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The Movement of Staple Commodities

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Interviewer: Kendra Besanger

Darin Barney is Canada Research Chair in Technology & Citizenship, and Associate Professor of Communication Studies at McGill University. He is the author of *Communication Technology: The Canadian Democratic Audit* (UBC Press: 2005); *The Network Society* (Polity Press: 2004); and *Prometheus Wired: The Hope for Democracy in the Age of Network Technology* (UBC/Chicago 2000). His work concerns the relationship between technology and political judgment and action, with a specific focus on the politics of resource infrastructure in Canada, including current projects on the transformation of grain-handling technology in the Canadian prairies and the politics of petroleum and gas pipelines in the Pacific Northwest.

When did you first become involved with mobilities research?

I became involved in mobilities studies research three years ago, when I started a project on grain handling technologies in the Canadian prairies and became interested, more generally, in the question of how the way that commodities move from the point of their production to the point of their consumption affects political organization and social life more generally.

How do you use mobilities in your research?

My current research is primarily focused on how the movement of staple commodities is organized, particularly in Canada, and the way that the movement of those commodities becomes a site for transformative political action. I have two projects going. One is on the politics of the movement of grain off the Canadian prairies, looking at recent transformations of this system and the effects this has had on political organization and

political culture in the prairies. My second project is on the movement of petro-chemicals in the Canadian west and in the Canadian north, and the way that pipeline technologies have become a flashpoint for political action and organization. I am particularly interested in energy infrastructure as a site for potential political disruptions as part organized movements for more radical forms of political change.

Has there been a mobilities turn?

I do believe there has been a mobilities turn in social research. Ever since John Urry published his foundational material in this area, researchers have been paying new attention to the ways in which mobility and mobility issues touch on a whole variety of concerns in the social sciences and humanities. It's produced a wave of very productive work in which the question of mobility and mobilities is at the centre. I think that we are in the kind of enthusiastic moment of mobilities research, where people are seeing mobilities questions everywhere and in everything. There's a kind of mobilities imperialism happening, where everything is being rearticulated and rethought in terms of mobilities. I think we are still in a very productive moment and the questions that are emerging from people who are thinking through the paradigm of mobilities are still, I think, some of the most exciting questions in contemporary social science research.