BEYOND CONTENTIOUS COLLECTIVE ACTION:

Assessing Quiet Forms of Environmental Mobilization in Rural British Columbia

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Technological disasters are catalysts for contentious collective action as affected residents seek more stringent environmental regulations and accountability from responsible organizational and institutional actors (Picou, Marshall, and Gill 2004; Tierney 2019). Technological disasters such as dam failures, oil spills, and nuclear accidents are catastrophic events attributed to human error that tend to create chronic uncertainty about economic impacts, health effects, and environmental risks (Gill, Picou, and Ritchie 2012). The 2014 Mount Polley tailings dam failure is the largest technological disaster in British Columbia's history, and it prompted a vibrant social movement led by the Secwépemc Women's Warrior Society (SWWS). The SWWS established a forty-day checkpoint at the entrance of the mine site and organized annual protests at shareholder meetings of Mount Polley's parent company (Chewinski 2022, 14). Grassroots groups and non-governmental organizations also responded by organizing protests, private prosecutions, and letter-writing campaigns (Mining Injustice Solidarity Network 2015; Mining Watch Canada 2016; Amnesty International 2017). However, rural residents in settler communities located at the epicentre of the disaster – surrounding Quesnel Lake – did not engage in contentious collective action despite theoretical expectations to the contrary. In this research I consider the following question: How do rural residents in the direct vicinity of the mine mobilize in response to mounting environmental risks over time? I use rural residents to reference the largely older and white participants I interviewed in the settler communities surrounding Quesnel Lake (Big Lake, Horsefly, Likely, Mitchell Bay, and Winkley Creek). The composition of this sample is a product of settler colonial policies of land dispossession that forced the Secwépemc people from their traditional

territory onto small reserves (Ignace and Ignace 2017) located outside the study area.

Scholars have noted that research on mobilization in response to disasters and environmental risks tends to focus on contentious collective action – that is, oppositional and noninstitutionalized forms of mobilization such as protests (Jerolmack and Walker 2018; Cousins 2023; McAdam and Boudet 2012). By only counting protest, direct action, and other contentious collective actions as evidence of mobilization, researchers run the risk of categorizing quiet forms of mobilization as nonmobilization. Quiet mobilization refers to conventional forms of civic engagement such as participation in town hall meetings, public consultations, or the formation of interest groups that emerge in response to new environmentally risky industries (Jerolmack and Walker 2018). Jerolmack and Walker (2018) developed the concept in the context of white rural Appalachia, and I adapt it to the settler colonial context of predominantly white rural communities in British Columbia's interior. To consider quiet mobilization as nonmobilization may gloss over the individual and collective actions that typify political participation in rural, working-class, conservative, and/or settler communities (Jerolmack and Walker 2018; Kojola 2020). I draw on forty-two interviews with predominantly white rural residents and 208 newspaper articles to show how quiet mobilization occurs in the context of existing and mounting environmental risks and includes previously unrecognized tactics rooted in struggles over problem definition. Additionally, my five-year assessment of quiet mobilization reveals how shared understandings of mounting environmental risks unite largely white rural residents and facilitates the adoption of more collective actions.

The first period (2014–15) is associated with the fallout from the Mount Polley tailings dam failure. During this period, rural residents engaged in individual forms of quiet mobilization, expressing their support or opposition to the mine and the government's approach to disaster recovery through participation in public consultations, writing emails and letters, and publishing opposite the editorial (or op-ed) articles. The second critical environmental period (2016–19) centres on the company's long-term water management plan (amendments to Permit 11678), which would result in the daily discharge of mine wastewater into Quesnel Lake. Beginning in late 2016, rural residents united in opposition to the proposed contamination of Quesnel Lake, expanding the tactical repertoire associated with quiet mobilization following the Mount Polley disaster. A blend of individual and collective tactics emerged to

challenge status quo company practices and government permits. Residents who were economically independent of the mine and/or still politically engaged with disaster response continued writing op-eds, expressing a more critical and unified stance towards both the mining company and the provincial government. Moreover, this group of residents adopted more collective actions, mobilizing for a community vote against Permit 11678 and forming a grassroots interest group that launched collective letter-writing initiatives, public awareness campaigns, and institutional forms of advocacy like environmental permit appeals. While protest did not arise from communities located at the disaster's epicentre, a comprehensive five-year analysis reveals that quiet mobilization constitutes a significant aspect of political participation by the predominantly older and white rural residents living in the Quesnel Lake area.

I begin by reviewing scholarship on disasters, environmental risks, and social movement mobilization. Next, I describe the two critical environmental periods informing this study and the data, methods, and analysis strategy used to answer my research question. I then turn to the results, where I explain the tactics associated with quiet mobilization emerging in the aftermath of the disaster and document their evolution over time as environmental risks are amplified. In the final section, I review key findings, contributions to the literature and limitations, and I propose future research avenues.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Disasters can be catalysts for collective action (Picou, Marshall, and Gill 2004; Stallings and Quarantelli 1985). A typical vehicle for community collective action is the emergent group. After disaster strikes, emergent groups form to either respond to immediate community needs or to organize in pursuit of collective goals (Stallings and Quarantelli 1985; Tierney 2014). Emergent groups range from ephemeral search and rescue teams, for example, to sustained interest groups pressuring government action to address new environmental risks. The focus on emergent groups in the latter category has produced a diverse body of scholarship documenting the relationship between disasters, environmental risks, and political action (Bergstrand and Mayer 2017; Kroll-Smith and Couch 1990; Aldrich 2012; Cable and Degutis 1991; Luft 2012; Korzeniewicz and Casullo 2009).

Evidence from numerous cases, including the 1979 Three Mile Island (TMI) nuclear accident (Walsh 1981), the decades-long disposal of toxic

waste into Yellow Creek in Kentucky (Cable and Degutis 1991), and the 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill (Bergstrand and Mayer 2017) indicate that technological disasters often spur contentious collective action. Both the 1979 TMI accident and the dumping of toxic waste in Yellow Creek resulted in the formation of interest groups (the Anti-Nuclear Group Representing York and the Yellow Creek Concerned Citizens, respectively) by communities located at the site of the disaster. Interest groups in each case mobilized supporters to carry out pickets, marches, and/or protests as a means of airing their grievances (Walsh 1981; Cable and Degutis 1991). However, not all political action following a disaster is contentious. Research on mobilization responding to the 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill shows that only 15 percent of 351 survey respondents attended a protest or rally and only 17 percent joined a community group (Bergstrand and Mayer 2017). This suggests that contentious collective action may not be the primary channel of political participation in which affected residents may engage.

Disaster scholarship on emergent groups, such as interest groups, typically selects on the dependent variable by focusing on successful cases of collective action. This bias is also found in environmental justice and social movement scholarship concerned with explaining the emergence of not in my backyard (NIMBY) mobilizations against locally unwanted land uses (Bullard 2000; McAdam and Boudet 2012; Bell 2016). There are theoretical and methodological reasons explaining this academic bias. Theoretically, social movement mobilization is often conceptualized as sustained efforts to promote social change through noninstitutionalized tactics such as protest, direct action, and rallies (McAdam and Boudet 2012; Jerolmack and Walker 2018). Methodologically, scholars have relied on noninstitutionalized tactics such as protest as either the unit of analysis for social movement activity or as the core criteria to distinguish a mobilized community from a nonmobilized one (Wright and Boudet 2012; McAdam and Boudet 2012; Jerolmack and Walker 2018). As a result of these theoretical and methodological choices, tactics that are individual or institutional are rarely counted as evidence of mobilization. The problem with this convention is that contentious collective action may be "so wildly atypical of mobilization attempts" that our understanding of political action is compromised by focusing solely on noninstitutionalized tactics such as protest, direct action, and rallies (McAdam and Boudet 2012, 23).

There is growing concern that a focus on contentious, oppositional, and noninstitutionalized tactics unnecessarily narrows the scope of what

counts as mobilization (Jerolmack and Walker 2018; Eaton and Kinchy 2016; Kojola 2020; Cousins 2023). Jerolmack and Walker (2018) have introduced the concept of quiet mobilization to capture the style of political participation that may better reflect the practices of people living in small, rural, and/or conservative communities. Quiet mobilization refers to individual and collective practices that are political in nature and are either in support of or against new economic, political, or cultural initiatives. Practices and tactics include conventional forms of civic engagement such as attendance and participation in public consultations, conversations with neighbours, and the formation of interest groups. A key characteristic of quiet mobilization is a disavowal of contentious collective action and tactics that may be associated with the liberal left and contrary to rural values of civility and neighbourliness. I adapt the concept of quiet mobilization to trace the political participation of predominantly white rural residents in a settler colonial context.

Quiet mobilization is similar to the politics of small things, which includes everyday social interactions that influence problem definition and the capacity to act (Goldfarb 2006). Drawing on a key example from American politics, Goldfarb shows how the politics of small things was critical to garnering support for Howard Dean's candidacy for the Democratic presidential nomination in 2004. Dean supporters met in person to write supportive letters to caucus participants in Iowa and New Mexico and wrote hundreds of blog posts across different websites to debate Dean's suitability as a nominee (Goldfarb 2006). Letter-writing campaigns and blog posts exemplify struggles over meaning-making that are a key component of political and quiet forms of mobilization. In the context of environmental risks, meaning-making tactics were evident in individual and collective responses to the 2009 air pollution scandal in Madrid, Spain. Calvillo (2018) traces how individuals wrote blog posts that critiqued government decisions to change the location of air quality monitoring stations and highlighted how residents transformed public spaces with signs spreading awareness about air pollution that encouraged passersby to demand government action.

Closer to home, letters to the editor, or op-eds, have been used as a means of debating environmental risks should British Columbia lift its moratorium on offshore oil and gas development (Young 2004). Between 1998 and 2001, 42 percent of all content related to the moratorium in the *Vancouver Sun*, the *Province*, and the *Victoria Times-Colonist* were op-eds or letters (Young 2004). Such "quiet" or "small" tactics – letter-writing, blogs, and public signs – reveal a politics that is local and based

in the dynamics of issue and problem formation (Tironi 2018). Quiet mobilization tactics, like writing op-eds, are particularly important for persuading both the public and elites (Hart 2018). For example, experimental research has found a strong and positive relationship between exposure to an op-ed and changes in policy attitudes among both elites and the general public (Coppock, Ekins, and Kirby 2018). Changes in policy attitudes, such as a shared perception of environmental risk, may also work to motivate future public responses (Shtob 2019). To interpret quiet mobilization, or the politics of small things, as nonmobilization may be "a fundamental misreading of the situation" that ignores the routine but political meaning-making tactics employed by everyday people (Jerolmack and Walker 2018, 510).

Current research drawing on quiet mobilization has predominantly examined support for new environmental risks, known as a please-in-my-backyard (PIMBY) response to resource development (Jerolmack and Walker 2018; Kojola 2020). In the Iron Range region of Minnesota, rural, white, and working-class residents quietly mobilized support for the development of copper mines in the area. Kojola (2020, 690) finds that rural residents attended and participated in public hearings to express their support for resource development, drawing on the importance of industry to their rural livelihoods and living "the good life." Quiet mobilization is not only found in communities supportive of industry. Work pre-dating the concept has shown that quiet mobilization in opposition to oil and gas development in Saskatchewan and Pennsylvania occurred through individual actions in the absence of an oppositional protest movement (Eaton and Kinchy 2016). In both places some community residents would individually call the police about a variety of issues associated with extraction or share photographs of rural road damage caused by company trucks for local news stories. Whether supportive or oppositional, quiet mobilization provides a new lens through which to assess environmental politics. This study extends research on quiet mobilization by applying the concept to existing and mounting environmental risks in a settler colonial context; by proposing that tactics associated with problem definition (e.g., op-eds) may typify quiet mobilization; and by adopting a longitudinal view to reveal how tactics evolve as predominantly white rural residents are unified in their understanding of environmental risks.

RESEARCH CONTEXT

The Mount Polley Mine is operated by the Mount Polley Mining Corporation (MPMC), a subsidiary of Imperial Metals. It is a copper and gold mine that has been active in the Cariboo region of British Columbia since 13 June 1997. The Mount Polley Mine sits on the perimeter of Quesnel Lake and is adjacent to the town of Likely, which also includes a small enclave of homes (in Mitchell Bay and Winkley Creek) scattered around the lake. The community of Likely includes approximately 350 residents with an economy that revolves around mining, logging, and eco-tourism. During peak periods of production, the mine processed 21,000 tonnes of ore per day (Hoffman 2015). Waste produced through the extraction process – tailings – includes trace clay particles, sandy silt, and water that is stored in a tailings dam encompassing three hundred hectares of land (Hoffman 2015). The first critical environmental period (2014–15) informing this study includes the catastrophic failure of the Mount Polley tailings dam and its aftermath.

In the early hours of 4 August 2014, tailings approximating the volume of ten thousand Olympic swimming pools made their way into three bodies of water: Polley Lake, followed by Hazeltine Creek, before finally polluting Quesnel Lake. Consequently, a variety of toxic substances and other contaminants were released into the environment, including 259,050 kilograms of arsenic, 134,235 kilograms of lead and 20,724 tonnes of copper (Canada 2015). Scientific data from 2014 to 2019 indicates the periodic resuspension of tailings from the bottom of Quesnel Lake. The periodic resuspension of tailings often produces an abnormally bright-green water colour in Quesnel Lake, higher levels of turbidity (a measure of the cloudiness of water), and the seasonal mobilization of contaminants such as copper in the water column (Hamilton et al. 2020) the second largest ever documented, sent about 18 cubic millimetres of waste plunging to the bottom of the less than 100 metres deep West Basin of Quesnel Lake, a critical West Coast salmon habitat. To understand the impact of the spill on the lake, including the fate of suspended solids, we examine changes in physical water properties over eleven years (2006–2017).

The second critical environmental period (2016–19) involves the time before and following the approval of an amendment to Permit 11678 on 7 April 2017 (BC Ministry of Environment 2017). Permit 11678

outlines the mine's management of tailings and wastewater.[1] The 2017 permit amendment concerns MPMC's long-term water management plan (LTWMP), which allowed the mine to continue the practices associated with the 2015 short-term water management plan: using a seven-kilometre pipeline to discharge its wastewater directly into Quesnel Lake. The permit amendment authorized the mine to discharge an annual average of 29,000 cubic metres per day of wastewater into the lake. The effluent includes contaminants such as arsenic, copper, and ammonia, with water quality guidelines only met at the edge of a one-hundred-metre initial dilution zone (IDZ). The plan effectively relies on Quesnel Lake to dilute wastewater contaminants.

Across both critical environmental periods, Quesnel Lake residents were provided with opportunities to engage in environmental politics. One popular avenue for participation in environmental politics included attending public consultations either at open house meetings or through membership in a public liaison committee (PLC) convened by the mine. Between 2014 and 2019 over sixty public consultations were organized by the MPMC, most frequently occurring in rural communities at the epicentre of the disaster (e.g., Likely). Both consultations and PLC meetings included members of the public, various government ministries (e.g., Ministry of Environment personnel), and company representatives. Public consultations and PLC meetings in the first critical environmental period offered residents an opportunity to learn about, and provide input on, disaster response and recovery. Public participation processes during the second critical environmental period expanded the scope of concerns to also incorporate public input on the mine's LTWMP. Social movement scholars suggest that "public participation processes – instead of dampening conflict – may create political opportunities" that incite a sustained social movement (Boudet, Gaustad, and Tran 2018, 251). Despite the presence of political opportunities, the public consultation process did not spur contentious mobilization among Quesnel Lake residents.

[1] Pre-disaster, and in accordance with the original Permit 11678, mine wastewater and tailings were stored in either a tailings dam or open pits. The post-disaster period included two amendments to the permit: one in 2015 for a short-term water management plan and the second in 2017 for the long-term water management plan. Both allowed for the discharge of wastewater into Quesnel Lake.

METHODS, DATA, AND ANALYSIS

In this study, I use forty-two semi-structured interviews and 208 newspaper articles to make sense of community responses to mounting environmental risks over time. Combined, these data provide a textured account of how Quesnel Lake area residents mobilized in the face of mounting environmental risks. A focus on communities located in the direct vicinity of environmental risks is common in research on environmental justice and environmental hazards (Messer, Shriver, and Adams 2015). I collected interviews for this study between June and October 2019 as part of a larger project on public participation in environmental consultations in the Quesnel Lake area. I recruited participants via email (identified through news articles, meeting minutes, and web searches) and snowball sampling (asking participants to share study details with their networks). Interview questions were related to people's motivations and experiences of political participation in the five-year period following the 2014 Mount Polley disaster. I asked questions related to the public consultation process, people's risk perceptions, and about community conversations and meetings that took place as people made sense of the dam failure and the plan to discharge wastewater into Quesnel Lake. Interviews were an hour and forty-eight minutes on average and were conducted in people's homes or in public spaces. A vast majority of participants (79 percent) live in rural communities surrounding Quesnel Lake, including Big Lake, Horsefly, Likely, Mitchell Bay, and Winkley Creek. The average participant was sixty-five years of age and had lived in their community for twenty-nine years. Forty-one participants identified as white and one as Indigenous. The lack of Indigenous representation in this sample is a result of settler colonial policies that removed Secwépemc people from British Columbia's interior and confined them to reserves that account for 1 percent of their traditional territory (Ignace and Ignace 2017). About a third of participants had earned a university degree, and the sample is diverse both in terms of gender and political ideology.

To enrich interviews and triangulate my findings, I collected 208 articles from a local newspaper (the *Williams Lake Tribune*). I collected newspaper data in a two-step process. First, I searched for all articles published between 4 August 2014 and 5 August 2019 containing "Mount Polley" (N = 333). I reduced the sample to 172 articles by only including those that: (1) quoted residents living in the Quesnel Lake area; (2) described consultations or community meetings related to the mine; (3) were op-eds or letters to the editor; (4) mentioned larger community events in the Quesnel Lake area; and (5) referenced political mobili-

zations related to the mine. After noticing that some op-eds or letters to the editor were not included in my initial search results, I searched "Mount Polley and Opinion" and "Mount Polley and Letters" on the *Williams Lake Tribune* website. Consequently, an additional 36 articles were added for a final sample of 208 articles.

I imported interview transcripts into NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software, for a two-step flexible coding process (Deterding and Waters 2021). The first step includes indexing transcripts – coding large sections of text associated with each interview question. An example of an index code includes "resident concerns." The second step includes applying thematic codes to the index codes. Drawing on the same example, an analytic code includes "resident concerns – water quality." Deterding and Waters (2021) argue that this flexible coding process generates more reliable and valid codes. I also developed inductive codes when new themes emerged. The analytic and inductive codes derived from the interview transcripts were then applied to newspaper articles. I supplemented the coding of op-eds and letters to the editor with codes related to the overall stance of the article towards both the mine and the government. An article was coded supportive if the overall tone was favourable towards the mine or government. In these articles, authors commended the government or mine for its response to the disaster or efforts to protect the environment. Neutral articles did not take a position on the mine or government and often simply presented information. Critical articles took an explicitly oppositional stance on the mine or government by expressing concerns about contamination, disaster response, and environmental protection. As such, they should not be interpreted as against mining generally but, rather, as critical of how the disaster was subsequently managed.

RESULTS: QUIET MOBILIZATION AFTER DISASTER STRIKES (AUGUST 2014–DECEMBER 2015)

Quiet mobilization refers to forms of politics that include everyday conversations between neighbours, family, and friends; the formation of interest groups; and conventional forms of civic engagement such as participation in public consultations and community meetings. Quiet mobilization emerged as a concept to describe how white rural communities support or oppose the development of new environmentally risky industries (Jerolmack and Walker 2018). The research presented here is some of the first to apply the concept to existing resource extraction

activities that face mounting environmental risks. I draw on insights from Goldfarb's work on the politics of small things to show that contests over problem definition through email, letter-writing, and op-eds capture political practices that may typify quiet mobilization (Goldfarb 2006). A long-term assessment also reveals a shared understanding of the problems associated with risky practices that facilitate the development of more collective tactics.

In the first sixteen months following the Mount Polley disaster, study participants engaged in quiet mobilization by attending public consultations, writing letters and emails, and writing op-eds in regional newspapers. All participants in this study attended public consultations to shape decisions related to disaster response and recovery. This is not surprising given that participation in public consultations is a common form of quiet mobilization. What is surprising is the popularity of the written word as a tactic for expressing individual grievances, threat appraisals, and for shaping narratives about environmental protection. Over half of the research participants wrote letters or emails to politicians, government staff, and MPMC representatives. All but one was related to concerns about the environment and/or critical of the disaster response. Mitchell Bay resident Kim Goforth explained:

> Right from the start I was heavily engaged in communication, writing letters to different government officials, like the Ministry of Environment. I would copy the mine as well, so they knew full well what my feelings are ... I was trying to improve a relationship. Like, you're our corporate neighbour, you know? You're not treating us very well. You're not listening to us.

Kim quietly mobilized in opposition to the mine and the government's approach to disaster response and recovery because he, along with most participants, did not believe resident input was being meaningfully considered. His letters were particularly critical of clean-up efforts related to the tailings that encrusted Hazeltine Creek. Likely resident Robert said that he went on a "letter-writing flurry" in the first year of the disaster, especially in response to provincial authorization for a restricted restart of mining operations. Robert thought that the decision was rushed, prioritizing economic over environmental concerns:

> I didn't think they were ready to reopen that mine yet; it was such a huge rush how they got that approval. So, I had sent lots of letters to the government, and realizing that we're pipsqueaks, most were ignored. [Premier of British Columbia] Christy Clark did not respond

> to my letter. Coralee Oakes, MLA [for Cariboo North], did not respond to my letter. Those who did were somewhere down the chain of command, but it was just lip service, just basically following the Liberal party line. And that was distressing; that all these other values besides money and industry are of no value to the government.

Robert went on to say that he did not think that the decision to restart the mine was based on a balance between economic development and environmental protection. Although most letters and emails written by participants quietly mobilized concern about the environment and/or criticism of disaster response, op-eds written between 2014 and 2015 indicate a greater diversity of views.

Table 1 below shows the distribution of op-eds by author identity and the stance of each article towards the mine.[2] Overall, most op-eds are supportive. However, articles written by Quesnel Lake area residents point to a polarization of opinion, quietly mobilizing both support for and criticism of the mine. This suggests that residents were competing over the cultural construction of reality related to disaster response and recovery.

TABLE 1
Op-ed Authors' Stance Towards the Mount Polley Mine (2014-15)

	Mine Stance			Number of Op-eds (4 Aug 2014–31 Dec 2015)
	Supportive	Neutral	Critical	
Quesnel Lake Area Resident	2	1	3	6
Indigenous Resident	0	1	0	1
Cariboo Region Resident	9	2	4	15
British Columbia Resident	1	0	0	1
Government Representative	5	1	0	6
Contributing Columnist	4	9	1	14
Williams Lake Tribune Staff	1	3	0	4
Total	22	17	8	47

For example, on 30 October 2014, Likely resident Catherine Wright explicitly criticized the mine's clean-up efforts:

[2] All tables in this research follow the same colour scheme. Dark grey cells indicate the highest value for each row. Light grey cells indicate a 1- to 2-point difference from the highest value (excluding 0) in a specific row. In other words, rows with both dark and light grey values indicate greater heterogeneity and less homogeneity in op-ed author stance.

> I listen to the words, but I look at the end result, and what I see is that no clean-up has happened in the Hazeltine Creek Valley where the deep layers of sludge are, and the only evidence of any kind of clean-up is a series of little piles of sticks along the lakeshore.

A week and a half later, Likely resident and Mount Polley employee Bonnie Rolston wrote an op-ed indirectly responding to and challenging the "self-made conclusions … that no one is doing anything." Lamenting the community corrosion evident in Likely in response to the disaster ("I see families that used to be great friends fighting on Facebook"), Bonnie mobilized support for the mine by highlighting "the endless hours that Imperial Metals put in to clean up this incident." She also counters fears about environmental impacts by pointing to scientific experts who have demonstrated that "the water is safe to drink [and] that the fish are doing well." As these examples illustrate, residents had conflicting interpretations of disaster response and recovery and used op-eds to advance their differing claims. Residents with ties to the mine were supportive, while those economically independent of the mine tended to be critical.

Table 2 below shows the distribution of op-eds by author identity and the stance of each article towards the government. A different pattern emerges, indicating less support for the government, with a large share of articles either critical of or neutral towards the government's response to the disaster. Focusing again on Quesnel Lake area residents, we see that half were neutral while a third were critical of the government.

TABLE 2
Op-ed Authors' Stance Towards the Government (2014-15)

	Government Stance			Number of Op-eds (4 Aug 2014–31 Dec 2015)
	Supportive	Neutral	Critical	
Quesnel Lake Area Resident	1	3	2	6
Indigenous Resident	0	1	0	1
Cariboo Region Resident	1	8	6	15
British Columbia Resident	0	1	0	1
Government Representative	5	1	0	6
Contributing Columnist	1	5	8	14
Williams Lake Tribune Staff	0	1	3	4
TOTAL	8	20	19	47

One supportive article written by Horsefly resident Bruce MacLeod expressed appreciation of the Ministry of Environment "for taking the time and trouble to come to our community and keep us posted on their progress to date." Critical articles, including one written by Likely resident Doug Watt, expressed disappointment in the Ministry of Environment because weekly reports "ha[d] been exceedingly short on hard data, facts, and interpretation."

In the aftermath of disaster, rural residents in settler communities quietly mobilized their support for, *and* criticism of, institutional responses to the tailings dam failure. All participants attended public consultations, and over half combined this with emails and letters to the government and mine. Some residents used op-eds to shape public opinion about disaster response and recovery by either reinforcing criticisms (if they were economically independent of the mine) or expressing support (if they worked for the Mount Polley Mine). Common to all three forms of quiet mobilization (attending public consultations, writing letters and emails, and writing op-eds) is the focus on individual actions. However, the discharge of mine wastewater into Quesnel Lake sparked a blended form of quiet mobilization that includes both individual and collective action.

QUIET MOBILIZATION IN THE FACE OF MOUNTING ENVIRONMENTAL RISKS (JANUARY 2016–AUGUST 2019)

The second critical environmental period began in 2016 in anticipation of government approval of an amendment to Permit 11678 (the long-term water management plan), which allowed the mine to continue discharging wastewater, or effluent, into Quesnel Lake. As mentioned earlier in this article, the amendment permits an annual average of 29,000 cubic metres per day of wastewater to be released into the lake, essentially relying on the lake to dilute the contaminants. This practice is widely opposed by Quesnel Lake area residents, with several participants describing it as adding "insult to injury." Quesnel Lake area residents responded to these new environmental risks by blending individual and collective forms of action that characterize quiet mobilization.

As with the first period, the second critical environmental period included individual forms of quiet mobilization such as writing emails and letters as well as op-eds in the *Williams Lake Tribune*. Considering op-eds specifically, Tables 3 and 4 show that most articles written in this period converged towards criticism of both the mine and the government. Unlike those in the first period, all ten of the Quesnel Lake area op-ed

authors in the second period were economically independent of the mine, continued attending public consultations or PLC meetings, and/or were one of the founders of the interest group Concerned Citizens of Quesnel Lake. Of the ten articles written by Quesnel Lake area residents, all were critical of the mine, with seven also being critical of the government. Quesnel Lake area residents writing op-eds were thus more likely to be critical and to be active in environmental politics related to the disaster. Likely resident Richard Holmes and Xatśūll First Nation

TABLE 3

Op-ed Authors' Stance Towards the Mount Polley Mine (2016-19)

	Mine Stance			Number of Op-eds (1 Jan2016 – 5 Aug 2019)
	Supportive	Neutral	Critical	
Quesnel Lake Area Resident	0	0	10	10
Indigenous Resident	0	2	1	3
Cariboo Region Resident	3	1	7	11
Mine Representative	2	0	0	2
Contributing Columnist	4	0	0	4
TOTAL	9	3	18	30*

*One article includes co-authors (1 local resident and 1 Indigenous resident). It counts towards each category.

TABLE 4

Op-ed Authors' Stance Towards the Government (2016-19)

	Government Stance			Number of Op-eds (1 Jan 2016 – 5 Aug 2019
	Supportive	Neutral	Critical	
Quesnel Lake Area Resident	0	3	7	10
Indigenous Resident	0	0	3	3
Cariboo Region Resident	1	3	7	11
Mine Representative	0	2	0	2
Contributing Columnist	0	1	3	4
TOTAL	1	9	20	30*

*One article includes co-authors (1 local resident and 1 Indigenous resident). It counts towards each category.

member Jacinda Mack criticized both the mine ("It continues to use an under-performing water treatment plant that discharges mine effluent to Quesnel Lake") and the government ("BC has not fined nor [has it] penalized the company for this disaster. Instead, it granted hydro tax breaks") in a co-authored op-ed on the eve of the second anniversary of the disaster. The remaining articles criticize and challenge the approval of the discharge plans as well as company claims that the original tailings deposited into Quesnel Lake are not resuspending.

Residents critical of the mine and government decided to diversify their approach to claims-making. Following the approval of the short-term water management plan, Mitchell Bay neighbours Kim Goforth and Christine McLean, along with friend Judith Pringle, put together an email distribution list that formed the interest group Concerned Citizens of Quesnel Lake (CCQL). The group's work blends individual and collective action with a focus on mobilizing information, public awareness campaigns, and institutional advocacy. When I asked Kim why he co-founded the group, he explained:

> Because I didn't want to be the only one writing letters. I didn't want the government to think that I am the only one. So, I would inform all my neighbours, all over Winkley Creek, and here [in Mitchell Bay], let's get them all, we need power, *we need people power*, you know? And I'd ask them to write letters. And that I can help them do it. So, that's why I just got more people. I started talking with them, I said, "You know, I can't just be a lone complainer. *We've all got to do this; we've got to write some letters. Otherwise, we're going to have little or no impact.*" (emphasis added)

Kim, Christine, and Judith quietly mobilized Quesnel Lake area residents to either sign letters written by the CCQL or write their own letters using templates supplied by the group. One specific example includes a letter-writing and public awareness campaign (Figure 1) that was launched as the Mount Polley Mine was conducting consultations about its long-term water management plan. The billboard in Figure 1 was located on a busy highway (Highway 97) leading into the city of Williams Lake. As Christine explained:

> During the thirty-day consultation period we wanted to get as many people writing to the government as possible. And I was like, "How are we going to get these people motivated or mobilized? Here's the letter, you know how everybody does it, here's the letter, just send it to your government official and tell them no." And I don't know,

Figure 1. Billboard Sponsored by CCQL. *Source*: Save Quesnel Lake by Concerned Citizens of Quesnel Lake, https://www.ccql.ca/single-post/2017/01/16/media-coverage-of-mining-watch-legal-action.

> one day we were driving into Williams Lake, and I thought, "Let's get a billboard. How much money does that cost?" Judith and I got on the phone and Pattison said, "Well, I'll give you a billboard for a month for $1,200." I emailed everybody in the group, I said, "We need $1,200." We got $1,200 and we put up a billboard that said, "Save Quesnel Lake," and we got 250 letters sent in opposition to that.

In addition to letter-writing and public awareness campaigns, core organizers Christine and Judith collated and shared information about mine activities with group members, attended public consultation and Public Liaison Committee meetings, wrote petitions, and launched an appeal of the 2017 amendment to Permit 11678. Most of these tactics are forms of institutional advocacy. Emails between Ministry of Environment and CCQL members show how the group used collectively written letters to advance its grievances through institutional channels. On 18 January 2017, core CCQL organizers submitted a group letter outlining concerns about water quality reporting frequencies and public access to discharge data. A staff member of the Ministry responded on 23 January 2017, noting that their concerns: "will be considered in the

pending amendment to Permit 11678" (Chewinski 2022, 131–32). More significantly, core organizers of the group launched an appeal of the 2017 amendment to Permit 11678. As part of the appeal, the CCQL would like to end the practice of discharging wastewater into Quesnel Lake in favour of exploring other strategies that follow best available technology. It is still being reviewed by British Columbia's Environmental Appeal Board.

Other forms of collective, institutional, and quiet forms of mobilization have been organized by Likely residents. Residents pressured the Likely Chamber of Commerce to hold a vote to determine the community's position towards the second permit amendment at the same time that the CCQL launched its letter-writing campaign and billboard. Knowing that the vote would be taking place, Likely resident Skeed Burkowski, owner of a fly-fishing lodge, explained:

> I arranged a coup. I emailed as many people as I could. We all joined the Chamber, went to the meeting, and we opposed. That's what it was. We opposed rather than endorsed Mount Polley. But yeah, people that had cabins on the lake from Horsefly, they joined the Chamber. We just joined, we signed up.

The Chamber of Commerce vote took place on 6 December 2016, asking members to state whether the mine should be allowed to continue discharging effluent into Quesnel Lake. A vast majority – 80 percent – of members voted no (Lamb-Yorski 2016). Present at the meeting were some members of the CCQL, who read out a letter endorsed by the group:

> In terms of benefit to risk, the receiving environmental water users are being asked to absorb all the risk while Mount Polley Mine Corporation and their shareholders and the province of BC will reap the benefits (Lamb-Yorski 2016).

The mounting environmental risks posed by Mount Polley's wastewater practices may not have spurred protest, but it expanded the tactical repertoire associated with quiet mobilization. In this wave of mobilization, residents blended the individual actions associated with disaster response to include more decidedly collective, oppositional, and institutional forms of advocacy.

CONCLUSION

The 2014 Mount Polley tailings dam failure is the largest mining disaster in Canadian history. The disaster polluted Quesnel Lake, a near-pristine body of water, critical salmon habitat, and main water source for rural communities scattered along the lake. The disaster sparked a vibrant Indigenous-led social movement that resulted in direct actions and annual protests at shareholder meetings (Chewinski 2022). However, no contentious collective action emerged among the predominantly white rural residents in settler communities located at the epicentre of the disaster, despite widespread grievances and high levels of threat appraisals. This is surprising given theoretical expectations that culpability tends to result in the emergence of collective action in the aftermath of technological disasters (Edelstein 2004; Cable and Degutis 1991; Picou, Marshall, and Gill 2004). How do rural residents in the direct vicinity of the mine respond to environmental risks over time? I find that rural Quesnel Lake area residents engage in quiet mobilization rooted in civic practices (e.g., public consultations and letter-writing) concerned with the cultural and contested construction of environmental problems and their solutions. I document how new environmental risks produce a shared understanding of environmental problems, which reinforces individual actions but also facilitates the emergence of collective tactics.

Echoing the work of Jerolmack and Walker (2018), this research cautions against interpretations of the absence of *contentious* collective action as a sign of nonmobilization. I suggest that this is a misreading of the situation, arguing that rural residents in settler communities engage in quiet mobilization that mirrors more conventional forms of civic participation. Although quiet mobilization has been explicitly applied to populations at risk of new resource development (Jerolmack and Walker 2018; Kojola 2020), I show the utility of this concept for understanding mobilization in settler communities facing mounting environmental risks over time. I highlight how environmental risks posed by the 2014 Mount Polley disaster incited community conversations about culpability and threat as well as widespread public participation in consultations – two key forms of quiet mobilization. Everyday conversations and social interactions are important for defining social reality and participating in the politics of small things (Goldfarb 2006). Drawing on Goldfarb's insights, I highlight the importance of the written word as a political practice concerned with contesting or reinforcing existing definitions of a problem. I expand the tactical repertoire associated with quiet mobilization in settler communities by showing how writing op-eds

(or emails and letters to government and industry officials) are routine actions that may typify the political practices of predominantly white rural residents.

Over half of study participants wrote letters and e-mails to corporate and government actors expressing their grievances, and a smaller number wrote op-eds in local newspapers. The latter tactic (writing op-eds) links quiet mobilization to the cultural construction of reality as the meaning of environmental risk and protection are debated. Consequently, Quesnel Lake area residents and those in the greater Cariboo Region either mobilized their support for, or criticism of, government and company responses to the disaster. Second, mounting environmental risks posed by the company's long-term wastewater plan beginning in 2016 facilitated greater levels of quiet mobilization as Quesnel Lake area residents united in opposition to the decision and blended individual and collective actions to express their grievances.

Many Quesnel Lake area residents continued attending public consultations and writing letters and emails, and some continued publishing op-eds. While the first critical environmental period featured a mix of support for and criticism of government and company practices, there was widespread opposition to the approval of an amendment to Permit 11678 that allowed the mine to discharge wastewater into Quesnel Lake over the long term. This was evident in the stance of op-eds as well as in the quiet forms of collective and institutional action that emerged. Residents along Quesnel Lake mobilized in opposition to the wastewater management strategy, which culminated in an overwhelming majority of Likely Chamber of Commerce members voting against the practice. As this was happening, the Concerned Citizens of Quesnel Lake emerged to coordinate public awareness campaigns and collective letter-writing efforts as well as to introduce institutional forms of advocacy, including an appeal of 2017 amendments to Permit 11678. The disaster and subsequent environmental risks may not have spurred local collective action predicated on noninstitutionalized tactics, but it did result in the proliferation of a diverse range of tactics associated with quiet mobilization.

It is important to consider the generalizability of the results of this study. It is difficult to assess whether the findings are unique to this research or whether they may speak to broader processes evident in community responses to disaster and other forms of environmental risk. This research is also limited in its ability to assess the efficacy of quiet mobilization. However, it breaks with methodological conventions in disaster research that select on the dependent variable and focus extensively on contentious tactics. In doing this, I extend research on quiet

mobilization by examining how different forms of political participation emerge in the face of mounting environmental risks in settler communities over time. Analytic attention to other forms of politics across multiple years – public engagement with Members of Parliament via emails and letters or in debating environmental risks via news media – enriches our understanding of the landscape of political participation on the part of predominantly white rural British Columbians. Future research might consider the effects of quiet mobilization on policy processes, community relationships, and attitudes towards resource development. It might also consider how other rural and/or Indigenous communities affected by technological disasters or environmental contamination engage in quiet mobilization and how this changes, and under what conditions, over the long term.

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