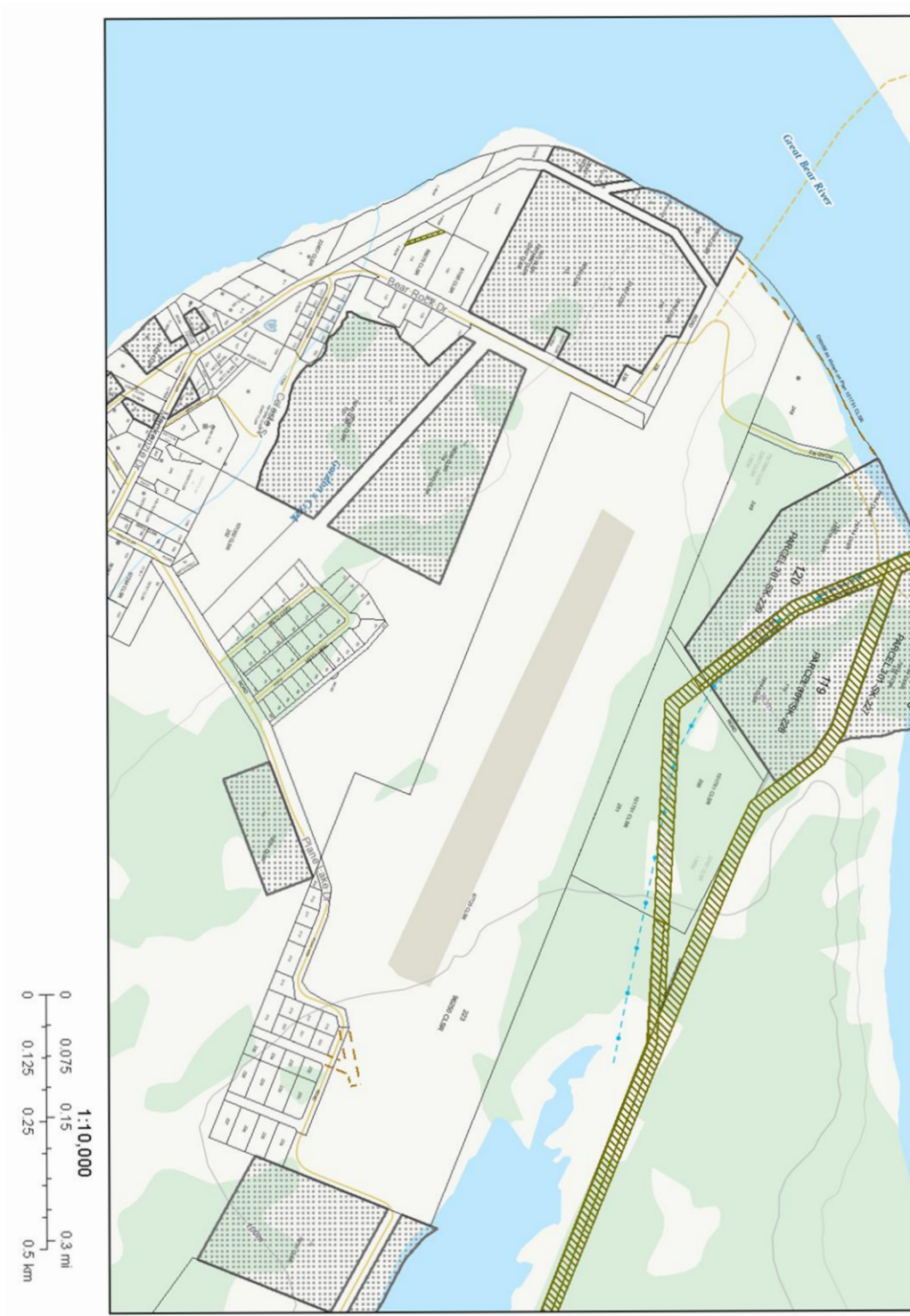
(Richot, 2011; Sheppard and White, 2017; Liscombe, 2011; on how this process developed in the Inuit case see: Tester and Kulchyski, 1994; Damas, 2002). Crucially, these visions were developed away from the input of local Indigenous populations, they also did not take local patterns of habitation, nor local environmental conditions into account. Thus, in new towns like Inuvik, high-modernism created the conditions for spatial forms of social and racial segregation to develop and remain (Farish and Lackenbauer, 2009). Hence, as these grand geopolitical visions failed to materialise, and as explained by Harold Strub (previously a chief architect of the NWT), planning, in smaller urban environments like Tulita across the NWT, became the responsibility of governmental experts:

“New houses [demanded] delivery of services – electricity for light cooking, fuel oil for heat, tanks and piping for water and sewage. [The] task of implementing housing and services in remote Northern settlements became a technical challenge having little reference to traditional patterns of settlement. The technicians filled the apparent vacuum of local determinants for planning permanent settlements with the determinant most familiar to themselves, the efficient distribution of utilities. The planning of utility networks dictated the planning of the community. Compact utility networks were cheaper to build and operate than extended ones. Only the fire control requirement for minimum separation between buildings (12 metres) prevented even greater density. Governments imposed social structure and physical development in spite of, rather than in harmony with local conditions.” (1996:64).

As houses were initially attributed on a first come, first serve basis, this process had the unintended consequence of separating members of families (ibid). Resources could not be pooled together and shared as easily as before, and the model of the collective-oriented extended family was slowly replaced by that of the more self-centred EuroCanadian nuclear family (ibid). Furthermore, the creation of these “new subjects in new, urbanised landscapes” (Farish and Lackenbauer, 2009:544), was accompanied by the application of “subdivision grid patterns originally devised to unroll suburban

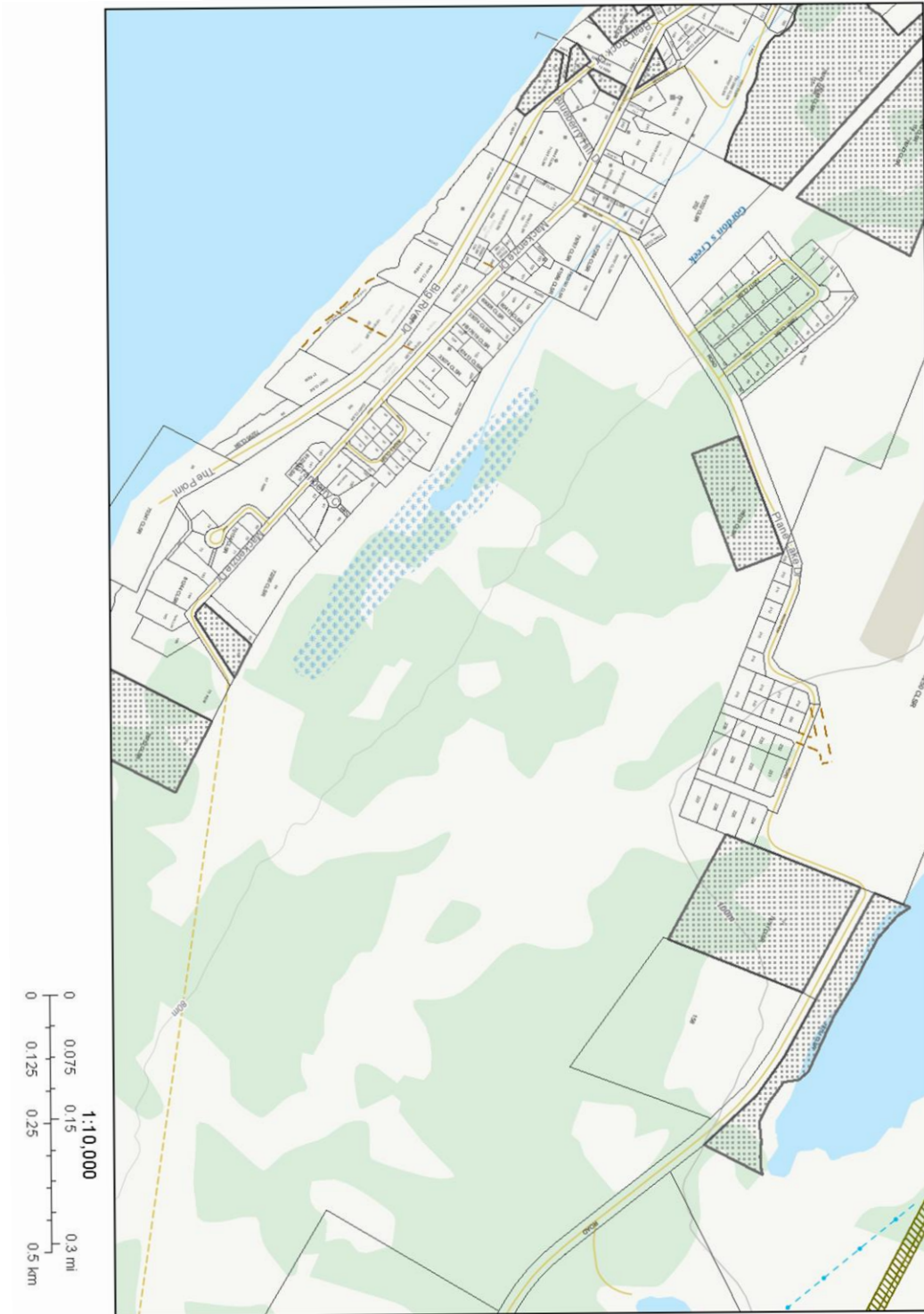
fabric over the flat agricultural land surrounding southern Canadian cities” (Strub, 1996:92) in the cold, barren lands of the Northern tundra (I provide maps of the settlement of Tulita in figures 6 and 7 below).

Thus, in Tulita’s case, the result is that in all but its size and remoteness, the settlement, at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, concentrates all the critical infrastructures of modern urban life, and even more in some regards (after all, Internet access in the community is now faster and of a better quality than that of an average Londoner). But the paradox lies precisely in this contradiction, that on the one hand, Tulita’s urbanity was not acknowledged as such by my interviewees and acquaintances (urban typologies were never used by them to describe Tulita). On the other hand, settler modernity’s urban materialities continue to subtend, fashion, and organise the spaces of everyday life in the community. In this chapter, I investigate this paradox and what it means for the manner in which the beings of geopower interact with the lives of the Tulita Dene and Métis. I show that the beings of geopower *are* urban materialities, since the meanings, practices and modes of being attached to them are distinctively EuroCanadian and operate in this sense as affective forms of estrangement. However, as I demonstrate these operations are not completely successful.



**Figure 6**

Map of Tulita, north



**Figure 7**

Map of Tulita, south

(source: Canada Lands Survey System CLSS, Natural Resources Canada, CLSS Map browser: Tulita, January 2018)

Figures 6 & 7 are reproductions of copies of an official work published by Natural Resources Canada (part of the Government of Canada). They have not been reproduced here in affiliation with, or with the endorsement of the Government of Canada. Copyright/trademark owned by the Government of Canada.

## **An urban space**

The urban-rural dichotomy is at the core of the way the non-Indigenous informants I interviewed in Yellowknife represented Indigenous spaces. For example, in OENR's and RCNDA's responses, this distinction subtends visions that equate the notion of backwardness to Indigenous communities:

‘Here in the North, it is a frontier landscape, and the transportation corridors are not completely defined [we] don't have universities per se, and people go out to go to school and this is my personal feeling: you take somebody who comes from a community who... Communities of 500, 600 and then you are in class with 200 people, it's a little overwhelming, it's not unlike when a rural goes to the big city, and that has its impact.’

(Recorded and semi-structured interview RCNDA, Yellowknife, 27/03/2015)

‘At this moment in time, I think it will be, largely a reason for that is because of the fact that there really are institutionalised mechanisms through which the people of the NWT, should they choose to use them, can influence how development happens more so than in quite a number of rural places in Canada.’

(Recorded and semi-structured interview with OENR, Yellowknife, 18/03/2015)

Whilst these views are grounded in the ‘god's eye perspective’ of government, that is, from a view situated in the experiential lifeworld of a metropolitan centre of political-economic power -Yellowknife- it nevertheless follows in the steps of a settler colonial historical narrative that has, since the period of contact culture, “conceptualised the North as a distinctly non-urban geographical space that sits somewhere out in the country or borderlands”, a “liminal zone without rules” that “marked civilisation from savagery” (Edmonds, 2010:xix), via the notion of *frontier*. For a spokesperson of the GNWT's Industry, Tourism and Investment department (identified as SITI), it is this trope that has organised settler, political efforts to ‘civilise’ the North after 1945:

‘The next phase which I think sort of started after the second world war up until the late 1980s. This was a time that they said when Canada was pushing back its boundaries. [We] actually started to build a lot more logging towns and mining towns right across the country. So, I mean you build roads, power lines, you do all of that to help fuel that economic growth but the change that happened that the war brought in a lot of new technologies, like I have in the picture there of a big airplane. [But] you really... You didn't need to have aboriginal people, you didn't care if aboriginal people lived there and had something to offer because you could parachute all of that in yourself.’

(Recorded and semi-structured interview with a representative of the GNWT's ITI - SITI-, Yellowknife, 25/03/2015)

In the contemporary configurations of power, however, the distinction is not between “civilisation and savagery” but between spaces that concentrate modern consumer services and amenities (including services provided by governments: housing, health, water, waste disposal, policing, fire, education and so on...) and a kind of liminal Indigenous hinterland where none of these are available:

‘One of the things to consider, we are off the beaten path. [Even] if you put a highway in, I don't think everybody would come. It's also a unique Canada itself... Whether that's to see the parks, or to see communities, or to experience communities and experience activities in communities, those are things that even if you put a road in, we would want to do anyway and putting a road in may not necessarily bring someone in because it is still far. It is fourteen hours from here to Grande Prairie, which is the next major centre in terms of shopping. People that go to Grande Prairie don't come to Yellowknife. [I] think that it is still a frontier, unknown.’

(Recorded and semi-structured interview with a representative of the Canadian Northern Development Agency -RCNDA-, Yellowknife, 27/03/2015)

‘So, in 1967, for example, they moved the government from Ottawa to Yellowknife. [They] started to organise local communities. So, imagine if you have a lot of aboriginal communities around the North and they were just sort of loose communities, people living there, around a Hudson's Bay store. So, when you go in, you ask what kind of communities are these? How do we lead those communities? Is it just the chief of band or community that runs this? How do we do that? So, to create local governance and create things like hamlets, and municipalities and to provide them with all of the proper societal things like schools and nursing stations and police stations and firehalls, and all of that kind of things, makes you spend a lot of money.’

(Recorded and semi-structured interview with a representative of the GNWT's ITI - SITI-, Yellowknife, 25/03/2015)

This urban-rural dichotomy (implied in the above quotations) also structures the Tulita Dene's semiotic mediation of the settlement, as opposed to the categories of meaning applied to the bush/land nexus. However, in their interpretation of this dichotomy, an important distinction is made between the notion of life spent as part of a band/group, or a family whilst on the land, that is in accordance with traditional Dene social and spiritual rules of cohabitation and living inside the *physical* (or as I argue here, the *urban*) limits of what is now the modern settlement. This distinction can be clearly seen in the role of the mythical nahani (or bushman) figure (a recurring theme in this thesis). The nahani represents a symbolic congealing of all the asocial behaviours that can derive from a life spent entirely outside of the socialised boundaries of one's band.

From a normative perspective, the principal element that substantiates such an interpretation is that the notion of "municipal land" –lands assigned to the areas occupied by a built infrastructure in Tulita at the time of the SDMCLCA, as well as lands reserved to house its future growth- is one of the core regulatory elements of the spatial governance framework established by the SDMCLCA. Municipal lands are the only lands of the Sahtu Settlement area that can be sold and owned (or donated) privately and that can as such, be taxable (SDMCLCA Highlights, 1994). They are under the authority of the GNWT and are, in this sense like any other municipal lands throughout the rest of Canada (ibid). By opposition, whilst settlement lands<sup>105</sup> are also

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<sup>105</sup> To repeat, settlement lands are the only other types of land within the Sahtu region to which the Sahtu Dene and Métis have their title recognised in the SDMCLCA. All other types of land in the region are considered crown lands. Sahtu settlement lands represent approximately 15% of the Sahtu region's surface area. However, within these settlement lands, two sub-categories of lands can be identified. There are first, lands whose surface and sub-surface resources belong to the Sahtu Dene and Métis. These only

owned privately by the Sahtu Dene and Métis in collectivity, they can never be sold and are exempt of taxes (ibid, 1994:2).

As can be inferred from the following quotation from RRO's interview, this regulatory system has been translated, in practice, into a dichotomy between settlement lands situated outside -where Dene customary rights of occupation and use have precedence over settler property laws- and those located inside the municipal boundaries of Tulita (but also between these lands and crown lands):

'If I want to go to this lake, build a cabin, I just go and build a cabin [but I can't do that on crown land], [that is] Federal government land, their land is crown land, you cannot build a house on that until you get permission from the government. But due to the land claim, we have land selected, we just go ahead and build a cabin on it... Let's say [T] lake, if I want to build a cabin there, I have to talk to [F] and [D] who have cabins there. I say: can I build a cabin with you guys? I think they will say yes.'

(Unstructured, recorded interview with RRO, 26/11/2014, Tulita)

Similarly, whilst, the Sahtu Dene and Métis have retained harvesting rights over the entire Sahtu region (including on settlement lands, special harvesting areas, and crown lands), they are not allowed to hunt, trap or fish on "private land within municipal boundaries" (SDMCLCA Highlights, 1994:7).

This distinction is also translated in practice by the fact that for some, the ontologies that apply to life inside these municipal boundaries are not the same as the ones that are prevalent outside of them. For instance, one acquaintance (SUE 2) explained to me that he believed that families did not behave in the same manner depending on whether their

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represent 4.4% of settlement lands. Second, there are lands whose surface resources belong to the Sahtu Dene and Métis but whose sub-surface resources are under the exclusive jurisdiction of the Federal government. These lands represent 95.6% of settlement lands.

interactions took place inside or outside these boundaries, for example when participating in communal hunting campaigns. Hunting campaigns are usually undertaken in communities of 4 or 5 families (which represents 20 to 30 individuals). As hunting is a group undertaking, sharing occurs whenever surplus resources are harvested, especially with people who cannot spend time on the land (single mothers, elders, young infants, the sick). This was confirmed by RRO:

‘Everybody goes to the same spot but the other times that they have to change and if other people have trap lines there, they would go with them and they would share. As of right now, there are some people out in the land right now, that this guy traps are there, we took a couple of guys with them to trap with him right now. So, they share. Like if I have a trap line across there that I do every year, everybody knows that, but if you come along and you wanna trap there, just come to ask me and I can say ok yes or I can say no. [You] just set a net, you get a lot of fishes, you just get what you need and just pass on. In my case, I usually hunt, and I just give some meat to mostly single mothers or elders, I’ll give them...

[If] you were to hunt, like elk, moose, you can almost go anywhere.’

(Unstructured, recorded interview with RRO, Tulita, 26/11/2014)

For SUE 2 when on the land, the logic of family politics that pertains to life in the urban settlement, disappears. However, for him as soon as these families are back in:

‘The city, nobody waves at each other again, they don’t talk to each other, they don’t share anything. Out on the land, everyone is given something to do, everyone feels like they belong’.

(From an unstructured interview with SUE 2, as recorded in my fieldnotes, Tulita, 13/12/2014)<sup>106</sup>.

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<sup>106</sup> These observations are all the more important given that SUE 2 took care to communicate them to me in a private setting, where nobody could hear our conversation, nor even see us speaking. I believe that as he was at the time of my stay working for one of the local administrations, he may have feared some form of repercussion (in the context of families competing for political power within the settlement).

Whilst the dichotomy identified by SUE 2 was not depicted in the same terms by other acquaintances, it nevertheless seemed to underlie their understandings of why, beyond the importance of traditional land-based knowledges and practices, settlement life seemed to always lie closer to the ontologies -the modes of being- of settler urban worlds. This is how CI described it:

‘On the land, they are united, all these differences disappear. You wouldn't believe, they are good people in town but when they are on the land, you can just see that care and love for each other. One time when I was out there, you usually go out with three or four families -one of the family I was with was the first family to get a moose- so they took it home and the wife and the daughters are the ones that cut out the meat and do the first preparation and they live it out for about a day to cure I guess they call it, and that family they invited the other families to pick the meat they wanted first and the family that killed the moose pick what was left. They always take care of each other, they ensure that everyone has enough warm blanket, or whatever, the meat they need, water, they take care of the older people that can't carry anything. In town, they don't do that as much...when they came to town it wasn't their choice, the government made this place, they resented it in a way. Housing does everything, they can't even fix their door, they have to call housing first, so it hasn't become theirs. They live in it but it's not theirs and so they lost that caring. The government put them together in a place where they usually did not want to be right here in Tulita, there's people from the mountains, people from Willow Lake and people who used to live along the river, so there's three different people/groups put together and expected to live as if they've already been living like that for a long time.’

(Unstructured, recorded interview with CI, Tulita, 14/11/2014)

There is however, a gradation in the way these ontological differences were represented among my acquaintances. For instance, SUE 2 perceived the building constructed to house the SRRB (created in the wake of the SDMCLCA) as difficult to access, lacking transparency, and tied experientially to the settler fly-in/fly-out pattern of occupation. However, by contrast, for SUE, institutions created with the SDMCLCA, such as the land corporations, enable the perpetuation of traditional land-use practices:

‘What the land corporation does, is that it funds trips, like hunting, trapping, fishing trips. Their main ones would be the spring hunt. This is what they fund. They give each family, a household, they give them helicopter rides. One trip in, one trip out, to their hunting land or cabins. They just reach the families. That's very popular...

This fall hunt we had few of our active hunters. One of them ‘T’. I know that everytime he goes hunting, he always feeds the elders and stuff like that, they always share their meat... I myself, I hunt for my entire family, for my friends. So, we make sure that everybody has the chance to go hunting. We take people's kids. Kids are never on their own, relatives we take, we encourage that. We make sure everybody has the chance to go hunting.’

(Unstructured, recorded interview with SUE, Tulita, 18/11/2014)

However, non-privately owned lands are only a 30-minute walk away from the settlement's municipal boundaries (or a 10-minute drive by car). This seems to confirm that for SUE (and the other families he is referring to in the above quotation), the line that separates the settlement's urban-like life from bush-based practices is not just a spatial, but also an ontological one. What also transpires from this quotation is that what matters in this differentiation is not the fact of being on the land per se, but rather that being on the land together with one's relatives, and with members of other families during communal hunting campaigns enables the perpetuation of traditional knowledges, practices, and power relations (as between the experienced hunter/trapper or elder and younger or more inexperienced community member). In other words, what seems important in SUE's and SUE 2's perception is the fact that these events help keep alive traditional modes of being, as opposed to the physical environment of the so-called “town” or “city” of Tulita which prevents this from happening.

However, this does not mean that everyone in the community applies this distinction to the letter. Indeed, some continue to hunt small animals within the municipal boundaries of the settlement (mostly hares, rabbits or squirrels). For example, I once accompanied

the son of an acquaintance on a snowmobile trip in a non-inhabited part of the settlement. He was attempting to catch rabbits and grouses with a small hunting rifle. He explained to me that he was not supposed to do so and seemed anxious not to get seen. I have also observed other acquaintances setting rabbit snares at different locations on lands situated around their houses (see photograph 3). Fish are also harvested directly from the frozen Dehcho/Mackenzie river by a few families (see photograph 4). I was able to spend some time with one of them at the beginning of my stay. They explained that ice fishing had been a common practice in their family since they moved in Tulita (their house is located only a short walk away from the river)<sup>107</sup>.

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<sup>107</sup> However, it is possible that, because ice fishing in the Mackenzie/Dehcho river is a traditional practice for these families, they hold an exceptional right to harvest non-renewable resources there, that is, based on customary rules (a possibility that is acknowledged in the SDMCLCA). This interpretation was also confirmed to me by SUE.



**Photograph 3**

Setting a rabbit snare in Tulita, November 2014 (source: author)



**Photograph 4**

Ice fishing on the frozen Dehcho/Mackenzie river, Tulita, November 2014

(source: author)

Similarly, surplus fire wood (that is not used by the person who harvested it or given to his relatives) gathered in the surrounding vicinity of Tulita is sometimes sold to other residents. I noticed that this practice was undertaken mostly by younger members of the community, with the purpose of quickly obtaining spending money. In this sense, the spatiality of the settlement, bounded by its municipal limits, also serves as a kind of social taboo: an unacknowledged rule that establishes a distinction between what can *exist* inside, and outside Tulita. Thus, social actions that transgress this taboo not only express deliberate attempts to flout the behavioural rules that it represents, they also show that the translation of settler spatialities in Dene lifeworlds gives birth to new material practices.

### *Summary*

Thus, although it is still viewed as a rural, remote or backward space, Tulita in effect functions as an urban environment, albeit a peripheral or sub-urban one. As shown in the previous discussion, this is because settler geopower operates through immaterial systems of geo-coding (here, the separation between municipal lands and non-municipal lands enshrined in the SDMCLCA), that create distinct modes of spatiality, with a settler type of urban-based commodified “municipal” land on the one hand (which can be owned by, and sold or ceded to individuals), and lands where traditional Dene customary rules of access, use and possession can be perpetuated on the other hand. Whilst in the former, the modes of being of the settler world apply, in the latter, Dene animist rules of reciprocity and respect are followed. New practices seem to emerge when the former and the latter mix. It is perhaps for this reason that all the transgressive practices I was able to observe were done by members of the younger

generation. In this sense, and more importantly, the actions of the beings of geopower in Tulita also pertain to the specific configurations of power (and their dialectical progression) that stems from the materialisation, via particular physical structures, objects and movements, of the mode of spatiality that is normatively inscribed in the SDMCLCA. The SRRB's building, but also wood harvesting activities, and hunting trips are examples of these structures and movements.

What gives further ground to the argument that Tulita is an urban space is that most of the everyday practices and movements that now take place in the settlement are subtended by the circulation of *money*. Money is indeed correlated to the material expansion of urbanity (Simmel, 1964; 1978), and as noted before, of bureaucracies (Nadasdy, 2003). Whilst it has social consequences, it also refashions and produces space in ways that fit industrial-capitalist political economies. In the next section, I explore this point.

### **'Being' geopower: money and the uneven transformation of the spaces of everyday life in Tulita**

From a geopolitical point of view, money "is a social and cultural relation bound up with asymmetries of power, which [vary] from place to place" (Urry, 1996:228; see also, Corbridge et al., 1994). It functions as a "medium of exchange and as a store of wealth" and values that "allow social relationships to be extended across space and time" (Leyshon and Thrift, 1997:8; 21). In other words, the forms of deployment, circulation, and accumulation of money are not only contingent to place and time, they

are also tied to prevalent semiotic regimes and to the specific material configurations of space linked to pre-existing socio-economic systems (Leyshon and Thrift, 1997). Thus, in a market economy, whilst money materialises the semiotic effects of calculative and commodifying urban chronoscapes in place, it also refashions the local in unique ways (ibid; Simmel 1978). For sociologist Georg Simmel, money conveys values of individual emancipation, which not only encourage one's detachment from her/his community ties but also create the conditions for the emergence of new principles of society (Leyshon and Thrift, 1997; Simmel, 1978). Indeed, because of these transformative effects, money subtends the emergence of "new distinctions between people" at the same time as it creates semiotic distance with the objects that constitute their socio-affective environment (Leyshon and Thrift, 1997:35; Simmel, 1978).

In Tulita, money *is* a being of geopower. It fashions the lived spaces of the community's Dene and Métis residents by enabling the material production/reproduction of forms whose semiosis are tied to the settler urban/market economy. Beyond the concretisation of specific forms that its circulation and accumulation subtend, money -taken in its systemic entirety- can thus be viewed as the symbol of settler ontologies. Indeed, in the settlement, money, or its lack thereof, enables the creation and perpetuation of capitalist-type socio-economically and spatially unequal modes of being. It is a determining factor in one's ability to access renewable resources harvested on the land, and thus not only of an individual's political-economic position in Tulita's urban social hierarchy, but also of her/his role in the production of its dominant spaces. The socio-ontological impact of this dependency is accrued by the geographic distance of Tulita from other major urban centres. This peripheral position indeed not only diminishes the

*quantity* of money in circulation in Tulita, but in doing so, it increases its *relative* value.

FEMNLA viewed this issue as critical in ensuring Canada's sovereignty in the North and described it as a problem of how to ensure sovereignty by affordability.

One area where this issue appears particularly problematic is the question of access to food products. For instance, beyond the particular material difficulties that come with poverty in every social settings, the problem of not being able to hunt, trap, fish, or harvest wood because of one's inability to purchase the required gear takes on an almost existential sense in an environment where food products sold in the only available store are often too expensive, or of such low dietary value, that they can never be entirely relied upon to provide for one's nutritional needs. For example, when asked about this subject, RRO explains:

'In that area here, not very active, people do trap, they just go out for a day and trap, not make it a living, can't make a living on it because the cost for fuel, the ski-doo you wanna use, food. No, they just can't make a living on it...

[to stay on the land for two weeks does it cost 2000 CAD or more?] maybe more yes...

That's a lot. Like people, they might rent a ski-doo and some tools, just for two or four hundred dollars for a day just to rent your ski-doo. Plus, you have to buy the gas, \$1.87 a litter you know, you need more than that where these guys are travelling. and to buy your food, that's a lot of money.'

(Recorded, unstructured interview with RRO, Tulita, 26/11/2014)

Similarly, for SUE:

'Specially, if you are from the UK, you know how much the price difference here is compared to anywhere else in the world. We have the most expensive things: gas is high, price of groceries is really expensive and the time to bring students, 8 of them, the price to bring 8 of them on the land for about a week, was at about 15000 dollars and the government did not want to fund that much...

People who can't go hunting. People who don't have the resources to, like boats, skidoos, any of these things. You give them gas, they can't use the gas, you give them helicopter rides, how are they going to hunt without guns, they've got nothing, so we have a lot of these people.'

(Unstructured, recorded interview with SUE, Tulita, 18/11/2014)

The high cost of living in Tulita became clear to me in mid-November 2014. I was offered the possibility to take part in a hunting trip to Willow Lake, located at a day's travel distance by snowmobile from the settlement. However, to be able to do so, I had to find a way to hire a working snowmobile, buy and stock sufficient gas for a week-long trip on the land, acquire the proper clothes, and learn the rules of driving a 600 cc (or so) horsepower vehicle in the wooded terrains of Tulita's surrounding bush in a matter of a week. In addition to the technical difficulties that this represented, it is the cost of these preparations that led me to choose not to participate. I had run well over my initial budget (of CAD 500) just by acquiring a dozen fuel cans and a sled to carry them.

For some, the high cost of living in Tulita was caused by the prices practiced by the local northern store. Northern stores throughout the Canadian NWT are owned by the North West Company (NWC). The NWC is the result of a 1987 venture from the historical fur trading Hudson's Bay Company which merged with the original Northwest Company in 1821. A Hudson's Bay trading post (and later a store, then renamed northern store) has been present in Tulita since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In this sense, the presence of a northern store in the settlement marks the geographic continuity of the colonial and capitalist processes that have underlied its formation as an urban centre. It also materialises the contemporary configurations of these processes (particularly in the form of consumerism and its reliance on highly processed food products) in the

everyday lives of Tulita's residents. This is all the more true given that the only location where money can be withdrawn from is an ATM placed inside the northern store.

At the time of my stay, the store was regularly underprovisioned or faced technical difficulties that prevented it from being able to sell certain key everyday products such as meat, or fruit and vegetables (the store's freezers were for example out of service for the first two months of my period of fieldwork). Whilst I relied more on these products on a day to day basis than my Dene and Métis acquaintances, this nevertheless shows that, even if it is arguably possible to speak of Tulita as an urban space, it remains a peripheral one in the hierarchy of urbanity in Canada. I contend that it is precisely this factor that accrues the impression of social exclusion when living in Tulita (in other words, the impression of being part of the same urban experience, whilst at the same time being excluded from it).

In the winter months, everything is brought by truck to Tulita from Yellowknife via the NWT's ice roads. As not many food products are grown in Yellowknife, or in the NWT more generally, most are imported from other parts of Canada. This not only significantly increases their costs, but also the possibility that accidents occur and thus that these products arrive in a deteriorated state. For example, in January 2015 in Tulita, I observed that the price of a small pack of frozen peas was \$(CAD) 7 (£ 4), and that of a pack of four tomatoes, two of which had gone past their shelf life, was \$ 5.4 (£ 3). Similarly, a food price data study conducted by the GNWT indicates that in 2015, in Tulita and Colville Lake, the average community price of 540 ml of canned tomatoes was \$ 4.99 (in Yellowknife -YK-: \$ 2.29); a bottle of 1 L of semi-skimmed milk, cost \$ 6.74 (\$ 3.76 in YK); 700 g of instant rice, \$ 8.27 (in YK: \$ 5.79); 570g of white bread,

\$ 4.91 (YK: \$ 3.54); 907 g of carrots, \$ 8.45 (\$ 2.72); 12 cans of soft drinks, \$ 19.99 (\$ 6.15 in YK); baby food sold in 128 ml jars cost \$ 2.07 (in YK: \$ 0.90); and the average price of a bag of 900 g of infant formula powder was \$ 34.49 (\$ 25.48 in YK) (NWT Bureau of Statistics, 2015a; 2015b). In the case of these everyday items, prices are between 1.3 and 3.3 times higher in Tulita and Colville Lake than in Yellowknife (ibid). The social impacts of these differences are all the more significant given the fact that they affect items that are critical to one's livelihood, such as bread, rice, infant food or milk. In this sense, these price differences tend to accrue political-economic inequalities within the community between those that have the financial means to live comfortably and thus to hunt, fish or trap (activities which are themselves very costly as the previous discussion shows) and those who do not (in other words, between the different economic classes described in chapter 5).

These inequalities find their root in the wide income disparity between residents of the community who are employed on a full time, full year basis and those who are not. According to a Statistics Canada census, Tulita's median total income<sup>108</sup> was of \$22 080 in 2016 (by comparison, the NWT's median total income was of \$ 50,618 in the same year) (2016). 46 % of those in employment (full-time and part-time) in that year in Tulita earned less than \$22 000, whilst the 16 % in the top three deciles earned \$80 000 or more (these statistics do not discriminate between Indigenous and non-Indigenous individuals) (2016). In that same year, 68 % did not work or worked part-

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<sup>108</sup> Total income includes revenues obtained through "wages, salaries, tips, commissions and net income from self-employment" (Statistics Canada, 2016). They also include "income from investment sources [from] employer and personal pension sources, [other] regular cash income, such as child support payments received, spousal support payments (alimony) received and scholarships [from] government sources, such as social assistance, child benefits, employment insurance benefits, old age security benefits, Canada Pension Plan and Québec Pension Plan benefits and disability income" (ibid).

time or part-year (Statistics Canada, 2016). These statistics give a clear picture of the community's socio-economic outlook and tend to confirm its highly dichotomous socio-economic structure.

In the case of access to food products, this dichotomy is translated in practice, at one end of the social spectrum, by one's inability to acquire certain basic food items from the store, and thus by one's almost complete reliance on assistance provided by relatives, in particular on gifts of food harvested on the land. This was the case of an acquaintance whose meals consisted mainly of dried pieces of caribou meat with carrots and rice stew given to him by relatives. At the other end of the spectrum are those who are able to afford not only products on display at the northern store, but also better-quality items sold online or on a made-to-order basis (by phone or mail) by companies located in Yellowknife. These items are then delivered, for a cost, either by plane or truck (unless relatives can bring them by car) to Tulita. For example, an acquaintance who invited me to spend the New Year's Eve with his family, offered to order several kilograms of fine delicatessen meat (including an entire ham leg) from a store located in Yellowknife in preparation of the event. He explained that it was usual for his and other families in the community to make these types of group order once or twice a month for particular occasions<sup>109</sup>.

For those who cannot hunt or fish but can afford to go to the store, industrially manufactured food products, such as frozen pizzas, sodas, ice creams, coffee powder,

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<sup>109</sup> In choosing to discuss these observations, I do not want to convey the idea that some individuals in the community prefer to buy expensive food items simply because they can afford them, whilst others, their immediate neighbours, go hungry because they cannot buy food products. Indeed, this is not the case since as noted previously, there are traditional and non-traditional sharing networks that operate to mitigate the effects of the community's socio-economic disparities.

sweet varieties of corn flakes, cookie paste, potato chips/fries, processed meat, hamburgers, breaded chicken wings, soups and so on...are the staple of the everyday. This is confirmed in a report published in 2015 by the National Collaborating Centre for Aboriginal Health (a para-academic organisation hosted at the University of Northern British Columbia which focuses on issues of health on behalf of Aboriginal groups in Canada). In *The nutritional health of First nations and Métis of the NWT*, author Regine Halseth writes that:

“More than half of the energy intake of First Nations and Métis in the NWT comes from less nutrient dense foods that are highly processed, low cost, and high in sugar and carbohydrates.”

“In the case of Aboriginal communities in the NWT, most have undergone some level of nutrition transition over the past 60 years. [This] process has been gradual and generally involves a shift towards a less healthy diet resulting from decreased reliance on traditional foods [and] increased reliance on market-based foods [that] are often preprocessed and high in refined carbohydrates and saturated fat” (2015:9, 27).

She reports that this “nutrition transition”, which she defines as “changes in [diets] accompanied by and resulting from industrialisation, urbanisation, economic development and globalisation of markets” (Damman et al., 2008:135, quoted in Halseth, 2015:27) has meant a shift for the NWT’s Aboriginal peoples from “traditional eating patterns to processed, shop-bought foods.” (Halseth, 2015:27). More importantly, the concrete manifestation of this transition has not been a rapid and brutal replacement of pre-existing Indigenous dietary traditions (Halseth, 2015). It has rather taken the form of the “consumption of fewer types and smaller quantities of traditional food recipes” (ibid:27).

Thus, from the standpoint of the material circulation of money, the spatial forms that are exchanged and possessed in Tulita are related to one's income. In the case of food, this is because the wealthiest groups can access products whose forms embody settler symbols of political, cultural, and economic power. For the less fortunate groups, it is almost exclusively the opposite, since, what is accessible through the actions of money to members of the less wealthy economic classes are products that are material embodiments of settler symbols of poverty. This is not only because they are experienced as being *expensive* within the semiotic system that gives representational power to the settler political economy but also because they are not felt to be as nutritional as food harvested on the land by the Dene. For instance, during a public presentation on scientific research projects being conducted in the Sahtu region organised in January 2015 in Tulita, an elder from Fort Good Hope intervened to explain that chicken meat being sold at the store did not have the same taste, nor the same energy value as wild chicken meat harvested on the land. However, through sharing networks, traditional forms, such as dried caribou meat in the above example (that is forms that symbolise attachment to land, the celebration of traditional values and knowledges and so on...), circulate among or between these groups. Crucially for my argument however, is the fact that the sharing of traditional food products does not involve the exchange of money. Traditional food products in Northern Indigenous societies indeed have more than a functional role, they also represent animist ontologies, modes of being (and other-than-human beings) and cannot as such be *sold* (Nadasdy, 2003; see also Halseth, 2015). This is a point that was emphasised to me at repeated times during my period of fieldwork and was delineated in the following terms by RRO:

‘There are people in town, they do that [they don’t share their catch] but still this is just the way they want to live and if they don’t want to share with me and they say you caught 10 fishes and you didn’t want to share it, and on the next day, I caught 10 fishes, I can still share it with you... Today some people share, and some people don’t, but we share, I will share. Back in the sixties, there were hard times that they went out on the land, they came back, they shared with others, they shared information. You might tell your neighbour that there’s a bunch of moose over that way, to help them survive.’

(Unstructured, recorded interview with with RRO, Tulita, 26/11/2014)

Thus, at a semiotic level, what one’s possession of money entails in the processual acquisition of industrially manufactured food, is an ability to master certain key symbols of settler forms of cultural power, such as those conveyed by for example fine delicatessen, fine wine and so on... In this sense, these sign-beings and their manifold forms (their taste, smell, geographical origins, and the affects they generate), also subtend the operations of geopower in Tulita.

The validity of this semiotic reading can be further substantiated with the following example. In early January 2015, an acquaintance (identified as MA) explained that many in the community perceived me as a source of ‘money’<sup>110</sup>. For this reason, he explained that I was never going to be able to learn what being a Dene *really* meant. For him, being a true Dene, signified being able to stay away from the networks of accumulation and exchange of money, and in doing so to be able to *be* ‘poor’<sup>111</sup>, and thus to *know* that one must share food in order to survive.

It is indeed the case that at the time of my conversation with MA, my material implication in the networks of circulation of money in Tulita was already entangled in

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<sup>110</sup> A term he used, as recorded in my fieldwork journal, dated 07/01/2015.

<sup>111</sup> From my fieldwork journal, dated 07/01/2015.

the unequal power relations of the community's socio-political-economic structure. In this sense, MA's remarks also imply that for him too, I represented a materialisation in the everyday spaces of Tulita of settler processes of government. In other words, because of the way I chose to use my privileged access to money, I was, in the world of the Tulita Dene (within the ontological contingencies of life in Tulita), a being of geopower, in manifold forms.

### **Architecture/infrastructure and the grid: cost-efficient planning and Tulita's *unhomely* spaces**

The second area of investigation that can help substantiate the argument that Tulita is experienced as a settler-like urban space by its residents is the community's de facto housing and planning processes of development. As noted in the introduction to this chapter, the development of government-built small settlements in the NWT participated in the establishment of the state's presence and of Canada's sovereignty in the Arctic.

Crucially, this process was detached from local Indigenous realities, contexts and ways of being/knowing (Strub, 1996; Sheppard and White, 2017). For instance, Strub explains that what characterised the early years of life in these new artificial towns were "buildings so large" that they altered the landscape, "blocked the view, threw long shadows, funnelled the wind and created huge snowdrifts", whilst making important "energy and service demands" fuelled by noisy and smelly diesel power generators (1996:64). He further observes that these communities' planning design relied

primarily on the criteria of cost-efficiency and fire safety (the necessity to separate buildings by a minimum distance of 12 metres to prevent the spread of fire) (ibid:92 Sheppard and White, 2017). This accrued the *concentration* of buildings within a small surface area whilst hampering Indigenous peoples from “seeing and hearing the land”:

“Planners locate houses in the centres of the smallest possible lots consistent with minimum fire separation, so that each house blocks the view of its immediate neighbours. Window orientation in houses ignores views and preferred exposures to sunlight”. (ibid:64-65).

Similarly, the introduction of heavy vehicles for water, sewage and fire service necessitated the construction of relatively large, open and long roads, built with low-quality materials and which had the effects of disrupting local soil, snow and wind dynamics (ibid: 65, 92). Individuals were offered houses that did not necessarily cater to their preferences but could not refuse them. The buildings themselves had few windows, were put above ground and did not contain a hearth as traditional log cabins and tents had. In their stead were placed oil furnaces “with their noise, dust, and stink” (ibid:72). Living in these housing units also implied that meals now had to be prepared and eaten “at the same spot [time] after time”, and that people began to sleep in separate rooms, rather than collectively in the same space (ibid). This, he argues, participated in the separation of everyday life from ontologies connected to the land.

Strub also observes that planning for these communities involved the zoning of lands for functional purpose (ibid: 92). This zoning (and the spatial orientation of buildings constructed on them) followed the geographical axis established by the grid, itself based on the spatial order created by two-lane gravel roads (ibid). It involved locating power, waste and transportation facilities apart from the areas where everyday life took place,

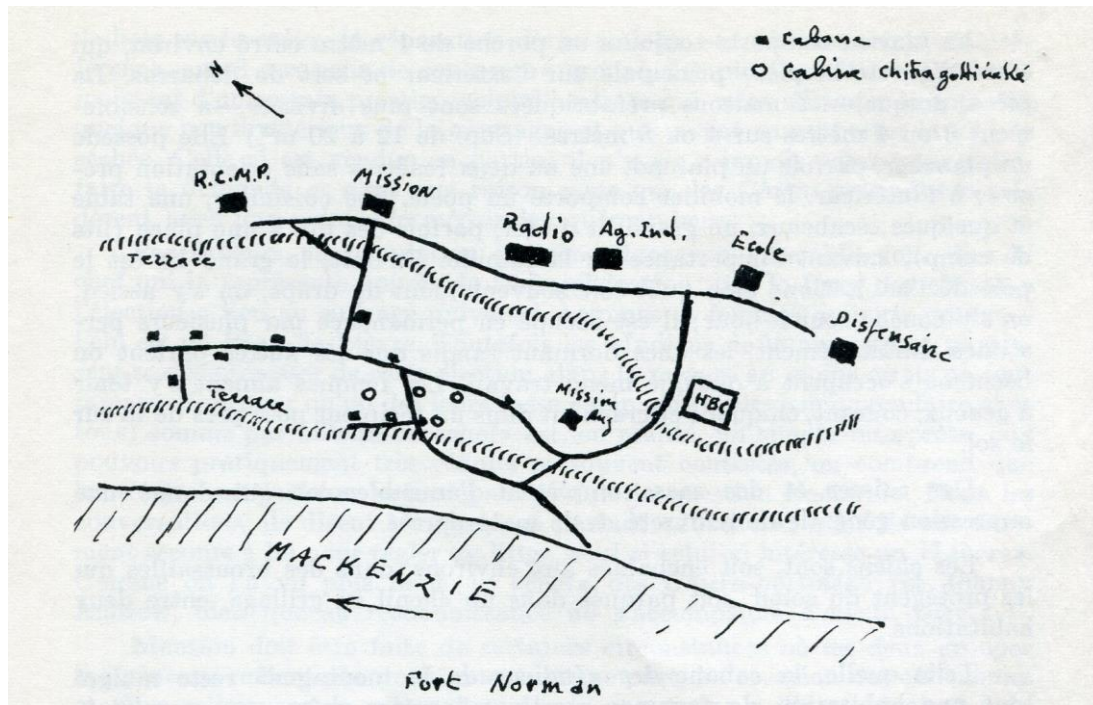
whilst residential structures had to encircle the administrative and commercial centre, located within the geographic core of each settlement (ibid:93). These cores were imagined to comprise offices and shopping centres which were to be placed inside the same buildings (ibid). For Strub however, this meant that “people used to inhabiting large outside spaces” had suddenly to “adapt to spaces reminiscent of cave dwellings” (ibid). Thus, he cogently contends:

“If the old community spirit still exists in the permanent settlements it is no thanks to the built environment. Community must often survive in spite of settlement design.” (ibid).

As responses from SUE, SUE 2, CI and MA quoted previously show, this problematic has remained a central one for the Tulita Dene and Métis as the spatial organisation of the settlement follows the patterns observed by Strub (1996).

In 2016, 73.3% of all the 150 occupied private dwellings in Tulita had been built before 1990 (Statistics Canada, 2016). Among these, 6.7% dated from before 1960 and 23.3% were built between 1961 and 1980 (ibid). None were constructed between 2011 and May 2016 (ibid). From a hand-drawn map of Tulita provided by anthropologist Jean Michéa dating from 1957-1958 (1963:77) (see figure 8 below), I have determined where the historical part of the settlement, those dwellings built in or before 1960, is located. The spatial organisation of the settlement, as it was at the time of Michéa’s stay, has remained the same until now. As already noted, Tulita began as a small trading post, around which an Anglican Church (later a Roman Catholic Mission), a RCMP station, an Indian agent office, a nursing station and a school were subsequently added. According to Michéa, until the late 1950s, each Dene and Métis family accustomed to travel to Tulita to trade, had their own log cabin in the settlement (1963). These were

constructed close to one another, in the southern part of the early town, directly above the Mackenzie/Dehcho river's eastern shoreline.



**Figure 8**

Hand-drawn map of Fort Norman (Michéa, 1963:77)

Figure 8 is a reproduction of a copy of an official work published by Natural Resources Canada, formerly Ministère du Nord Canadien et des Ressources Nationales (part of the Government of Canada). It has not been reproduced here in affiliation with, or with the endorsement of the Government of Canada but for public non-commercial purposes. Copyright/trademark are owned by the Government of Canada.

The settlement's topography is characterised by three levels of elevation. A steep slope separates the river from the first level. It is a relatively flat surface where all the original log cabins were built by the Dene in a north-west alignment from the Anglican Church (following the river's shoreline). These cabins have been replaced by government-funded housing units from the 1960s. These were built at the same locations as the original Dene cabins that they were meant to replace (the historical part of Tulita is

visible in photograph 5 below). They were still occupied at the time of my fieldwork. In 2015, the Anglican Church (photograph 6 below), on the other hand, was long-abandoned but the fact that it was still standing, more than a century after it had been built, gave it a particular semiotic significance. The second level of elevation, lies at 10-15 metres above the first. It is on this second level that the buildings hosting settler institutions (the HBC store, the Roman Catholic Mission/Church, RCMP, indian agent, the school, and nursing station) were located at the time of Michéa's fieldwork.



**Photograph 5**

Tulita's historical residential area, viewed from the Roman Catholic Church,  
December 2014 (source: author)



**Photograph 6**

Tulita's abandoned Anglican Church, December 2014 (source: author)

Even if modernised or re-built, most of these constructions have remained at the same locations as in the late 1950s. The only exceptions are the Indian agent office and the school. Whilst the former has been closed and replaced with a hotel (which also hosts the SRRB's and the Tulita Yamoria self-government secretariat's offices), the latter has been moved to the northern part of the town, a few metres away from the RCMP station. Michéa indicates that, in 1958-1959, houses where the non-Indigenous population lived were located on the second level, whilst all Dene and Métis families occupied dwellings located below (1963:76-77). This is still the case. However, the town has grown in size since the 1960s and there are now also Métis and Dene families living on the second level as well on the upper third level (towards the airport, past the hotel).

Tulita's growth from the 1960s until 2011 has indeed occurred in the form of the construction of additional residential areas, in the direction of the south first (along the winter road), then in the direction of the north (past the Roman Catholic Church), and then towards the east (starting behind the old school, or the current cultural centre) (NWT Archives, 1961-1966; 1981). The most recent of these new residential quarters is located at the northern end of Tulita, a few hundred metres away from Great Bear river/Sahtu dé. This expansion has in effect followed the planning pattern described by Strub (1996).

Regarding Tulita's local administrations, in addition to the hotel built in the early 2000s, the band office, a two-storey high modern building, was constructed in front of the HBC store in the 1990s. The two land corporations -two identical 12 metre-long, 3-4 metre-wide, and 2 metre-high trailers- were added later in the same decade at opposite sides of the settlement's shopping/administrative centre. Whilst the Dene land

corporation was placed near the RCMP station, the Métis land corporation was positioned a dozen metres behind the nursing station. The community's gas station as well as its power plant are located at the southern end of Tulita. Finally, a recreational facility was built at the location of the old school (in 2015, it comprised a swimming pool/ice hockey rink, a gym, and an entertainment hall). Next to this building, a modern structure hosting a cultural centre and a town office was built in 2014 (the town's administrative services were originally hosted at the band office's building). The settlement also comprised a small vocational training and family planning facilities and a small ceremonial ground (which was never used during my stay). The family planning centre appeared to have been in disuse at the time of my fieldwork.

What this organisation subtends is first that, as noted in chapter 5, the deployment of geopower in Tulita began before the actual arrival of government. Settler governmental administrations that convey the presence of the state and of its order, such as the RCMP, the school, the Indian Agent, or the nursing station came after the HBC and the Anglican (photograph 6) and Roman Catholic Church (photograph 7). Yet, the spatial pattern of their physical installation seems to have followed the same logic as the one described by Strub (1996), since all these administrative buildings were placed around the HBC store, overhanging the original Dene and Métis village, and the Mackenzie/Dehcho river. The construction of Tulita's Indigenous local government administrative buildings also followed the same arrangement: a progressive extension of its inner bureaucratic centre in concentric circles starting from the HBC/northern store. The relative *concentration* of these bureaucracies within a 400 to 500 metres radius from the northern store confirms that Tulita's spatial organisation follows the principles described by Strub (1996). In this sense, it is possible to argue that this spatial

clustering is the result of a planning strategy based on a settler grid-based, calculative, cost-efficient logic.



**Photograph 7**

Tulita's Roman Catholic Church with the new school at the back, Tulita, December 2014 (source: author)

Money also intervened in the formation of this spatial dispositif via two critical processes. The first was the credit system created by the HBC to acquire fur harvested by Dene and Métis trappers. Although economic exchanges between the HBC/northern store and these trappers did not always take the form of cash or cash credits as it does today (in the early decades of the fur trade, HBC trading post managers used “Made Beavers”, which included beaver coins), it is nevertheless because of these exchanges that Dene and Métis families were drawn to Tulita<sup>112</sup>. The second process -the development of economic classes- intervened more recently and stemmed from the privatisation of land and dwellings following the implementation of the SDMCLCA. As of 2016, approximately 39% of Tulita’s private households were owned and 61% were rented (Statistics Canada, 2016). Almost 39% needed major repairs and 22.5% were considered not suitable (that is, overcrowded) (ibid). Only 33% of those who owned their property had a mortgage to pay off (ibid). The median monthly costs (which include mortgage payments, property taxes, costs of electricity, heat, water and other municipal services) to keep and maintain these properties for those who owned them was \$830 (ibid). Among those who rented, a staggering 79% lived in subsidised housing (ibid). Thus, again, at one end of the spectrum lies a relatively high number of residents living in ill maintained or overcrowded households. At the other end are those residents who can afford to own and maintain a property. In-between lies a majority of Tulita’s residents who live in rented, subsidised properties. This disparity is visible simply by walking up and down Tulita’s roads. At the northern end of the settlement, on Bear Rock Drive, are two large compounds belonging to Tulita’s most successful entrepreneurial families. In 2015, each comprised several two to three-storey buildings and small trailers where the families as well as individuals working for them were

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<sup>112</sup> Related to this is the development and habituation to money games.

housed and offices were located. At the front of these compounds, I have also observed areas where construction machinery, pick-up trucks, ATVs, and snowmobiles belonging to these families or used as part of their companies' activities, were parked (see photographs 8 and 9 below).



**Photograph 8**



**Photograph 9**

Photographs 8 & 9: Tulita's industrial compounds, viewed from the northern end of Bear Rock Drive, January 2015 (source: author)

I visited one of these compounds, the smallest of the two. At the time of my stay in Tulita, it was composed of an 80-100 squaremetres office building, a 3-storey high warehouse (located on the other side of the settlement), a relatively spacious 100 squaremetres trailer complete with two autonomous spaces (each comprising a kitchen, bathroom and bedroom), and a garage with different kinds of equipment and two heavy duty snowmobiles. They also had two pick-up trucks, and a small crawler dozer. Their main living space was a very spacious, well equipped, 250-300 squaremetres house. One entered from the ground floor, a 30 squaremetres room with a modern flat TV set, a pool table, sofas and an arcade games terminal. A small stairway led to the main section of the house. It had four large bedrooms, each with their private bathrooms, an open-plan kitchen and a living room both located in the same 60-70 squaremetres space. The living room was impressive for the number of advanced technological items present. For example, it had a very large flat screen, a home cinema, a DVD and Blu-ray player, a gaming console, and satellite TV channels. The compound also had access to a high-speed Internet connection. The family that owned this compound told me that they were trying to add a 100 squaremetres greenhouse in an area adjoining the house.

One of the particularities of the northern end area of Tulita is the fact that it concentrates its wealthiest families. Indeed, although less impressive and smaller in size, there are similar, very well equipped, houses in other parts of the newly built quarters of Tulita. However, contrary to the area where the compounds described above are built, there are also older, poorer households in these blocks. For example, on Sesame Street, I was able to visit houses, that although significantly less spacious than those on the northern end of Bear Rock Drive, had interior configurations and amenities that were very similar to that of the entrepreneurial household I have just described. In

parallel however, and on the same street, I have also visited a house where the occupant, who rented it, could not afford the same kind of comfort.

Furthermore, at the bottom of this scale, I have observed that there are households composed of groups of 5+ renting occupants living in badly maintained one- or two-bedroom semi-detached/row houses (according to Statistics Canada, in 2016, 16% of all private households in Tulita had more than one person occupying a room). In one case, the occupying family -a father and his four sons- had, in addition to individual cell phones, an HD TV, satellite channels, one DVD and Blu-ray player, a PS3, and an Xbox. They also explained that they had access to a high-speed Internet connection which they used to buy films online. In the other case, the occupants did not have access to these high-end technologies (except cell phones). In this sense, beyond the differences in access to certain amenities and technologies that render each household's socio-economic configuration unique, one of the common denominators that distinguishes the less wealthy groups from the richest one is an ability to *spatialise* the material conditions of their modes of being.

Furthermore, as the above discussion makes clear, one's ability to access and use money is critical to this process. Yet, it is precisely because of the ability to transform the everyday lived spaces of Tulita's residents that access to money is associated semiotically not only to settler geopower (as noted in relation to my own participation in the circulation of money in the community), but also that it orders the socio-political hierarchy of Tulita's families inside the settlement. Indeed, once outside the municipal boundaries of Tulita, it is not money that enables one to build a log cabin, or even to survive, but the pooling together of resources, knowledges and in this sense, the sharing

of money. In other words, and as already noted in chapter 3's discussion of Lefebvre's societal space (1991), the ability of Tulita's wealthiest economic classes to materialise particular versions of settler spaces is tied to their very identities, to their ability to exist and to perpetuate their power as settler-created groups, within a settler-created environment. For instance, without the environment provided by Tulita's settler urban materialities, these large compounds would only appear as colonial-industrial outposts. With it, and with the system of signs and meanings that subtends it and that it subtends, they become the effective symbols of the political-economic success of a fraction of the Dene and Métis population and thus of settler industrial capitalist modes of production/exchange.

For some among those who do not have the ability to fashion or refashion Tulita's neo-urban materialities (or to materialise their own spaces), the experience of living in the settlement remains one marked affectively by the impression of constraint, of having limited control over one's environment, and in this sense by anxiety. These anxieties were communicated to me by a few of my Dene acquaintances. However, the fact that these were in all cases elders who had grown up on the land meant that they were better able to identify the effects of the transition to settlement life on Dene ways of being and knowing than their younger counterparts. In this sense, even if these voices were a minority, I argue that taking them and what they say about life in Tulita seriously, helps in understanding how the beings of geopower operate and have operated historically in the spatial formation of the hamlet.

As reminded above and as already noted in chapter 3, in the *Production of Space*, Lefebvre observed that for a society to exist, it must be able to produce its own space

(1991). In Tulita, whilst the poorest groups cannot produce their own spaces within the municipal boundaries of the hamlet, they can do so outside of them. It is arguably because of this factor that anxieties manifest themselves in their settlement's lives through what architectural historian Anthony Vidler called feelings of "spatial estrangement" (1992:11). In *Warped Space* (2001), Vidler argues that this notion is at the core of the Hegelo-Marxian critique of the spaces produced through urban processes, viewed not only as alienating for the self, but also as capable of creating a pathological distantiation from one's socio-affective environment:

"Estrangement of the inhabitant of a city too rapidly changing and enlarging to comprehend in traditional terms; the estrangement of classes from each other, of individual from individual, of individual from self, of workers from work [where] the physical fabric of the city [is] identified as the instrument of a systematised and enforced alienation [of] individual isolation from the mechanical, mass-oriented, rapidly moving and crowded metropolis." (ibid:65).

In Tulita, this estrangement is, I contend, the result of the atmosphere of enclosed space created not only by the spatial organisation of the settlement itself, but also by the housing units and by the fact that many of these units do not belong to their occupiers. They have in this sense, limited power to act upon the physical world that surrounds them. Following Vidler (2001; see also Simmel, 1964: 409-424), I argue that it is the difficulty to live among the materialities that order their living spaces in the settlement ("the physical fabric" of Tulita's built environment) that was the source of feelings of estrangement for my acquaintances. Or, as argued by Strub (1996), the physical separation from the land, its light, sounds and sight, created by enclosed buildings, generated alienating conditions for those Tulita Dene who had grown up on the land.

This view was confirmed to me by CI (quoted in full on page 279) for whom housing units built by the government strongly affected Dene ways of being. It was also shared by a retired Oblate priest who was temporarily in Tulita during the Christmas celebrations of December 2014. Having spent several decades in the Sahtu region, he regretted the time when the Dene used to live traditionally. He explained to me that for him the Dene had been oppressed by governmental policies that did not understand them. The problem was that for him, it is impossible for the Dene, who are used to live in wide, open environments, to be suddenly confined to small, enclosed spaces as they are now, not only inside government-built housing units but also by having to live within the boundaries of a tiny settlement like Tulita. Similarly, an elder (in his late 60s) I spent time with associated the experience of living in a modern housing unit to being in an enclosed environment, and to being estranged from the land. He viewed his existence in the settlement as being embedded within the sensory confines of settler urbanity. By opposition, he once referred to a traditional log cabin located on the land (a cabin he shared with a friend), as the only place where he could still feel truly happy and free.

Another elder recounted the time she spent when she was young with her family growing up on the land. In the time that preceded her settlement in Tulita, she recalled that her family lived in tents and log cabins in the (Mackenzie) mountains. Life on the land was difficult, particularly in winter. She told me how her feet would hurt from long hours of time spent walking. She nevertheless remembers that at that time, she felt happy. She was always busy making tea, making fire or skinning rabbits. Most importantly, she remembers that being on the land in this way, always traveling from place to place in an environment that was never really enclosed by walls or windows,

gave her the impression of freedom. By contrast, for her, life in the settlement meant losing this freedom. A third elder viewed his experience of living inside one of the most recent housing units as partly disempowering. The idea of coming back home and being able to push a single button to switch every single amenities and electrical appliances on (lights, heating, water, TV, radio) felt disheartening, as he perceived it as a loss of control over his environment. This man, a respected figure who was in his early 80s in 2015, was one of the few elders in the community whose traditional hand-built log cabin was still standing at the time of my fieldwork. He still regretted his life in it however.

The third example is from another respected figure, an individual probably from the same generation as the one in the previous example. This individual (identified as Harry), with whom I unfortunately did not have the opportunity to spend much time, lived in a small log cabin (photograph 10 below) he built near a small lake located about 40-50 kilometres south of Tulita. Access to the location was by car, via the winter road. Harry could live, if/when he chose to do so, in a very spacious and comfortable home in the settlement. This house which I had the opportunity to visit, was a two-storey high building complete with all the modern amenities described previously (a flat TV screen, DVD and Blu-ray players, computers, access to Internet and so on...). His son, his girlfriend and her children and another relative lived in this house. Yet, he preferred to spend as much time outside of the settlement as possible. His cabin was built only a few metres away from a small lake, where I was told, ducks and geese are usually plenty. At the time of my visit in early December 2014, one could find stores of wood logs piled at the front of the cabin as well as an old snowmobile, probably dating from the 1980s. Harry's cabin was a square shaped 30 squaremetres dwelling built entirely

with wood. It was equipped with a portable diesel fuelled power generator. The cabin also had a satellite TV antenna but no working TV set inside. Heat was provided by fire wood. Thus, Harry's dislike for the settlement came not from the presence of modern amenities per se, but rather from the *concentration*, in a relatively small surface area, of people, machines, amenities and buildings. This impression can be said to have been accrued by the conditions in which some of these housing units were in 2014-2015.



**Photograph 10**

Harry's log cabin, December 2014 (source: author)

The GNWT has provided homeownership grants and homerehtal subsidies in Indigenous communities since 1967 (NWT HC, 2014). By April 1997, it had built 5800 housing units throughout the territories (ibid; examples can be seen in photographs 11, 12 and 13). However, in 2000, of the 13405 occupied dwelling units present in the NWT, 50% needed repairs. Whilst this situation improved in the decade that followed, in Tulita important problems remained and were still present during my stay and well after it. For instance, in 2016, all the members of Tulita's housing board resigned because of widespread dissatisfaction with the way the community's housing association staff took care of maintenance and kept records of their intervention (CBC News, 2016a). From the dozen or so subsidised housing units built by the GNWT that I was able to enter whilst in Tulita, I believe that what primarily characterises the experience of being inside them is their standardised and enclosed character<sup>113</sup>. The manner in which these housing units appeared when looked from the outside also gives some indication about the kinds of spaces and experiences they produce. From the outside looking in, they often seemed lifeless. For example, on Celeste Street (photograph 11), where my first accommodation was located, my neighbours' houses often appeared closed, with their windows and curtains drawn so that only faint lights could be seen at night. Yet, the fact that they stood so close to each other, only a mere 10-15 metres away, gave the impression that one could always be seen. I observed that this pattern repeated throughout the community. This impression of lifelessness was accrued by the fact that the community often felt like it was devoid of human presence. For instance, movements seemed to take place mostly by car or snowmobile, even if

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<sup>113</sup> However, not everybody inhabited these units in the same manner. One acquaintance in particular, who had lost access to running water, telephone and Internet (he told me that he could afford neither but was not bothered by it) used his storeroom to prepare caribou, rabbit and sheep skins for tanning. He was skilled at making traditional clothing items and used his living room to stitch gloves, moccasins and mittens. He also used his unit's entrance hallway to breed dogs.

only to go to the store, only a 15 minutes walk away from Celeste Street. Visits between relatives happened at home, *inside* their respective housing units, never outside.



**Photograph 11**

Aligned series of housing units on Celeste Street, January 2015 (source: author)



**Photograph 12**



**Photograph 13**

Photographs 12 & 13: Examples of housing units, Tulita, November and December 2014 (source: author)

Furthermore, outside their homes, the general pattern of interaction between residents was the same as in urban environments. Non-kin related inhabitants occasionally acknowledged each other at the store, or during cultural or recreational events (poker games, traditional celebrations, gaming contests and so on...), but they rarely did so outside of those spaces where social interactions were bound to happen. For example, residents would usually park their pick-up trucks, ATVs or snowmobiles in front of the store, go in, buy their groceries and then leave, except when a relative required a lift (they would then wait inside their cars, engine on). I noticed that those who did not know someone who could bring them back home often remained there standing idly, sometimes for 30 minutes or more until they could muster the courage to walk. Thus, as noticed by CI, SUE and SUE 2, intra-settlement social interactions between non-family related individuals were limited. Hence, after the store's opening hours, after sunset, Tulita often seemed almost completely empty. In fact, my experiences of wandering along the settlement's streets (at night or during daylight hours) was almost always a solitary one, except for the semi-stray dogs I encountered here and there<sup>114</sup>, and the increasing number of cars and snowmobiles that people the community's soundscapes<sup>115</sup>. As observed by Strub (1996), the settlement's large roads (9 kilometres in total) are designed to facilitate the mobility of big utility vehicles. This renders the auditory and visual presence of modern industrial machinery a ubiquitous feature of the experience of living in Tulita. The limited hours of daylight and the cold temperatures

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<sup>114</sup> It is however possible that this was caused by the relatively extreme cold temperatures (between -25 C and -50 C during my stay) or by the limited hours of daylight (only 2-3 hours in December and January) that are characteristic of the winter months in Tulita. However, my argument is not that residents do not spend time outside per se but rather that the material and spatial organisation of the settlement tends to create an urban-like experience.

<sup>115</sup> The use of motorised vehicles to move around the community is increasingly prevalent. For instance, between 2006 and 2015, the number of traffic crimes per year in the settlement steadily increased from 7 to 26 (NWT Bureau of Statistics, 2016).

that characterise the winter period arguably only aggravate the anxieties created by Tulita's urban-like organisation.

Although the experience of living in one of Tulita's housing units varies, it can be argued that because of their pre-fabricated character and organisational sameness, the spaces produced by them are *a priori* calculated, standardised, urban-like. It is this standardised spatial likeness that creates the condition for a mode of being in the settlement that resembles settler city life and that is as such experienced by some -those who retained the strongest emotional and ontological links with Denendeh- as synonymous with estrangement. This point is cogently put by Simmel in *Metropolis and Mental Life* (1964:422). In his *Sociology*, he writes:

“Social life in the large city [shows] a great preponderance of occasions to *see* rather than to *hear* people [which] brings us to the problems of the emotions of modern life, the lack of orientation in the collective life, the sense of utter lonesomeness, and the feeling that the individual is surrounded on all sides by closed doors.” (1923:486, quoted in Vidler, 2001:68).

In other words, and as cogently put by Vidler in his comment on the above quotation (2001), for Simmel, social relations in urban-like environments are shaped by the ocular-centric spaces produced by the serialisation of the functional infrastructural and architectural forms that are characteristic of the city. Indeed, in the metropolis, individuals interact with each other primarily through the medium of sight (Simmel, 1964; Vidler, 2001). This is because a distance must always be put between one's self and those of others for the purpose of psychical preservation, bodily protection and to remain in pace with the accelerated money-driven rhythms of the city (Vidler, 2001:68; Simmel, 1964). In Tulita, the functional nature of the spaces created by pre-fabricated housing units (but also houses built following settler models), by administrations (recall

SUE 2's perception of the SRRB), and by the store (and relatedly, the community's recreational centre), or the Roman Catholic Church, instigate similar ocular-centred socio-spatial relations in the everyday lives of its Dene and Métis inhabitants. Indeed, residents tend to interact with each other in spaces whose functional role is exclusively to produce or reproduce social interactions, as is the case in bigger agglomerations. Outside these dedicated spaces, in this small community of 500 to 600 individuals, where many have lived together for decades, residents *see* each other but do not necessarily *speak* to each other. Whilst this may seem normal to an outsider who grew up in a mostly urban environment (like myself), it was in fact experienced as an abnormal situation by some among my acquaintances (the elders cited previously, but also MA, SUE, SUE 2 and CI).

The example of Tulita's Roman Catholic Church can help further illuminate the manner in which this phenomenon takes place. This building is located only a dozen metres from the Dene Land Corporation, the community's RCMP station, the northern store and a mere 5 minutes walk from the school. The church is a relatively old structure, built in the 1960s (the first Roman Catholic Church was built in 1870). There has not been a priest staying in Tulita on a permanent basis for several decades. On the other hand, Sister Celeste Goulet, an elderly Oblate nun who has spent most of her life in the settlement, has become one of its constitutive features. The street that borders the church bears her name. The church, named the Church of St Theresa of Avila, is a 15-20 metre high (it has two storeys, plus a 5-10 metre high spire), 50 metre long and 15 metre large rectangular shaped building. The relative monumentality of this structure (the only other building of that size/height being the new school which was constructed long after the church), gives it a unique presence and *visibility* in comparison to other

structures in the community. In this sense, the church not only fashioned, quite literally, Tulita's spatial order but it also imposes on a day-to-day basis, the *sight* of its presence. This monumentality also serves to establish a symbolic *distance* between the Dene and Métis of Tulita and the Roman Catholic Church. Indeed, the quotidian character of this material presence helps solidify the imbrication of the Roman Catholic Church's meanings and symbols in the lives of the Dene. For example, one acquaintance who was a fervent Catholic spent several hours each week cleaning up the church hall because he believed that this was the proper way to be a good Christian, and a good person. Similar patterns of social interactions to those found at the store can also be observed in the manner in which the church is used by the hamlet's residents. Whilst masses-like events are organised on a weekly basis (extracts from the Bible are read as there are no priests to celebrate mass) with 30 to 50 residents regularly in attendance - Christmas mass being the moment when the highest number of inhabitants are present- it is only a minority (3-4 individuals) that actually participates in the social life of the church. I have attended two of these masses during my stay and observed that residents who otherwise know each other, saw each other but again barely, if at all, spoke to each other before or after them.

Thus, each building has particular semiotic and social functions and, in this sense, not only produces particular spaces, but also materialises particular types of inter-subjective interactions between its users. *Concentrated* together in a small surface area -the settlement's municipal lands- these *socio-functional* spaces operate to convey the experience of settler urbanity. They can be divided in five categories. The first is composed of the community's zones of habitation (pre-fabricated and non pre-fabricated housing units, mobile homes, row houses and so on...) distributed across the

settlement, but historically beginning from the south-east, along the eastern shore of the Dehcho/Mackenzie river. The second comprises the community's administration/leisure/shopping buildings which are clustered around the inner centre, starting from the old Anglican Church (at the original location of the first HBC trading station) and the HBC store (photographs 14 and 15). The third social space consists of the settlement's infrastructural facilities (roads, airport, petrol station, power plant, water pumping facility, waste disposal sites and so on...), which are scattered *in* and *around* the hamlet's municipal boundaries, as if to mark its inner and outer geographical shapes. The fourth socio-functional space is constituted by the entrepreneurial compounds located in the north end of Bear Rock Drive. These operate semiotically as *materialised* models of settler capitalist forms of success, either to be followed or resisted. The last cluster comprises the apparently non-functional spaces deriving from non-occupied lands located within or only a few hundred meters beyond Tulita's municipal boundaries. These spaces operate through their sound-, sight-, and lightscapes as a material-semiotic presencing of the beings of supernature *inside* the settlement. They also remind its inhabitants of the peripheral and frontier-like geographical position of Tulita within settler society.



**Photograph 14**

Tulita's socio-functional centre viewed from Blueberry Hill Drive (with the ceremonial area and hotel on the left and the northern store on the right), December 2014 (source: author)



**Photograph 15**

Tulita's socio-functional centre viewed from the hotel (with the band office on the right and the northern store and the old HBC trading station on the left), December

2014 (source: author)

Crucially, in relation to the circulation of money, this socio-spatial clustering adds to already existing economic distinctions (and is to a certain extent aggravated by it). Indeed, it tends to solidify the symbolic separations, within Tulita Dene and Métis society, between those who can move from one socio-functional space to another with ease (the entrepreneurial and bureaucratic classes), those who can access specific spaces but not others (the classes who are either employed by or work for the preceding groups), and those who cannot move between spaces at all (who live mostly from traditional and non-traditional forms of subsidies). Again, once outside the settlement itself, these spaces disappear and some of the individuals who belong to the least mobile classes, become the ones with the most valued capital (for example elders who are not part of the town's bureaucracies and who do not have relatives and families to support them whilst in Tulita). This de facto separation furthers the social distance felt by those who are still attached ontologically to the beings of supernature from the everyday material experiences of living in Tulita. It also creates the spatial conditions for interpersonal forms of estrangement to develop.

### *Summary*

In this section, I have argued that the affective atmosphere created by the settlement's spatial organisation, and by its built environment, is markedly urban. However, at the same time as this urbanity is manifested materially through what can be viewed as forms that are normally part of any town or city in Canada (with its roads, store, church, housing units and so on...), it is experienced as an extra-ordinary state of events by some in the community. The reason for this is not the peripheral character, nor the size of Tulita, but precisely the opposite: the fact that it concentrates morphological features

that are visibly urban in a surface area that is perceived to be substantial enough to occlude Denendeh and its beings from sight and sound. The geopolitical character of this phenomenon does not elude the Tulita Dene and Métis. Indeed, as the quotations from interviews with SUE, SUE 2, and CI or the examples of MA or of the elders described above make clear, life in the settlement is viewed as being significantly more socio-politically alienating, and settler-like, than life outside of it<sup>116</sup>. Thus, insofar as most of what has been built in the settlement also originates from the direct or indirect action of settler governments (the GNWT, or the Federal government), and of other non-Indigenous agents (the HBC, the Roman Catholic) or agential processes (the actions of entrepreneurial industrial-capitalist forces, of money), it is possible to infer that Tulita's built environment, taken in its ontological entirety (the types of beings/sign-values, and associated emotions, affects, behavioural possibles, meanings and so on...), enables the concrete materialisation of settler geopower in the everyday lives of the Tulita Dene and Métis. In other words, the community's pre-fabricated housing units, the store, the Roman Catholic and Anglican Churches, and the settlement's administrative buildings render the presence of settler geopower, in its manifold forms of being, a quotidian one for them. In the case of housing units, these beings include the doors, windows, corridors, bedrooms, bathrooms, open kitchen, walls, and the precognitive/cognitive affects and emotional automatisms they generate and that enable the production/reproduction of settler urban-like modes of being. They also include the *external* forms of these houses, which, when taken together, constitute the subterranean, terranean and extraterranean realities and related behavioural possibles that mimic settler modes of spatiality, particularly in their calculated,

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<sup>116</sup> This can also be clearly inferred from the fact that MA once described a house we were driving by, and where a civil servant from the GNWT lived, as a "white government house".

rationalised forms (i.e. their distribution in space -close to one another; their orientation -placed along the community's roads). In the case of the Roman Catholic Church or the store, it is primarily their material monumentality (the store resembles a very large rectangular shaped warehouse of 500-600 squaremetres, half of which is reserved for stockpiling goods), and importance in the everyday social actions of the Dene and Métis that generates settler-like forms of being. Most important among these are the habits, thought-processes, feelings and ideas associated with the practices that take place in or around these buildings.

However, the result of the operations of these beings is not *systematically* subjectifying. Whilst they convey the sign-values, behavioural possibles, meanings (or ontologies) that pertain to settler life, the material things that people the everyday spaces of Tulita (from manufactured food products, to housing units, to satellite TV, cars and snowmobiles) also become part of practices that are distinctively Dene through a process of dialectical transformation. In the next section, I explore this aspect further.

### **Speculation and dialectics: subverting Tulita's settler materialities through the dynamic of semiosis**

As the preceding discussion makes clear, one of the semiotic conduits of the beings of geopower in Tulita is matter. However, as with money (the selling of firewood harvested on the land), or food (the harvesting of country food being sustained by salaried work), the forms taken by the social practices that link materialities to the production of space in Tulita do not move unidirectionally. In other words, they do not

only facilitate the dissemination of settler (or neo-settler) meanings, values, and ways of knowing. They also enable new modes of thinking and being, some of which empower the Dene and Métis, to emerge. As such, since this movement involves a transcending of the original meanings attached to settler materialities, it is arguably dialectical in nature. I draw this interpretation from Lefebvre's *Dialectical Materialism*, where he explains cogently that:

[Dialectical] Movement is [a] Transcending. Every reality and every thought must be surmounted in a higher determination which contains them as content, as an aspect, antecedent or element, that is as a moment in the Hegelian or dialectical sense of that word."

"Every activity is a co-operation. [One] technique gives birth to another, one technique perfects another, etc... Each object is a content of consciousness, a moment. When the sum of objects is thought of as a whole, products acquire a higher meaning." (1968: 24, 93, 116).

In Tulita, this *dialectical transcending* reveals traces of resistance to, as well as of subversion, or metamorphic appropriation, of the beings of geopower. Crucially, as argued throughout this thesis, since the beings of supernature are involved in this metamorphosis, it also involves speculative thought-processes.

These transcending practices take place first at the level of Tulita's built environment.

For instance, for YDA, subverting the settler spatial order meant:

'Economic diversification... These solutions exist, the technologies exist around the world, we have any number of combination of energy solutions available to us: solar, wind power, tidal, we can throw turbines in the river, we can do geothermal, there's even biomass, biofuel, wood pellets... We can do this in [ways] that don't limit our ability to use the land in ways that are culturally relevant and meaningful... The problem is [we] push away each other. We need to get together, agree on things. The land corporations and the band, they need to come together to share a platform that says: we will do this.'

(Unstructured, recorded interview with YDA, Tulita, 03/03/2015)

YDA's speculative reframing of the community's future is embedded in the dysfunctional character of its present political and economic structure. Yet, there is one example that proves that this coming together is possible. This took the form of a material re-shaping of Tulita's landscape. It is the building of Tulita's new hamlet office and cultural centre. The construction of this somewhat classically-designed building had the support of the entire community (and transcended in this sense the settlement's economic classes). Another example is the fact that the community's school now also offers extra-curricular activities in and on bush-based traditional knowledges and practices. Furthermore, every morning, pupils are encouraged, via loudspeakers, to attend class to be able to work towards the empowerment of the Dene and Métis people of Tulita (this also indicates a transcending of settler temporalities analysed in chapter 5).

In addition to actions that attempt to re-shape the material forms of Tulita's built environment, there are also practices that alter the meaning of settler objects/things. I have referred to Ayah's prophecies throughout this dissertation and argued that beyond their apparently functional religious role, they also serve to subvert settler ontologies for the purpose of re-asserting the political authority of the beings of supernature. In some cases, this subversion also applies to mattered space. For example, the belief evoked in chapter 1, that the construction of an all-weather road will lead to the destruction of Tulita's Dene society, shows that the beings of supernature, here those that bear speculatively on Dene visions of the present, can subvert the anticipatory logic conveyed by settler infrastructural buildings. Indeed, it operates a semiotic reversal

which transforms the fear of industrial development into a kind of faith in community-based cohesion and traditions.

Another example is provided by Tulita's Anglican Church. Constructed around 1860, it is the oldest building currently standing in Tulita. It is a square shaped 5 metres high single storey log structure with a small bell standing at 1-2 metres above the roof. Abandoned in the 1960s, the Anglican Church was in a derelict condition at the time of my fieldwork in 2015 but remained a constitutive feature of Tulita's landscape, so much so that it is now advertised by the GNWT as one of the iconic touristic attractions of the Sahtu region. Yet, for the Dene, the church's bell symbolises the possibility of the end of their world, that is if it falls, and the church crumbles with it. This indicates that despite its settler origin, Tulita's Anglican church now acts like a being of supernature for the Dene since it has a more-than-human impact on their becoming. Indeed, the speculative path that the physical appearance of the Anglican Church opens in the thought processes of the Tulita Dene, allows the settlement to cease to exist exclusively as a settler space.

An additional example of these semiotic forms of subversion is the belief, prevalent among my acquaintances, that window curtains and blinds should be closed at nightfall so as to prevent spirits and other malevolent more-than-human beings from seeing the interior of houses illuminated with artificial light. For others like MA, the ubiquitous presence of artificial lights throughout the settlement is a material indication that a *metaphysical* separation exists between Tulita's urban world (taken as a spatial whole) and Denendeh's non-human beings. Both beliefs nevertheless indicate that it is the ocular-centred reality provided by artificial lights (after all, the principal purpose of

artificial lights is to allow sight to function in the absence of daylight) that is rejected, because of their ability to alter (but not suppress) the agential processes of non-human beings. Implied in the first case, however, is a transcending of the urban morphologies that structure Tulita's landscapes, since through the speculative possibility that they may be able to see, non-human beings are given semiotic instrumentality over these morphologies.

There are, however, more evident traces of rejection of the spatial order imposed in Tulita. For instance, one family never signed the SDMCLCA. The head of this family told me that he saw the agreement and the system of governance that was subsequently implemented as going against the interests of the Dene. He did not trust the people, nor the institutions that now administer the settlement. On an everyday basis, there were also indications that this order still did not accord with Dene modes of being. One example was the manner in which the settlement's utility services were managed. At the time of my stay, water was delivered by truck, twice a week for a set price. Houses were heated with diesel delivered once a week, also by truck. Solid and liquid waste was removed by truck once or twice a week. Different individuals handled each service at different times of the day. They were provided with a list of houses to service and a precise schedule to follow. Yet, deliveries of water and diesel were never made in a consistent, or regular order. I have for example spent several days at a time without water or heating fuel because the individuals in charge of delivering these utilities had simply forgotten to pass by my house (or they had called in sick and no deliveries could be made).

Practical (and transcending) re-appropriations of settler industrial-capitalist *sign-things* also concern tools. For instance, as observed by philosopher Graham Harman, the being of tools/objects/things should be regarded as “potentiality”, “namely potential for alteration, growth or movement” (2002:229). An example of this is provided by the trail making campaign which takes place every year in November (photographs 16 and 17). This exercise, which marked traditionally the beginning of the winter hunting season is now primarily mediated by mechanical power. The following quotation is an excerpt from my field notes which relates this event as I experienced it while accompanying a group of Dene men on the first day of this campaign. It shows the importance of new technologies such as snowmobiles in mediating the life/land relationship.

‘This is how a pathway (primarily for snowmobiles, but it later becomes an “ice bridge” that links the winter road between Tulita and Norman Wells) across the now frozen Mackenzie River is “built”. The process works as follows: first two snowmobiles attempt to break a trail from one shore to the other, across the river. Snowmobiles are heavy and very powerful machines. Doing this successfully requires a high level of mechanical expertise and driving skills and an excellent ability to navigate across the ice so that the snowmobile does not break, fall into the water beneath the ice or tip over. This, in itself, has already taken the entire morning and we are only a third-way through. The snowmobiles are used to flatten the ice and to create a rough trail. Then, three to four men equipped with long axes follow behind. Their role is to remove the remaining pieces of ice that could prevent the snowmobiles from moving at high speed when we come back and for future use. This is a long, physically straining process.’ (Excerpt from my field notes, Tulita, 19/11/2014)

The surface of the river which, on this first day, is made of layers of rough pieces of ice and mixed patches of snow and frozen water, is dangerous, wild and potentially deadly. However, for the men of Tulita responsible for breaking the first trail of the winter season, it is already a pathway in the making. For them, the visualisation of the way the land is to be transformed is mediated by affects that derive from their past experiences

of tools such as snowmobiles, and axes. In this sense, the manner in which these tools were used during this exercise can be viewed as the embodied dialectical result of these men's past practical attempts to create similar trails. The beings of supernature are also never far. During this exercise, 1-2 metre high branches of white spruce are planted in the frozen ground to mark the trail so as to ensure the men's safe return in the case that high winds develop, and the trail is covered in snow. In parallel, I was later told, these branches are also associated with water/river spirits and were thus put there to ensure the safe passage of these men. Then again, from a speculative point of view, the possibility of not being given safe passage was also always present.



**Photograph 16**



**Photograph 17**

Photographs 16 & 17: Breaking the ice to clear a pathway across the Dehcho/Mackenzie river, Tulita, November 2014 (source: author)

Finally, as the example of the window curtains given previously shows, the supernatural/extra-ordinary still bears, even if speculatively, on the lives of the Tuliita Dene and Métis when *inside* the settlement. As argued in chapter 1, animals are the principal medium through which this happens. The following example can help substantiate this point. In November 2014, I was waiting for an acquaintance on the porch of the community's hotel. The sun had already set a couple of hours before. At that moment, a wolverine appeared and began to walk towards me. Across the hotel's porch, on the other side of this area of the settlement, its inner centre, people were getting in and out of the store whilst others were leaving the band office, as a meeting had perhaps just taken place. I nevertheless seemed to be the only one to see this being walking towards me. I found this experience surreal and could not help but think that perhaps this was a spirit animal. For fear that it may bite me, I decided to run inside the hotel, behind me. An environmental scientist who worked for the SRRB and who was also inside at that moment saw me and asked what had happened. When I mentioned the wolverine, he appeared to be stupefied. He had never seen one during the 4 years he had spent working in this part of the Sahtu region. He tried photographing it, but it was already gone. When I later mentioned this extra-ordinary vision (insofar as I was the only one to see it) to one of my Dene acquaintances, it surprised him. It looked like he could not fathom the idea that a wolverine -a wolverine of all animals- could have been walking freely right in the middle of the settlement and without anyone (except me, an outsider) seeing it. Thus, he explained that it could not have possibly been a wolverine -it was probably a fox or something of a similar size-. According to him, wolverines are solitary, fearful animals. They tend to shy away from contact with human beings and do not wander into inhabited areas. He also explained that for the Dene, wolverines are tricksters, they deceive, steal, hide and kill. Thus, for him, the fact

that I had seen a wolverine *inside* the settlement meant the irruption of signs associated with that animal's *personhood* in its social order and therefore the creation of new speculative thought pathways. These speculative pathways could only have unpleasant outcomes, given the wolverine's character. Hence, because of the wolverine's bad reputation and because *I* was the only one to see him, it was best to question the veracity of my story (Could it have been a fox? Could I, a non-Dene, decipher the difference between a fox, a marten and a wolverine?). However, it is precisely this anxiety that confirms the geo-political imbrication of the beings of supernature in the socio-spatial order established by (and in) settler Tulita. Indeed, my acquaintance's affective appreciation of the story of my encounter reveals the potency of these beings in that order and thus their capacity to transcend it, through the semiotic mediation of animist heuristic categories.

Furthermore, what the examples presented in this section also show is that Tulita is not *only* a settler space. Collective and individual practices, meanings and understandings interact to contradict the dominant heuristic categories conveyed by settler materialities and the spaces they produce. In other words, at the same time as the operations of settler geopower in Tulita subtend processes of governmentalisation, they also generate the conditions for these processes to be rejected, subverted, or transcended in new ways. I contend that their emergence follows a dialectical movement insofar as they do not mimic either settler or Dene forms but are rather practical solutions to the semiotic and heuristic problems that arise from their ontological confrontation. In other words, it is precisely because categories of meaning, and the signs that are associated with them, enter in conflict (e.g. the irruption of an other-than-human being *inside* Tulita or the ability of settler buildings, such as the Anglican Church, to *embody* Tulita Dene and

Métis history) within the spaces of being of the Tulita Dene and Métis (or the spaces where Tulita's beings, including the beings of supernature/Denendeh and the beings of geopower, interact) that new practices become necessary. In turn, the enactment of these practices entails the production of new spaces, with their particular sign-beings, and their associated meanings and representations (and their own problems). Crucially, however, the outcome of this animist appropriation of Tulita's spatial present is never certain, nor pre-determined, and remains in this sense tied to a speculative framing of settler futures.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have argued that in the NWT's Indigenous spaces, urbanisation functions as a geopolitical strategy that serves to assert settler sovereignty in the Arctic at the same time as it seeks to subjectify Indigenous lives by making them more and more settler-like. Since the 1950s, and Cold War framings of the Arctic as a space of conflict, this strategy has concretised the Federal Government's high modernist visions of the North and its peoples as resources in need of development (and thus necessitating the intervention of the state). However, the history of the formation of the NWT's Indigenous settlements began long before the enactment of this strategy, with the arrival of HBC traders, Anglican and Roman Catholic missionaries and resource extractors throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. One way of analysing these successive waves of expansion of the urban fabric in the NWT's Indigenous spaces is by viewing them as being part of one cohesive process of *concentration*: of amenities, services, activities, peoples and finally values and ideas.

Furthermore, although this geopolitical strategy of urbanisation was not identified as such by my acquaintances and interviewees, it is at the core of the spatial order subtended by the normative system implemented with the SDMCLCA. In the quotidian life of its residents, Tulita's urban forms also operate at a material-semiotic level to enact this subjectification through the production of grided spaces organised on the basis of economic (cost-efficiency) and technicised necessities (e.g.: the transportation of water or diesel by truck). These spaces create realities that rely on social practices (linked to the circulation of money, or the utilisation of food products, TV channels, DVD sets, housing units, roads and so on...), values (accumulation of goods and objects, or the acquisition of properties), and affects (feelings of estrangement, confinement and similar anxieties) that mimic settler urban life. Whilst some have the means to enjoy and thrive in these realities, others remain consistently excluded from them or from being able to benefit from their existence.

Thus, through the community's urban fabric, geopower materialises settler modes of being and thinking in the everyday spaces of the Dene and Métis. However, in the history of the spatial development of the settlement, the geontologies that are subtended by geopower have also been conveyed by non-state actors and agencies that existed prior to the arrival of government or high modernist materialities (e.g.: housing units, gravel roads, utility trucks and so on...). The HBC (and the money/credit economy that has enabled it to bring the Dene and Métis to adopt capitalist modes of production/consumption) and the Roman Catholic Church (and the system of values, symbols and beliefs that have influenced Dene and Métis worldviews) epitomise this point. Both have had a quasi-infrastructure function in shaping the spatial organisation of Tulita. They also continue to fashion the community's spaces of the everyday both

materially (due to the *monumental* and *central* character of their imbrication in the built environment of the settlement) and socially (they play a polarising role in the social movements of Tulita's residents). Crucially, this enables settler ways of being and thinking to be *practiced* on a quotidian, intimate and personal basis: in one's car when on the way to the store, in one's kitchen when processed food is prepared and consumed, in one's living room when watching hockey games on TV, and more generally when in a confined space, away from the land. Thus, through processes of bodily habituation, physical repetition and affective enjoyment, settler geopower operates at a psychological level by working "on and through the practices and desires" (Li, 2005:383) of the Tulita Dene and Métis.

However, at the same time as this takes place, practices that manifest the rejection, or transformation, of settler geopower also emerge. Given the fact that these practices result from inconsistencies in, and confrontations with, the spatial order established by settler geopower, I contend that their phenomenological development is dialectical in nature. However, the direction of this development reflects the contingencies of life in Tulita. Thus, similar to Dene animist modes of thought, it follows speculative pathways (pathways which are, in this sense, tied to individual experiences and beliefs). In other words, what characterises this development is not that it moves towards a particular *telos* (as in Hegelo-Marxist rational-material dialectics, or Heideggerian *enframing*), but precisely the contrary, that is, it is open-ended (i.e.: visions of the future are potentialities in the making, they are always *changing*), whilst at the same being tied to the contingencies of place. Such spatially-grounded envisionings of the future also enable subversive forms of settler temporalities -forms that metamorphose these temporalities in ways that give power back to Dene heuristic/semiotic categories- to

emerge, as with Ayah's prophecies (or the school's call for students to work towards the emancipation of the community). In this sense, this chapter also confirms the metamorphic effects of the beings of geopower, not only in relation to the modes of being of the Dene and Métis, but also as regards the manner in which they interact with the beings of supernature. It is through this channel that the former are able to alter the latter and vice-versa. In this sense, the beings of geopower create the ontological conditions for metamorphosis.

## CONCLUSION

### **Problematizing the ontological assumptions of geopolitics, revealing the ontologically transformative function of geopower**

This research project speaks to various debates within contemporary geopolitical scholarship. First, it has sought to respond to calls to provide ethnographically informed analyses of the manner in which geopolitical phenomena are experienced in peripheral polities. In doing so and following calls of progressive and subaltern geopoliticians to unsettle dominant ontological assumptions in geopolitics, it has shed further analytical light on the geopolitical implications for marginalised cultures, of the hegemonic domination of Western ontologies over the production and circulation of knowledge. In order to do so, it has problematised the notion of geopower not only in relation to existing research (as the relations of power that naturally and artificially fashion the earth's spatial forms), but also in the context of Dene animist ways of knowing, as an ontological force (following Povinelli's *geontopower*).

Furthermore, because of the spatial tension that is inherent to the functioning of geopower –that is, between the *universalising* tendencies that subtend the deployment over space of Western rationalising technologies of geo-graphing and the *particular* nature of the ways in which these technologies are practiced and experienced locally- I have also sought to delineate the modes of operation of geopower (i.e. how, rather than only why or where, it operates). I have argued that in Tulita's particular context, geopower operates through the continuous production and reproduction, as well as the solidification of categories of meaning, symbols and signs that are conveyed in the

configurations of mattered space that are particular to settler urban environments. In this sense, geopower operates by capillarity as a quasi-ontological force within, above and below the Dene and Métis everyday experiences of being and living in Tulita.

Second, by problematising this ontological link, this thesis has also sought to investigate further the relationships between geopolitical visions and the spatial forms of architectural and infrastructural matter as they are lived through everyday social practices. It has confirmed in particular that a built environment's spatial forms and psychical atmosphere also serve geopolitical strategies of governmentalisation. Furthermore, following urban geopoliticians, it has shown that among the different shapes taken, and systems of spatiality conveyed by, a built environment, urban forms are particularly effective in supporting these strategies. This is because the urban fabric subtends rationalised, scientised, grid-based models of organisation of space and modes of being in space, and thus EuroCanadian/Western geontologies.

Third, at a discursive and normative level, I have also showed that geopower's geocoding rationalities are enacted through the regulatory architecture of the SDMCLCA. In Tulita, industrial and capitalist processes of development, and the particular temporalities that they subtend, cannot be disentangled from this architecture. Anticipatory chronoscapes, characteristic of EuroCanadian wage-based political-economic processes, shape settler representations of Tulita. These, in turn, affect the sociological and spatial order of the settlement. As I have shown, there is indeed a socio-spatial disparity in the community stemming from differences in revenue, in access to jobs, and in one's ability to master the rules of functioning of the wage economy. This disparity has informed the development of economic classes in Tulita

since the beginning of resource extraction activities. It was entrenched in the political-economic system implemented with the SDMCLCA. Because of these political-economic changes, life in the community is now, more than ever, tied to global commodity fluctuations (via jobs provided by, and access/benefits agreements made with, oil/gas or mining corporations) and to the governmental subventions provided by the GNWT (most employment opportunities in Tulita are in local administrations) and the Federal government.

However, traditional land-use practices and sharing networks are also supported by this decolonial capitalist political-economic structure. Revenues obtained by Tulita's Dene and Métis land corporations (or at a regional level, the Sahtu Secretariat Incorporated) through investments made in capitalist ventures across the Sahtu region (hotels, outfitting companies, trophy hunting/fishing guide enterprises and so on...) provide funding for communal traditional hunting/fishing campaigns, as well as for community-based projects which aim to service Dene and Métis residents in Tulita. For example, a small shop, operating between 6 and 11 PM provides residents with snack foods and drinks past the northern store's opening hours. This shop is subventioned by the land corporations. Similarly, the MacKay Range Development Corporation (MRDC), owned by the Tulita (Dene) Land Corporation, provides local workforce services and equipment to companies willing to undertake projects in the Tulita area. However, at the same time as the MRDC helps fund scholarships and summer student employment programs in Tulita, it construes itself as a vector of Canadian Arctic sovereignty through the delivery of "economic programming and infrastructure developments" (MRDC, 2018).

In fact, as showed in chapters 5 and 6, the extension of infrastructural and urban materialities in the North, including those built by the HBC and the missionary actions of the Anglican and Roman Catholic Church, has served the assertion of Canada's sovereignty over its Arctic provinces and over its Indigenous population. In this sense, the fourth contribution of this thesis is to show that geopolitics is not, historically in this part of the NWT, the result of the sole action of the state (it does in this sense precedes the biopolitical administration of Sahtu Dene groups). It is also the *de facto* consequence of the actions of non-governmental agents and agencies, including the HBC and Roman Catholic and Anglican Churches, but also of the more recent construction of residential compounds by Tulita's most successful entrepreneurs, or of the generalisation of the use of motorised vehicles. However, similarly to the community's metamorphosis into a settler industrial and capitalist political-economic environment (in other words, through the generalisation of a capitalist mode of production/consumption), these agents and agencies also create the conditions for forms of resistance to, subversion and transcendence of geopolitics to emerge<sup>117</sup>. These take the forms of practices, material constructions, semiotic alterations of settler symbols, and the application of animist beliefs to settler urban structures, materialities or temporalities that bring control over the production of categories of meaning into the hands of the Dene.

Fifth, the principal innovation of this thesis as regards existing analyses of geopolitics is thus to show *how* it operates as an ontological force in the spaces of the everyday of an

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<sup>117</sup> The intricate relationship between geopolitics and forms of being that indicate resistance, subversion or transcendence is best explained, following Lefebvre, as resulting from the conflicts between identity, one's self, and the ever-changing character of external reality: "If thought is defined by identity, then it is also defined by immobility. Hence a fresh conflict develops between the structure of the understanding and mobility, between the coherence of clear thinking and the different polarities and shifting forces of actual experience" (1968:13).

Indigenous community, that is *beyond* its political-economic (as with Povinelli's geontopower) and normative (as with Rose-Redwood's geo-coding) subjectifying actions. Indeed, it suggests that geopower's ontological operations stem from the fact that it fashions the semiotic space in which beings interact. In doing so, it shapes their very modes of being-in-the-world. This is because, as recapitulated in the above discussion, geopower creates the semiotic and material conditions for settler modes of dwelling/being-in-the-world to become the norm in the lived realities of the Tulita Dene and Métis. This generates an ontological rupture insofar as it separates land-based practices and knowledges from the spaces of everyday life. In this sense, it also forces the Dene and Métis to develop innovative practices in order to resolve the affective and emotional conflicts and contradictions created by geopower. Therefore, also implied in the view that geopower is an ontological force is the fact that it metamorphoses beings. In other words, it transforms the signs attached to them, and in doing so, it alters their ontological nature: as life or nonlife, and as sovereign or bare life.

### **From speculation to dialectics: conceptualising an animist space**

Conceptually, this thesis has followed progressive and subaltern geopolitics' calls to bring Dene representations of geopower to the fore in ways that can contribute to attempts to shift dominant understandings of geopolitics away from their Western metaphysical/ontological grounds (Kearns, 2009; 2013; Sharp J, 2013). I have done this by emphasising how the agency of other-than-/more-than-human beings bears on the Tulita Dene's and Métis's representations of geopower. I have used two conceptual

tropes to do so: speculation and dialectics<sup>118</sup>. What representations of geopower in Tulita imply is indeed first that other-than-human and more-than-human beings have political agency over the lived spaces created by Tulita's settler urban environment. Traces of this agency are subtle and can pass for the simple presence of animal, meteorological, geological or spiritual forms. Yet, it is precisely because this presence *remains* through the gaps of Tulita's built environment, that is where Denendeh encroaches on the settlement's urban fabric (in the forms of particular sounds, sights, or visions), that the beings of supernature are able to influence how the Dene and Métis represent geopower.

I have argued that this occurs because of speculative thought processes. By speculative, I have understood a view of reality which recognises the contingency of things/events as they are experienced individually, that is, that an absolute exists beyond what humans *can know* through their senses or ability to represent (Shaviro, 2014; Harman, 2002; Meillassoux, 2012). In other words, through speculation, it is possible to posit, as Dene animism does, the open-endedness of beings: their forms, their agency, their personhood, their characters, and most importantly, the behavioural, psychical (i.e. the types and nature of the thoughts they create), affective and metaphysical (i.e. the types of reality they generate, from dreams to experiences lived in the physical world) possibilities they afford the individual 'interpreter' (i.e. the person who interprets speculatively the signs generated by these beings). Yet, as with Dene animist thought itself, the scope and extent of the speculative pathways that are opened through semiotic interactions are tied to place. One can indeed never really escape the contingencies of

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<sup>118</sup> And in relation to my own entanglement in the lives of the Tulita Dene and Metis, the concept of the nahani.

space and time (i.e. the epochal and experiential conditions of her/his being-in-the-world, which includes spatial, semiotic and material contexts). Because of this, I have argued that when mediated through Dene animist ontologies, representations of geopower take the form of a *speculative geopolitics*. Indeed, an animist-based speculative geopolitics affords the possibility of giving geopolitical agency to non-human beings through the mediation of signs.

However, speculation is also at the core of settler anticipatory logics. Yet, contrary to the manner in which it operates in Dene animist thought, speculation is here an accessory to profit-oriented scientised and calculative constructions of time, which aim ultimately to establish versions of the future that are rationalised, universal, and in this sense, known, certain and anticipated. Because of this, I have argued that mathematical versions of speculation participate in the structuring of settler temporalities. Statistics-based probabilistic policies of management of populations in the NWT are a case in point. An additional example are political-economic expectations linked to future oil/gas and mining activities. As shown in chapter 5, profit-oriented speculative constructions of time informed my interviewees' (both in Yellowknife and in Tulita) understandings of the relationship between the future of the community and the deployment of resource-linked industrial and infrastructural materialities.

By contrast, in Dene animist ontologies, the intervention of non-human persons begets manifold possibilities, not only in forms (as possible futures, possible actions, emotions, affects, behaviours, meanings, symbols, lifeforms and so on...), but also, relatedly, in terms of what beings are afforded the quality of agency (dreams, physical experiences, or visions). It is precisely because it is never possible to determine the

ontological nature of an entity (one can always be faced with a powerful medicine man or spirit animal without knowing it), that he/she has always to speculate that it is potentially agential, and he/she must therefore act with respect. Thus, in this context, I argued that my use of speculation draws from, but also signals and amplifies, the *metamorphic* nature of beings (i.e.: to be in a continuous state of manifold forms) in Dene animist ontologies. Because of this, I contended that the processes of mediation of the beings of geopower in Tulita are speculative.

However, in the context of Indigenous ways of knowing, such a speculative mediation of everyday encounters with the beings of geopower cannot be disentangled from the contingencies of place. Thus, to arrive at an Indigenised interpretation of geopower (and a truly animist-speculative geopolitics) it is necessary to reconcile the open-ended nature of a speculative envisioning of reality with the place-bound character of Dene animism. In order to do so, I have suggested to use the Lefebvrian notion of material dialectics. I have argued, following Lefebvre, that this material dialectics can in fact be viewed as spatial insofar as the material production of spaces can be correlated to the spatial production of materialities (in other words, to produce matter is to produce space since spatial configurations of forms are nothing other than particular arrangements of matter). What this implies is that geopower is itself a dialectical process. To repeat, geopower is the semiotic-material congealing of the spatial configuration of forms that is particular to settler industrial capitalist ontologies. In other words, it is settler modes of spatiality (or spatial order) materialised. Wherever it is deployed, it is however bound to be resisted, transcended, subverted or transformed in relation to the conceptions, experiences and practices that reproduce and produce it locally. In this sense, my use of the notion of material dialectics, aims to signal that geopower creates conflicts and

contradictions at the same time that it initiates solutions to these problems through new spatial configurations.

In this sense, Dene representations of geopower are not only speculative -because of the semiotic imbrication of non-human beings in these representations- they also move in a dialectical direction, insofar as they are bound to change in accord with the dynamic relation that link spatial-material conflicts (in representations, in signs, or in meanings) to their resolutions. The dichotomy settlement life/bush life described in chapters 5 and 6 exemplifies this point. Many among my acquaintances opposed the effects of geopower, manifested in the affective, ontological, political-economic and socio-spatial disparities that characterise life in the settlement, to the behaviours and values attached to traditional land-based practices. Yet, not only are traditional materialities, practices, and values brought inside this settler space in response to these problems (I do not mean by this a chronological progression, but rather a spatial dynamic), but settler materialities now also help perpetuate subsistence activities and animist values and beliefs. In this sense, a dialectical reading provides an analytical explanation for the resilient and innovative character of Dene traditions confronted with the ubiquitous character of settler materialities and signs. At the same time, it allows the possibility to think geopower, not as an immobile force but as a dynamic interaction -a struggle- between dominant and peripheralised modes of spatiality.

In this sense, from a progressive geopolitical perspective, this dialectical structure opens the possibility of envisioning geopower, as a socially progressive phenomenon – capable of contributing to efforts to create more just spaces-, insofar as its forms are never fixed. In his preface to Lefebvre's *Dialectical Materialism* political scientist

Stefan Kipfer argued that Lefebvre's oeuvre is best understood as an attempt to oppose the urban fabric to an envisioning of a socially just city which would be produced through the artistic coming together of "peripheralised social groups" vying for "social surplus, political power, and spatial centrality" (2009: xxxii).

In a similar way, geopower's deployment in Tulita shows that dialectically, it also creates the *conditions* for a peripheralised social group to access "social surplus, political power, and spatial centrality." (ibid). The political-economic success of Tulita's wealthiest classes, some of whose members are elected representatives of the GNWT's legislative assembly, exemplifies this point. The construction of a cultural centre involving the support of the entire community also illustrates this point.

### **Limits: following a progressive research agenda**

Methodologically, the generalisability of these analyses remains however limited by the inter-subjective, and geographically focused, character of the research approach I have chosen. It is also marked by problems of internal validity insofar as I was able to observe only particular aspects of the Tulita Dene and Métis everyday practices, and access only a limited fraction of the community's population, crucially, a mostly masculine fraction (my interview population in Yellowknife was however more balanced).

Yet, as noted in part II, the purpose of this research is not to develop generalisable inferences about a large population, but rather to provide a description of the manner in which a specific phenomenon is represented by members of a particular population

within specific parameters. For this reason, interviews themselves were open-ended to allow respondents to offer detailed descriptions of their perceptions. In doing so, it aims to provide the empirical grounds for future attempts, attempts that would thus be better informed, to explore the same phenomenon. Second, as regards to issues of internal validity, I have relied on secondary data, either studies published by para-academic organisations, the GNWT or the Federal government, but also journal articles, and academic publications, related to Tulita when available or to the Sahtu region and the NWT more generally when not, to ensure the reliability of the information I collected during fieldwork.

Third, as argued in chapter four, this research does not follow a decolonial framework. Decolonisation refers to variegated experiences of colonisation and is still an ongoing experience (Cameron, 2015). For some, it includes research processes, as well as the ontological and epistemological assumptions that subtend them (see Battiste, 2013; Smith LT, 1999). Following this perspective, it is possible to argue that this research is grounded in settler epistemologies and thus that it *can* further epistemic forms of violence. The validity of this contention is accrued by the fact that I, a male academic educated in the West, am the initiator of this project. The epistemic imbrication of my identity with the positional characteristics of this thesis -being an academic exercise grounded in the networks of power/knowledge of a major Western centre of education- also further substantiates this argument.

In this sense, it appears impossible to argue that this research project furthers a decolonising agenda. However, I contend that it is *progressive* insofar as it pursues the goals of (1) problematising further the ontological assumptions that lie at the core of

dominant geopolitical scholarship's understandings of space (as subtended in the concept of geopower), (2) bringing to the fore strategies of resistance to, and subversion of, these dominant ontological assumptions as devised by members of an Indigenous community, (3) in doing so, suggesting ways to conceptualise space differently and (4) analysing the subjectifying operations of settler geopower as deployed in an Indigenous setting, in order to identify strategies that can confront and *unsettle* its *totalising* effects. By *unsettle* the *totalising* effects of geopower, I follow Kearns and have understood strategies that transcend the ubiquity of capitalist modes of production/consumption and industrial-infrastructure materialities, in other words beings that are conveyed via settler modes of spatiality (2009; 2013). Underlying these objectives is a belief that Dene ontologies, insofar as they still represent "a majestic source of non-capitalist reasoning" (Kearns, 2013:926), that is beyond the combined effects of past and present high modernist, industrialist and capitalist structures and processes, have the potential to help counter their worst aspects not only in the Sahtu region, but also in places that are faced with similar challenges. By worst aspects, I have taken a Lefebvrian *socially progressive* perspective and understood alienating forms of architecture and infrastructure, that is modes of organisation of space that create feelings of estrangement from oneself and from others.

### **Openings: towards a speculative geopolitics**

One of the crucial implications of this thesis' conclusions is that *to urbanise is to make space, geopolitical*. This is because the city can create and ensure the perpetuation of structural forms of physical and/or symbolic violence as urban geopoliticians have demonstrated. Second, it is also because the governmentalising processes that subtend

its material development (i.e.: geopower), as in the Canadian North, mean that *to urbanise space is to make it state-like*, sovereign (or alive in a geontological sense), and thus governable, controllable and inter alia, geopolitical. In other words, there can be no geopolitical spaces, without the existence of city-like environments since there can be no control over populations without a system of coordinates that allows for their geographical positioning, fixing and identification. This system of coordinates is almost exclusively based on the model of urban spaces, built prior to the addition of a grid.

For instance, as the example of Tulita shows, prior to the establishment of roads, housing units, or waterworks, the Canadian state was able to *distill* its symbolic authority in the everyday lives of the Dene and Métis simply by existing in the form of urban materialities (which include as argued previously, industrial/resource development infrastructures). In this sense, the arrival of state-built materialities in the late 1950s cannot be viewed as a temporal rupture. It was part of a geopolitical continuity in settler attempts to defeat Indigenous nomadism so as to assert the logic of settler sovereignty over Arctic spaces and their peoples. It is indeed because the Tulita Dene and Métis migrated by will or by force to the settlement that they could then be managed/identified by governments and that policies that aimed to transform them into settler-like beings could be imagined, implemented and most importantly, have an effect on them.

Third, in as much as urbanisation is a planetary process (Brenner, 2014), it is possible to add to Povinelli's argument regarding the increasing importance of settler geontopower in modern neoliberal configurations of governance (2016) by arguing that the types of high modernist urban-like spaces subtended by geopower have also become

hegemonic. In other words, whilst I have argued that they are different phenomena, the former (geontopower, an ontological force tied to settler neoliberal forms of governance which separates life from nonlife) cannot be disentangled from the latter (geopower, an ontological force which materialises settler modes of being in space, including in particular those tied to industrial infrastructures, transportation/utility grids, and capitalist modes of production/consumption). Indeed, geontopower establishes what counts as life and nonlife (and following Agamben, as sovereign life and bare life), whilst geopower separates living/sovereign (or governmentalised) spaces from nonliving/bare spaces. The consequence of this entanglement is that no other spaces, including spaces of wilderness or nonlife, can exist independently of the rationalised city and its commodified spaces. This has clear environmental consequences, in particular the impossibility of thinking ecological finitude/resource scarcity outside of the ontological framework imposed by urban life. At the limit, this implies that without a profound reevaluation of the role of urbanisation -including of its architectural and infrastructural forms- in perpetuating settler-like modes of being, the wealth of utopian geo-political ideas that can be brought to the fore because of ontological differences (between peoples) through ontological openings (to other beings, including other-than-human and more-than-human beings) risks disappearing. Since thinking *beyond* the urban is an almost impossible task, the problematic raised by this observation is to rethink the urban to allow for the geopolitical agency of nonhuman beings inside the city.

Thus, beyond the discursive, affective, semiotic and symbolic mediums of geopolitical phenomena (as revealed by critical geopoliticians), and the more orthodox environment-based approaches developed by classical geopoliticians, there is a third

problematic identified by this research: it is the geopolitical relationships that link the (historical and ongoing) expansion of urban-like spaces to the domination of Western/EuroCanadian ontologies. Put simply, urban-like environments do not merely order the manner in which populations behave, they also create the ontological conditions for them to normalise the conditions of this ordering. Indeed, even if attempts to resist these processes exist, they tend to remain grounded in ontologies that are characteristic of the urban world.

For example, in Tulita, the comfort provided by the settlement's grid networks is now so ubiquitous that electricity and satellite TV remain some of the essential features of log cabins built away from it. Similarly, motorised transportation is now such a critical element of everyday life in the community that it has become essential to traditional activities such as subsistence hunting or ice-breaking exercises. However, this is not to say that these attempts did not provide solutions that have helped reclaim or even transform Tulita's urban fabric for emancipating purposes. Indeed, as I have shown, what is important in the Tulita Dene and Métis practices that seek to appropriate the settlement's spaces and materialities is the meanings and beliefs they attach to them. Put simply, a structure whose form is similar to those of settler urban buildings can also mean political empowerment and enjoyment. This is the case if the signs associated with it are those of a coming together of a group of individuals, celebration of cultural values and pride. In Tulita, the use of snowmobiles on the frozen Mackenzie/Dehcho river, but also the new cultural centre, and to a certain extent, the new school, incarnated these values. I have, for instance, participated in a training session on how to build traditional drums with several Dene acquaintances on an evening in the newly-built cultural centre. The event gathered an impressive number of old and young volunteers,

happily willing to teach or to learn how to make this critical symbol of Dene animist values and beliefs. This reclaiming of meaning and signs also enables other-than-human and more-than-human beings to influence the manner in which settler-shaped spaces are experienced and represented. The belief in Ayah's prophecies, prevalent in Tulita, exemplify this relationship. It shows that through semiotic re-appropriations, the political importance of Dene heritage values of respect and reciprocity endure in, and in effect define, the way the future of modern, settler urban life is envisioned. In this sense, the beings of supernature continue to have geopolitical agency in the lives of the Tulita Dene and Métis since they bear on the manner in which a settler space, Tulita, is mediated politically in the socio-symbolic structures of everyday life in the community.

I have thus suggested that one way of drawing from Dene animist ontologies in order to *create* geopolitical agency for nonhuman beings in the face of the ubiquitous presence of geopower is by giving them speculative power. I have suggested that this process be called *speculative geopolitics* insofar as it aims to inscribe a possibilistic and place-contingent interpretation of the spatial imbrication of non-human beings in the political lives of human communities<sup>119</sup>. Through the action of signs, a speculative geopolitics would inscribe the operation of affects, emotions, animals, meteorological, geological or climatic beings (but the possibilities are infinite) at the heart of the production of social spaces. Such an approach would indeed allow for Indigenous ethics of care and respect for all beings (material and non-material), and the belief in an agential-relational ontology that associates these beings together, to be put at the core of analytical processes regarding the geopolitical imbrication of matter, space and

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<sup>119</sup> Other attempts to give agency to other-than/more-than-human beings in geopolitics have recently been taken up by Western scholars (see Conway, 2015; Dalby, 2015; Shaw, 2015; 2016; Last, 2015).

peoples (for to respect non-human beings is first and foremost to posit their capacity to reciprocate benevolent as well as malevolent actions). Furthermore, and most importantly, as with Kohn's semiotic anthropology, a speculative lens enables a geopolitics *beyond the human* insofar as it proceeds from Indigenous vision-based metaphysics by allowing the play of individual imagination and experiences in the categorisation, description and interpretation of the actions of non-human beings<sup>120</sup>. However, as with Dene modes of knowing, a speculative geopolitics would only make analytical sense if grounded in the contingencies of place. One can indeed only speak for a river if she/he has experienced it. Crucially, in the spaces of the city, a speculative geopolitics can potentially allow for the agential reintroduction of non-human beings in architectural/infrastructural design and spatial planning decisions. What would a city that is thought *through* the semiotic reactions of animals look like? The theoretical and conceptual grounds for a speculative geopolitics still need to be invented. I propose that this be the direction of future studies that investigate the interaction of Indigenous ontologies with geopower and geopolitics.

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<sup>120</sup> Clark's "speculative volcanology" provides an example of such an approach, albeit only in the field of geology (Clark et al., 2017b).

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