

#Pipeline Politics

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Thinking about energy pasts and futures, and specifically around pipeline politics, I want to quickly mention an indigenous history of the Mackenzie Valley Pipeline¹ from the 1970s and the current struggle around the future twinning of the Kinder Morgan pipeline—two different historical moments that also work, as LeMenager discusses in her piece, at different scales.¹ In his 2014 book *Red Skin White Masks, Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition*, Indigenous scholar Glen Coulthard (who teaches at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver) examines what he calls the “place-based cultural foundation undergirding the Dene Nation’s critique of capitalist imperialism as expressed at the public hearings of the Mackenzie Valley Pipeline Inquiry between 1975 and 1977” (53). This pipeline, constructed to transport natural gas from Prudhomme Bay, Alaska, to the lower 48 states, was only built after extensive consultations with Northern residents—native and non-native. Coulthard is from the Dene nation of Canada’s Northwest Territories (a nation in which I also have relatives) and he argues that it was the very negotiation of land claim settlements in this period that witnessed “numerous attempts by the state to coercively integrate our land and communities into the fold of capitalist modernity,” a process of, Coulthard’s reading of Frantz Fanon suggests, “primitive accumulation [that] has been at least in part facilitated by the very mechanism of recognition that we hoped might shield our land and communities from it: the negotiation of a land settlement” (53).

Now, I would say that Coulthard’s reading of this history deserves, with all its political urgency, what Gayatri Spivak calls the respect of a rigorous critique, and in the spirit of the Marxist Literary Group (sponsors of the MLA session on which this paper is based) I think it might be worth thinking about, or teasing out, distinctions between primitive accumulation (from volume 1 of *Capital*), David Harvey’s accumulation by dispossession (theorized in the *Socialist Register* in 2004), and Silvia Federici’s emphasis, in *Caliban and the Witch*, also from 2004, on the gendered nature of both historical accumulation and its present day variants.² I make these remarks only to note that Coulthard himself does mention Marx, Harvey, and Federici, but only in the most cursory fashion (I may be doing what Brent Ryan Bellamy will call for in terms of a symptomatic reading of indigenous activism and critique; too, the

¹ See LeMenager “Infrastructure Again, and Always” in this issue.

² See Harvey, Federici, and Marx.

relation of primitive and dispossession accumulations at the same historical juncture may be an example of what Jeff Diamanti will describe in terms of the relation of energy to capital).³

The second moment, then, concerns a struggle this past fall (of 2014) at my home university, Simon Fraser University (SFU), in and around its campus on Burnaby Mountain, ten miles east of here, where Texas-based Kinder Morgan proposed to drill a tunnel through the mountain, with the goal of tripling its shipping of bitumen to the port of Vancouver and foreign markets. When KM started surveying in the fall, protestors began acts of civil disobedience, and two SFU professors, Lynn Quarmby (chair of the Molecular Biology and Biochemistry department) and Steve Collis (poet, and my colleague in the English department) were served with multi-million dollar lawsuits for their roles in slowing down KM's work. (This convergence of the sciences and the humanities challenges, I think, Dominic Boyer and Imre Szeman's call for an *Energy Humanities* [*University Affairs*, Feb. 2014] that will somehow recuperate our sunset industry. I prefer Jordan Kinder's comment in another MLA panel on bitumen that "it is easier to imagine the death of the humanities than it is the end of the reign of Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper"). Interviews and other texts that Quarmby and Collis had written were entered into evidence at the civil trial in November 2014, including a blog entry by Collis, the final paragraph of which ran as follows:

As barricades were assembled from garbage dumped down a hillside from the parking lot in Burnaby Mountain Park, an old, rusted oil barrel was uncovered and rolled up the hill. It's a talisman, a symbol of the old world we are trying to resist and change. It is, we hope, the last oil barrel that will have anything to do with this mountain forest. (Collis 2014)

Now, there was a bit of a comedy of errors as the protest went on, devolving in some ways into celebrity arrests (people going to the protest specifically to be arrested—the kind of thing LeManager may mean when she talks about what we worry about privately as critics and activists), and KM's injunction being thrown out of court when it turned out they had used the wrong GPS coordinates. Both sides claimed victory and I will leave it to history to determine that. But as a nod to the "literary" side of the MLG, I will make a quick genre or digital humanities comment, that while Collis' text was quite simply, as I said, a blog entry (Collis 2014), it was entered into evidence as a poem by KM's lawyer (so this resonates both with what Adam Dickinson discusses in his piece in terms of eco-poetics (or the eco-digital), but also Bellamy's

³ See Bellamy "Energy and Literary Studies" and Diamanti "Three Theses on Energy and Capital" in this issue.

notions of genre.⁴

The saga—or struggle—of Kinder Morgan/Burnaby Mountain may also resonate with other lessons delivered at the MLA 2015 convention, including a session on Althusser, where the argument was made (not least by my SFU English colleague Carolyn Lesjak) that the capitalist mode of production ultimately (in the last instance) is a matter of *economic exploitation* not repression or violence. That is to say (and with respect to Collis’ anarchist politics, police complicity is not the (anarchist or Foucauldean) point: police repression is the means to an economic end. This argument may be confirmed or indeed negated, I think, by more recent political developments in the petro-state that is Canada. In early 2015, the Conservative government of Stephen Harper introduced an anti-terrorism bill that many human rights specialists saw as a threat to free expression. At the same time, a leaked document from the national police force, the RCMP, showed how “violent environmental extremists” are a perceived terrorist threat to the country’s oil and gas industry.

But this classic moment of police *interpellation* suggests the need for a critical, as well as activist, solidarity with the analysis (and politics) brought to bear by Coulthard: that is, an alliance between settler and indigenous activism *and* theory. Coulthard’s treatise on the recent history of First Nations politics in Canada argues forcefully, via Fanon, that a politics of recognition, a politics based on liberal, state-based accommodation, only pathologizes resentment as resistance, a resistance that is thoroughly tied to place-based identity. That is to say, a politics of the land. For a nation inextricably tied to resource extraction and exploitation as is Canada, such land-based politics will only be a hindrance.

Two back-channel instances of critique followed this session that are worth marking. During the discussion comparisons were made between “Energy Humanities” and “digital humanities”, and I remarked that unlike DH’s anti-theory success with institutional support, EH would likely take a more counter-hegemonic stance – needless to say, this argument met with resistance. Curiously, the same critic also suggested I, or the panel, listen more to indigenous voices, a suggestion with which I can only agree.

Works Cited

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⁴ See Dickinson “Energy Humanities and Metabolic Poetics” in this issue.

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