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# Cracks, Gaps, and Oil Spills in the Settler-Colonial Symbolic Order: Confronting Socio-Ecological Antagonism in Canada

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**F**OSSIL CAPITALISM, and its settler-colonial symbolic order<sup>1</sup> in Canada, traffics not just in bitumen and liquefied natural gas but also in fantasies and disavowal that—for some of us—inhibit our ability to (imagine how to) infrastructure our wellbeing in less inequitable and environmentally degrading ways. Assessing the politics of extractivism in Canada, this paper provides an overview of some of the Lacanian and Žižekian-inspired concepts that have been used to analyze settler colonialism, (fossil) capitalism, and environmental conflict and offers new points of interaction. The overall argument is that Lacanian psychoanalysis, especially when combined with Marxist (critique of) political economy, offers tools for analyzing the ideological terrain of extractivism and orienting toward an

<sup>1</sup> I use this phrase to emphasize how the flow of fossil capital in Canada relies upon a network of material, affective, and legal infrastructures that have developed part and parcel with the history and persistence of Canada as a settler-colonial state. “Settler-colonial symbolic order” is not intended as a substitute for a deeper, more all-encompassing analysis of the “settler-colonial situation” of a given regime. My use of the phrase “symbolic order” is also not limited to the terrain of shared linguistic meanings but involves a more expansive concept of symbolic exchange, including commodity circulation and the transportation infrastructures that enable it.

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emancipatory politics founded on a (negative) universality. That said, for Lacanian psychoanalysis to be useful and appropriate toward these ends, it is necessary to confront the colonial origins and legacies of psychoanalytic theory and to deepen connections between the studies of psychoanalysis, settler colonialism, infrastructure, and extractivism. This frames what I attempt to do throughout this article.

I will begin by introducing the idea of Canada as a settler-colonial symbolic order in relation to fossil capitalism and the concept of extractivism. Against this backdrop, I will consider pipelines as symptoms that emerge from and render visible the antagonistic dimensions of Canadian extractivism. Specifically, it is the leaky materiality of pipelines themselves, the precarious colonial jurisdictions upon which they are erected, and the strong Indigenous-led resistance to pipeline developments that bring the immanent cracks in Canada's settler-colonial symbolic order out into the open. While proponents of extractive development mobilize ideological fantasies to conceal these antagonisms, psychoanalysis can be a useful tool for critique. Throughout the paper, I will also attempt to probe the limits of the applicability of psychoanalytic theory (given its origins as a colonial discourse) and look for points of convergence and solidarity between psychoanalytic, Marxist, and decolonial perspectives.

## **Extractivism and the settler-colonial symbolic order**

Deriving from the work of ecological Marxists, "fossil capitalism" captures the fact that, first, modern industrial capitalism (since the mid-nineteenth century) has been largely powered by fossil-fuel energy sources, and, second, the material properties of fossil fuels render them amenable to capitalist control over labour (Malm, "Fossil Capital" 44) and the self-expansion and accumulation of capital (Altvater 41): "a key aspect of fossil capitalism is the flexibility that fossil energies provide in regard to the temporal distribution and spatial location of consumption" (Scott, "Networked Infrastructure" 19). All economic systems involve practices that could be described as "resource extraction"<sup>2</sup> (collecting raw materials from the environment and transforming them into useful goods and services)

<sup>2</sup> I acknowledge that "resource extraction" expresses ontological presuppositions about nature (such as, nature is framed essentially as an external repository of exploitable materials that exist to benefit humankind). This might be critiqued as an anthropocentric, promethean, and/or economic view. This differs from, say, an idea of nature as a set of kinship relations that involve obligations and responsibilities, or from a view of human-nature relations that see the very concept of "nature" (as a distinct category) as incoherent and meaningless. That said, regardless of one's choice of terms—and bracketing the important

(Fast 33), but “extractivism” describes a non-reciprocal way of relating to natural environments that is oriented to short-term accumulation, generating benefits for distant capital without generating benefits to local people (Scott, “Extractivism” 124).

My interest in “extractivism” as a concept is that it describes antagonistic relationships and processes that are common to settler colonialism, fossil capitalism, and ecological degradation in Canada. Contemporary settler-colonial regimes, such as Canada, have emerged and are co-produced in relation to the global political economy of capitalism (Pasternak and Dafnos 2). Extractivism refers to a specific logic (the logic of capital accumulation) that is endemic to capitalism (Scott, “Extractivism” 124), one that “not only encourages, but structurally enforces the drive to extract on ever-greater scales and to ever-greater depths” (Fast 33–34). Extractivism can be applied to both socio-ecological relations (like unsustainable and environmentally degrading forms of resource extraction) and to social relations (like extraction of surplus value from workers, appropriation of land and culture from colonized peoples). While extractivism can be useful as a conceptual link between colonialism and capitalism, the risk, as Imre Szeman and Jennifer Wenzel have highlighted, is that when used for analytical purposes it can be imprecise and garner excessive abstraction (resulting in multiple distinct concepts and systems collapsing into one another). With this caveat in mind, I believe extractivism can still be a useful concept for analyzing the ideological space of pipeline politics and for describing an antagonism common to both settler colonialism and fossil capitalism in Canada. While it might be the case that extractivism lacks analytical precision, it still nonetheless succeeds in capturing a basic intuition about how non-reciprocal human-nature and human-social relations produce harm at various scales of time and space.

Extractivism in Canada has been sustained through various kinds of infrastructure. Winona LaDuke and Deborah Cowen argue that physical infrastructures of circulation and accumulation have been historically (and still are) “coupled with affective infrastructures” (247). While the authors do not explicitly define the term “affective infrastructures,” I understand it as a phrase that highlights a relationship between (infrastructured) material wellbeing, subjective experience, and one’s relation to politics. As Matthew T. Huber writes, “everyday lived practices of energy consump-

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debates around the production of nature and the co-constitution of human socio-ecological relations—all human societies must take/extract from, make changes to, and shape environments in order to survive and thrive.

tion—specifically in relation to the privatization of housing and automobility—can be seen as underpinning a variety of populist neoliberal logics (such as a hostility to taxes)” (“Neoliberal Energies” 493). Moreover, it is necessary to consider “how energized practices shape particular forms of thinking and feeling about politics ... Oil is a powerful force not only because of the material geographies of mobility it makes possible but also because its combustion often accompanies deeply felt visions of freedom and individualism” (Huber, *Lifeblood* xi). One of my aims is to relate the physical and affective infrastructures that sustain fossil fuel extraction to the concept of the symbolic order.

The symbolic is one of the three interrelated registers in Lacanian theory which is, as Ilan Kapoor defines it, “the order of language, the result of historical, intersubjective, and collective practice” (*Confronting Desire* 6). The emphasis on “intersubjective” and “collective practice” in defining the symbolic order is particularly crucial for my application of the concept to the network of infrastructures that enable a combination of material and affective exchanges. Moreover, the symbolic refers to “not only the order of language in the narrow linguistic sense, but the entire cobweb of symbolic relations that form the ‘substance’ of our social being” (Salecl 3). It is along such lines that I refer to a broader concept of symbolic exchange, including commodity circulation and the transportation infrastructures that enable it, to develop the idea of Canada as a settler-colonial symbolic order.

Canada’s particular symbolic is predicated upon a network of jurisdiction and infrastructure that has been created to facilitate the extraction and export of primary products from Indigenous lands. As S. Harris Ali explains, “the initial role of Canada as a white settler colony was to supply cheap food and primary resources to Britain, and as such, the major focus of investments was on staples extraction and not industrial manufacturing” (98). The domain of colonial laws and meanings, as well as the networks of physical and affective infrastructures that sustain the circulation of commodities and desires, facilitate the extractivist drive of fossil capitalism in Canada, but it is also cracking under pressure. Indigenous land defense, assertions of inherent governing authority and jurisdiction, and head-on collisions with colonial state violence reveal both the antagonistic nature of settler colonialism and the contestation between colonial and Indigenous political-legal orders.

## **(Socio-ecological) antagonisms, founding violence, and disavowal**

Recent years have witnessed a surge of resistance to extractive infrastructures across Turtle Island (“North America”). From opposition to the Dakota Access Pipeline to more recent struggles against the Trans Mountain Expansion (TMX) and Coastal GasLink (CGL) pipelines (among countless related struggles), such conflicts render visible the antagonistic nature of settler-colonial capitalism. At the forefront of pipeline struggles are Indigenous peoples and communities who have been disproportionately burdened with the (social, environmental, and health) harms of resource extraction and who put their bodies on the line to protect the land, water, and the real “critical infrastructure” (the ecologies and relationships) of their unceded, traditional, and/or treaty territories (Spice 41). Oil spills, blockades, and violent clashes between land defenders and the RCMP highlight the cracks in fossil capital’s settler-colonial symbolic order, where fantasies of uninhabited landscapes dominated by techno-industrial mastery are ruptured and resisted by Indigenous peoples, environmentalists, land defenders, and solidarity blockaders. Snaking along these cracks and gaps, pipelines are leaky, symptomatic objects from which the unconscious of fossil capitalism and settler colonialism speak.

Disavowal of social and ecological antagonism is a recurring feature of mainstream Canadian political discourse in general and certainly of the discourses that promote extractive projects. Both capitalism and colonialism are predicated upon a violence—the “original sin” of dispossession (primitive accumulation in Marx’s terms)—that must be disavowed by the official ideology in order to reproduce their relations of exploitation and colonial domination. Moreover, these systems normalize their effects, such as economic inequality, environmental racism, inequitable distribution of environmental harms, undemocratic decision-making processes for land use, and the “expendability” of certain populations and communities (Pellow 25). The irony, as Travis Fast notes, is that “[t]he promise of neoliberal extractivism in Canada ... was never popularly premised on the destruction of the environment, increased tensions with many Aboriginal communities, or the compensation of capital with super profits. Rather, it has always been promoted on the grounds of job creation and general economic wellbeing” (53). It has, therefore, necessitated various forms of disavowal and justificatory fantasies to conceal antagonism. In this section, I will briefly outline some of the ways disavowal and related concepts have been theorized within the traditions of psychoanalytic Marxism and

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theories of decolonization and subsequently applied to the analysis of capitalism, environmental conflict, and settler colonialism.

From a Žižekian perspective, disavowal is a central category that connects the Marxist critique of commodity fetishism to a Lacanian inspired theory of ideology; disavowal links the substitution of “social relations between people” for “relations between things” (Marx 165) to the substitution of the fetish object for the fundamental trauma that constitutes subjectivity and marks the site of social difference. As Kapoor defines it, as “a substitute for fundamental trauma, the fetish is a site of disavowal, allowing the subject to better master her world by ridding it of lack and difference” (*Confronting Desire* 123). For Sigmund Freud, the classic example of “fetishism” and the disavowal that accompanies it is the perception that the little boy makes of his mother’s “missing phallus.” As Freud puts it, “the fetish is a substitute for the woman’s (the mother’s) penis that the little boy once believed in and—for reasons familiar to us—does not want to give up” (152–53). Freud elaborates: “[W]e see that the perception has persisted, and that a very energetic action has been undertaken to maintain the disavowal. It is not true that, after the child has made his observation of the woman, he has preserved unaltered his belief that women have a phallus. He has retained that belief, but he has also given it up” (154). In short, there is a “conflict between the weight of the unwelcome perception and the force of his counter-wish” (154).

I will underscore three basic ideas here: 1. What is at stake with the psychoanalytic concept of fetishism is a traumatic encounter with a lack or “real,” specifically in relation to social and sexual difference; 2. traumatic encounters may be accompanied by disavowal (or an affect that involves “energetic action,” sustaining a simultaneous knowing and not-knowing [Weintrobe 7]), as a way of dealing with lack and difference; 3. the traumatic confrontation is fundamentally about being castrated (about how the constitution of the [castrated] subject coincides with the proliferation of social difference as mediated by the symbolic order, the realm of meanings and social exchange). As Freud puts it, “the horror of castration has set up a memorial to itself in the creation of this substitute” (154). The fetish is a way of dealing with and displacing difference, but it is also an indication that trauma is being registered reflexively. What connects Marx’s account of the commodity to Freud’s account of the fetish is both the activity of disavowal (an activity that is simultaneously practical, active, and psychical) and the confrontation with the Symbolic (the exchange relations governing the commodity universe and the coincidence of lack and difference that is instituted by language and experienced by linguistic beings).

Disavowal is also expressed within neoliberal environmental governance. As Robert Fletcher highlights, “by disavowing the reality of neoliberal capitalism’s contributions to ecological degradation, [neoliberal environmentalist discourse] sustains the fantasy that degradation can be redressed through the same mechanisms that perpetuate it” (“Breaking Attachment” 66). “Neoliberal environmentalism” is, in short, the idea that market mechanisms (like carbon markets and cap and trade programs) are sufficient to address the dangers posed by the ecological crisis; we can maintain a capitalist, growth-oriented economy, as long as we adequately integrate environmental costs into our modes of exchange. In short, neoliberal environmentalism is “the paradoxical idea that capitalist markets are the answer to their own ecological contradictions” (Büscher quoted in Fletcher, “Virtualism” 796). Tied to this is the idea that markets, individual consumer choice, and demand-side economic policies hold the most promise for climate change mitigation. Ilan Kapoor and Zahi Zalloua argue that the very discourse of “climate change” disavows what is in fact a socio-ecological crisis with political-economic underpinnings: that is, “climate” obscures the social and economic causes and “change” smooths over the urgent stakes of the problem (120).

Finally, disavowal of settler colonialism (in particular, the persistent nature of it) is a core feature of Canadian public discourse, including that which promotes pipeline projects. While settler colonialism is founded on injustice and political domination—specifically on genocidal violence, the establishment of unequal social relations, and extractive relations to nature that produce enduring changes to both environment and human societies—this injustice is sustained, in part, by mobilizing justificatory fantasies and myths of national origin. “The typical settler narrative ... has a doubled goal. It is concerned to act out the suppression or effacement of the indigene; it is also concerned to perform the concomitant indigenization of the settler” (Johnston and Lawson quoted in Veracini 373). Many ideological fantasies have served, historically and in the present moment, to naturalize settler presence on Indigenous lands, legitimize colonial modes of governance, and justify social, political, and geographical marginalization of Indigenous peoples.

One such example is the relationship between the state’s use of surveillance on Indigenous peoples and the ideology of pacification, an ongoing process “aimed at producing a specific ‘peace’ through ‘civilizing’ political and legal strategies” (Dafnos, Thompson, and French 323). Pacification involves the “displacement and containment of Indigenous peoples and social systems that stand in the way of capitalist modes of produc-



tion,” securing capitalist-colonial order by defining (in law and policy) Indigenous subjectivities, self-determination, and subsistence practices in terms of risks to national security (323). For example, a leaked report by the RCMP’s Critical Infrastructure Intelligence Assessment Team titled “Criminal Threats to the Canadian Petroleum Industry,” refers to the “anti-petroleum ideology” and “violent aboriginal [*sic*] extremists” that are a part of “a growing, highly organized and well-financed, anti-Canadian petroleum movement, that consists of peaceful activists, militants and violent extremists, who are opposed to society’s reliance on fossil fuels” (RCMP quoted in Spice 43). Although the disruption of “critical infrastructure” is often framed as a threat to both the functioning of the state and to the well-being of the population (despite the fact that more than 85 percent of critical infrastructure in Canada is privately owned and operated), the practical consequence of this is that state functioning is linked to the economic security of private corporations (Dafnos, Thompson, and French 328–29).

### **Disavowal and the politics of the Trans Mountain Pipeline Expansion project**

In some respects, the shift from the Conservative government of Stephen Harper to the Liberal government of Justin Trudeau expresses the shift from denial to disavowal in Canadian public discourse. Whereas denial denotes an outright negation of a situation, disavowal is more nuanced (although potentially nefarious), involving a simultaneous acknowledgement and denial. In 2009, Harper announced at G20 in Pittsburgh, “we [Canada] also have no history of colonialism” (Wherry). Although Harper would later retract his statement, it is significant that his spontaneous position was one of outright denial. In contrast, Trudeau has built his political brand around public apologies, cultural sensitivity, and an ostensible desire for “reconciliation” with Indigenous peoples.

As Liam Midzain-Gobin and Heather A. Smith have documented, Trudeau’s tenure as prime minister reflects a change of tone from previous leaders; colonialism is now publicly acknowledged as a dark side of Canadian *history* but not as a persistent feature of Canada’s settler-colonial *present*. The authors further note that Trudeau’s acknowledgement of colonialism as a past occurrence coincides with his framing of it as a matter of systemic discrimination that can be addressed through reform, rather than as a structure (Wolfe 388), the overhaul of which would involve reorganization of law/jurisdiction and a redistribution of property/land. The framing of colonialism as a process of past injustices resulting

in present-day discrimination is what Midzain-Gobin and Smith call the discourse of “reconciliation lite” (489) or (with a more Žižekian ring to it) “reconciliation without decolonization.”

The federal government’s approach to the Trans Mountain Pipeline Expansion project (TMX) expresses a mixture of disavowal, neoliberal environmentalism, and “reconciliation lite.” On 18 June 2019, the government of Canada declared a national climate emergency and then the following day approved the TMX (currently under construction, amid strong resistance), which would triple the pipeline’s capacity to transport bitumen from the Alberta tar sands to the Pacific coast of British Columbia (Mabee). The project poses disproportionate harms to Indigenous peoples on their unceded and treaty territories and has given rise to resistance on many fronts, including the construction of Tiny Houses, land defense, divestment campaigns, and legal challenges, the latter of which have been undertaken by a combination of First Nations, settler municipalities, and environmental organizations.

The project has emerged as a political-legal battleground for what the establishment of Indigenous consent looks like within formal government approval processes. Successful legal challenges necessitated a second round of consultations with affected Indigenous communities, but subsequent challenges by First Nations were unsuccessful, with the courts concluding that First Nations have no “veto power,” that is, no real ability to say no to projects on their unceded territories (Markusoff). The TMX is set to cross the territories of more than one-hundred-and-forty First Nations bands and Indigenous communities (APTN News), with which Trans Mountain has signed sixty-seven Mutual Benefit Agreements (MBAs). They are confidential commercial agreements which may “include pipeline construction education and jobs training, skills enhancement, business opportunities or improved community services and infrastructure” (Trans Mountain Corporation). As Shiri Pasternak and Hayden King argue, while “there are clear financial benefits to participating in various stakes of resource projects, especially in light of the state’s divestment from Indigenous people’s wellbeing ... the types of benefits accruing from participation [in projects such as TMX] ... are mere incremental gains against the bar of fulsome Indigenous jurisdiction and inherent rights” (44). In short, while an unproblematized concept of “Indigenous consent” is circulated in the public discourses that promote the TMX, the consultation processes have effectively served as rubber stamping exercises for what was always, in the eyes of the federal government, a *fait accompli*. This has been demonstrated by the government’s purchase of the project from

energy company Kinder Morgan in 2018 for \$4.5 billion and its enduring faith in the project's economic viability despite significant risks. The project is touted as having a strong business case, despite the fact that costs have ballooned up by 70 percent—now a \$21.4 billion cost to taxpayers—and that multiple analyses have raised significant doubts about whether the project will ever be built or, if built, be economically viable (Gunton, Joseph, and Dale; Nikiforuk; Allan).

All this not to mention the question of whether the project is *socially justifiable* given the inequitable distribution of social, health, and environmental harms posed by the project: “The development of hydrocarbon reserves and related export infrastructure relies upon and reproduces a form of racial capitalism that continually subjugates Indigenous territorial relations to colonial geographies of resource extraction” (McCreary and Turner 226). Oil spills are an inevitable feature of pipelines; Trans Mountain has reported eighty-four spills to the Canada Energy Regulator (formerly known as the National Energy Board) since 1961. The expansion project plans to triple the current pipeline's oil-carrying capacity, with the goal of increasing oil exports to Asian markets. Decisions about the location and scale of pipelines “have consequences for the spatial organization of environmental inequities in Canada” (Scott, “Networked Infrastructure” 15), which in the case of TMX involve disproportionate risks to Indigenous communities on their unceded territories in the form of environmental contamination, oil spills, loss of lands due to displacement, and sexual violence against women and two-spirit people due to proximity to “man camps” (Indigenous Network on Economies and Trade 5). Finally, there are intergenerational environmental and climate justice concerns insofar as decisions about pipelines involve a temporal distribution of inequities; to become economically viable, to recover sunk costs (thus prompting further expansion of tar sands production), pipelines must remain operational for decades. Needless to say, this imperative has long-term climatic consequences.

### **The mess at the surface: pipeline as symptom**

A psychoanalytic approach to analyzing pipeline conflicts begins by confronting the paradoxical status of their visibility: pipelines are often at their most “visible” before they are built. As Dayna Nadine Scott writes, “once built, a pipeline literally vanishes underground. Once buried, the critical social relationships and power mechanisms that are scripted in and enacted through its flows become blurred” (“Networked Infrastructure” 24). To this we could add, not only before their by no means inevitable

construction, but also at any point when their flows are interrupted, the visibility of a pipeline coincides with a refusal, malfunction, or negation of the smooth transit of its flows. As Lacan said of the causal logic of the symptom in relation to the unconscious, “there is cause only in something that doesn’t work” (*Seminar XI* 21). In another sense, the imperceptibility of fossil fuel infrastructures is sustained by both invisibility (of the subterranean physical infrastructure itself) and visibility (the over-saturation of material goods, images, and discourses that relate the infrastructure to an immediate point of consumption or experience).

The unconscious is formulated from the subject’s first encounter with the Real, known as the Oedipal event. From this encounter, the symbolic order takes hold, enabling the power of language to organize this encounter, or trauma, as the primal fantasy. Every encounter with the real afterwards becomes organized as fantasy. Ideological fantasies are mobilized as “screens concealing the gap” (Žižek, *Sublime Object* 132) of the Real, serving to restore meaning and obscure antagonism. In the Canadian context, pipeline struggles crop up at the intersection of multiple antagonisms: settler colonialism, ecological crisis, and fossil capitalism. The leaky and contested “real” of pipelines contrasts with their symbolic function of shoring up ideological fantasies of techno-scientific mastery of nature, trans-continental settler conquest, and a false universalism of economic benefits in the “national interest.” The unconscious is constituted essentially by what is refused in consciousness (Lacan, *Seminar XI* 43): it is this emphasis on negativity, or this repression, that makes psychoanalysis potentially relevant for political critique.

Slavoj Žižek defines ideology not as “an illusion masking the real state of things” but, rather, as “an (unconscious) fantasy structuring our social reality itself” (*Sublime Object* 30). For Žižek, ideology is a “generative matrix that regulates the relationship between visible and non-visible, between imaginable and non-imaginable” (“Spectre of Ideology” 1). “Ideology regulates the dialectical relationship between” the Symbolic and the Real (Vighi and Feldner 29). It functions as a kind of knowledge immanently split between its explicit, rational, transparent ideas (the Symbolic) and its “unthinkable, unrepresentable ... nucleus of disavowed enjoyment” (the Real) (Vighi and Feldner 29). The Imaginary functions as the little bit of the real, the *objet a*, used to formulate the (ideological) fantasy. In short, for Žižek, antagonism is ontological (Kapoor, “Antagonism” 2), and (ideological) fantasy is the means by which a subject conceals the “real” gaps in the symbolic order.

From a Lacanian perspective, the unconscious is not conceived as a buried, subterranean archive. As Verges puts it, “[psychoanalytic] interpretation is not the decoding of readable texts stored in the hidden archives of a buried world; it is the intersubjective production of openings in which the desire of the ‘Other’ plays an active role” (183). Lacan’s primary contribution to psychoanalytic theory, of reading Freud alongside structural linguistics, is often summarized with the claim, “the unconscious is structured like a language” or “the unconscious is the discourse of the Other” (*Seminar XI* 149, 131). This shift involves de-physicalizing and de-individualizing the notion of the unconscious, conceiving it not as a deep repository of physical traces but, rather, as the space of rupture in intersubjective (linguistic, social, economic, ecological) networks. Rather than promoting a notion of the unconscious that perpetuates an excavatory and extractive mode of analysis, the Lacanian perspective is well suited to the study of oil spills, attending to the mess at the surface rather than fetishizing the obscurity of the depths.

### **Cracks in the settler-colonial symbolic: jurisdiction and infrastructure**

From the railroads of the nineteenth century to the pipelines (and railroads, highways) of the twenty-first century, transportation infrastructures and the forms of jurisdiction upon which they depend, as well as the ideological fantasies they sustain, have been central to the project of settler Canadian nationalism. Cowen argues that “infrastructure is often the means of dispossession, and the material force that implants colonial economies and socialities. Infrastructures thus highlight the issue of competing and overlapping jurisdiction—matters of both time and space.” From a Lacanian standpoint, “the symbolic order is circular, inconsistent, lacking any ultimate foundation” (Salecl 4). It is along such lines that I simultaneously (although not interchangeably) refer to *the* symbolic order as both Canada’s settler-colonial symbolic order and as the global political economy of (fossil) capitalism. In short, “symbolic order” is a concept that can function at multiple levels of socio-historical scale and abstraction.

That said, whether the concept “functions” is different from whether it is useful or appropriate, especially considering the colonial origins of psychoanalysis. As Frosh notes, “psychoanalysis is ... an exemplary incidence of a disciplinary practice that both draws on colonialism and disrupts its categories at the same time” (“Psychoanalysis” 145). Responding to the critiques made by postcolonial theorists regarding the universalizability of psychoanalysis, given the colonial backdrop of its development, Kapoor

approaches the question for Lacanian theory in two ways: the first argument concerns the historical spread and expansion of the Western symbolic order; the second argument concerns the negativity or contingency of Lacanian universalism (*Confronting Desire* 24). The historical argument is that (Lacanian) psychoanalysis “works” because the Western symbolic order has been globalized through the historical process of colonialism: “the West’s dominant representational and knowledge systems are all-pervasive (although not unchallenged)” (*Confronting Desire* 24). Frosh echoes this point, relating it specifically to the historical spread of the theory: “psychoanalysis, as it gained purchase in many (but especially European and American) societies, became a resource whereby people started to understand themselves in its terms, producing modes of consciousness that then are understood from within psychoanalytic theory in a kind of positive feedback loop” (“Primitivity” 37). To describe psychoanalysis as universal in this sense is also to say that it is “conflictual,” or positioned within (not outside or independent) of the struggle for meaning that it analyzes. Additionally, within Lacanian theory, the symbolic order is not self-enclosed but, rather, constitutively incomplete, not-all, and open.

This relates to Kapoor’s second argument for the universality of psychoanalysis: “the symbolic order can and does manifest itself differently in space and time, resulting from particular social and historical practices” (*Confronting Desire* 24). By foregrounding the “self-division of every social order” (*Confronting Desire* 25)—affirming a negative universality—Lacanian psychoanalysis may remain attentive to the concrete historical conditions from which discourses emerge while retaining a concept of historical change. Ranjana Khanna has put forth a similar line of reasoning, arguing that the process of symbolic integration into colonial systems of meaning has not been total: “[T]he spectral nature of postcolonial modernity means that an incorporation of forms of law, of languages, and of systemic inequalities into colonized countries did not amount to an introjection, or a full psychic assimilation” (229). It is not because of the ahistorical, universal validity of Western categories but, rather, the universal (yet incomplete and contradictory) imposition of Western categories resulting from historical processes that make psychoanalysis function as a (negative) “universal” theory.

Relating this back to an analysis of Canadian pipeline politics, there are at least two main ways of understanding the consequences of the (negative) universality of psychoanalytic theory and the idea of the symbolic order as constitutively incomplete: first, the settler-colonial symbolic order can be understood to be riven with various cracks and gaps (which

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are rendered visible through acts of Indigenous resurgence, blockades, clashes with state authority, and ecological conflicts); second, Canada can be understood as a space of multiple, competing symbolic orders (a settler-colonial symbolic order amenable to capitalist accumulation versus alternative Indigenous, decolonizing, and/or non-capitalist symbolic orders). To say Canada's settler-colonial symbolic order is incomplete is to echo Scott and Pasternak's assertion that "Canada's claim to exclusive territorial authority across all the lands and waters is a failed project" (205). This fact is demonstrated on the ground, in clashes between Indigenous land defenders and the RCMP, and in the courts on recent decisions on Aboriginal title, particularly in British Columbia.<sup>3</sup> On the one hand, new fossil fuel pipeline developments are increasingly met with fierce opposition from Indigenous peoples,<sup>4</sup> and, on the other hand, this opposition is grounded in assertions of jurisdiction and self-determination over lands and livelihoods.

LaDuke and Cowen state that while "infrastructure is the *how* of settler colonialism," it is also the case that "our collective futures hinge on remaking socio-technical systems.... Infrastructure is not inherently colonial—it is also essential for transformation; a pipe can carry fresh water as well as toxic sludge" (245). One of the domains of discursive contestation in Canada's politics of extractivism, where competing systems of infrastructured wellbeing are being articulated, is over the meaning of "critical infrastructure." From the standpoint of a Lacanian critique of Canadian pipeline politics, "critical infrastructure" can be approached in at least three ways: first, as a part of what I have called the settler-colonial symbolic order

3 For a discussion of major Supreme Court of Canada decisions on Aboriginal title from the past few decades and their implications for the recent politics of fossil fuel pipelines and the governance of resource extraction, see Shiri Pasternak and Nicole Schabus; Indigenous Network on Economies and Trade.

4 Despite their central role in social movements working to resist the development of fossil fuel pipelines in Canada, Indigenous peoples are not unanimous in their opposition to pipelines. Moreover, the status of different forms of "consent" given by Indigenous communities in the context of extractive development is highly complex and contested (Scott, "Extraction Contracting"). Given the poverty and lack of economic opportunities facing many Indigenous communities, generated through historical and persistent forms of dispossession and a relative absence of state provisioning (Pasternak and King), many Indigenous leaders find themselves in the difficult position of choosing between taking a principled stance against a project they disagree with or deriving some benefit from a project that appears inevitable (Atleo). While the oil and gas industry is the largest employer of Indigenous peoples in Canada (Thomas-Müller 117), the imposition of an extractive colonial economy has generated new class divisions and social and gendered hierarchies (Alook, Hussey, and Hill).



(the network of law and infrastructure that enables the extraction and exchange of natural resources on Indigenous lands in Canada); second, as an ideological support that tethers corporate fossil fuel development to the national interest; third, as a space of discursive contestation, where different meanings of “critical infrastructure” are articulated. As “an emergent category for the governance of crisis, critical infrastructure is defined by the Canadian government as the ‘processes, systems, facilities, technologies, networks, assets and services essential to the health, safety, security or economic well-being of Canadians and the effective functioning of the government’” (Spice 43; Public Safety Canada). The Government of Alberta has also passed a piece of legislation called *Bill 1: Critical Infrastructure Defence Act* (2020). The purpose of the bill is to criminalize land defense and railway/pipeline blockades. Anne Spice draws on fieldwork conducted in Indigenous land defense movements against pipeline construction (in particular, Wet’suwet’en resistance to the Coastal GasLink Pipeline). She has documented the “language game” of “critical infrastructure,” quoting Unist’ot’en camp spokesperson Freda Huson:

Freda Huson, notes that the pipelines were proposed to run through the clan’s best berry patches. By resisting pipeline construction, she explains, “what we’re doing here is protecting *our* critical infrastructure.” The language game of the response inverts the promise and inevitability of settler infrastructures but does not replace it with a network that works within the same epistemological and ontological relations to land and kin. (40)

Spice further notes that Huson’s appropriation of the term “critical infrastructure” enables a contrast between the kinds of extractive infrastructure prioritized by colonial governments versus the life-sustaining infrastructure (clean drinking water, interconnected ecosystems, local food sovereignty) that her community is attempting to prioritize and protect.

While the politicization of “critical infrastructure” can be understood as a language game consisting of practices of signification and resignification—such as competing accounts of what critical infrastructure means, which people and infrastructures are deemed valuable—it must also be understood in terms of competing jurisdictional claims, conflicts over who gets to exercise presence and political-legal authority within a given territory, that is, the conflicts between competing symbolic orders that reveal the gaps internal to the Canada’s settler-colonial symbolic order. As Pasternak writes, “jurisdiction is the power to speak the law” (148); to exercise



jurisdiction is to bring law into existence and, along with it, those who are subject to it (Dorsett and McVeigh quoted in Pasternak 148). As previously discussed, critical infrastructure discourse also pertains to whose presence and governing authority is perceived as a matter of risk, security, and criminality: “Indigenous peoples interrupt commodity flows by asserting jurisdiction and sovereignty over their lands and resources in places that form choke points to the circulation of capital. Thus, the securitization of ‘critical infrastructure’—essentially supply chains of capital, such as private pipelines and public transport routes—has become a priority in mitigating the potential threat of Indigenous jurisdiction” (Pasternak and Dafnos 3). The presence and proximity of Indigenous peoples at these key logistical “choke points,” and their willingness to engage in acts of refusal to protect their own land and vital relationships, exposes the “failed project” of Canadian colonialism (the inherent gaps, constitutive incompleteness, in the settler-colonial symbolic order and the state’s inability to exercise exclusive territorial authority). The Canadian state mobilizes appeals to “national interest” and “critical infrastructure” (as ideological supports) to smooth over conflict and secure the circulation of capital.

One of the clearest examples of the constitutive incompleteness (and in fact deliberate incompleteness) of Canada’s settler-colonial symbolic order is what Dayna Nadine Scott has called the regime of “extraction contracting” or “consent by contract”: “Consent by contract is a mode of governance that attempts to define the social, political, ecological, and economic relations regarding the use of Indigenous lands solely through confidential bargaining and agreement-making between private extraction companies and First Nations, but in fact affords the state a key role in setting the terms” (“Extraction Contracting” 272–73). As I discussed in a previous section, one of the prominent features of the discourse promoting the TMX is the appeal to the consent of Indigenous peoples. One of the outcomes of two rounds of consultations with local communities was the signing of “67 [Mutual Benefit] Agreements with 73 Indigenous groups in B.C. and Alberta” (Trans Mountain Corporation). As Scott argues, “the shift toward extraction contracting carries the following implications: interests and values typically considered part of the public law sphere are moved into the private sphere; this private contractual regime normalizes the state’s provision of access to Indigenous lands for extractive capital; the contractual regime satisfies the parties in the short-term and allows the state to delay resolving the failures of the public law realm” (“Extraction Contracting” 272). Most crucially, Scott argues that it is not that contracts “fill the gap” of an inadequate public regulatory regime. Instead, it is that

the state is “actively holding open the space for extraction contracting to fill” (273). This “insulates the settler law from demands for reform” and delays “the inevitable breakdown of the state’s jurisdictional authority on those lands, which will entail radical wealth redistribution from capital to Indigenous peoples” (273). While the state employs extraction contracting to insulate itself against (and even exploit) the constitutive failure of the settler-colonial symbolic order, it also holds open the space for industry to “enroll Indigenous communities as project beneficiaries, rendering participation in extractive development a modality of Indigenous self-determination” (McCreary and Wouters 242). There are, of course, other modalities of Indigenous self-determination, such as those that articulate with a broader politics of decolonization and resistance to extractive capitalism.

### **Shared antagonism: toward a politics of (negative) universality**

The social (capital-labour, settler-colonial) relations that constitute extractivism have developed within the “negative space” of primitive accumulation and colonial dispossession. This is the founding trauma that constitutes and reproduces fossil capitalism and settler colonialism, “not a process in the past but an inner moment of the present that reproduces the conditions of possibility for capitalist accumulation and expropriation” (Tomšič 143). This structural link between colonialism and capitalism (one name for which is “extractivism”) can be a source for solidarity for Indigenous and settler people insofar as it reveals an experience of shared antagonism, although by no means an experience that has been universally even or equal.

Given the rising whirlwind of right-wing populism, fossil fascism, and anti-immigrant sentiment, documented and theorized by many scholars (Malm and the Zetkin Collective; LaDuke and Cowen; Daggett), it makes sense for an anti-capitalist and decolonial politics to encourage settler divestment from nationalism. The very signifier, “settler,” underscores the precarity and historical recency of non-Indigenous presence on Turtle Island. In a sense, to really confront oneself as a settler means to affirm a non-identity, to acknowledge one’s rootlessness on land and to understand oneself as engaged in a shared—albeit different—history and pattern of dispossession and displacement. While “settler” is not a coherent or homogenous class category, to some degree the historical emergence and spread of capitalist social relations has entailed a universal (although by no means even or complete) loss of traditional, place-based subsistence

## Psychoanalytic

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cultures, which opens the possibility for solidarity and collective action across multiple axes of social difference.

A similar argument can be made regarding climate change, which is also simultaneously universal, global, and yet highly uneven in its distribution of harms at different geographic and temporal scales:

The advantage of the climate crisis is that (negative) universality is already built into it: it brings home the idea of humans as a “species” facing a common threat. While this threat impacts people and places differently, it nonetheless impacts everyone; no one can fully escape it, and everyone encounters it as a traumatic loss (of life, livelihood, etc.) ... Climate change thus provides the opportunity for collective mobilization around a universally experienced antagonism. (Kapoor and Zalloua 124)

Psychoanalytic politics generally affirms a solidarity founded on negative universality. For example, Kapoor argues that “solidarity among differing groups/movements can be constructed on the basis of a common adversary—capitalist development—and by politicizing not particular identities but shared exclusion” (*Confronting Desire* 290). This connects to what Paul Eisenstein and Todd McGowan have called “solidarity of the rupture,” where solidaristic relationships are forged on the basis of groundlessness and a renunciation of symbolic roots. This is a “solidarity attached to trauma,” one that occurs at the moment when “the subject loses its social and symbolic bearings” and exchanges “the envy of the Other’s complete enjoyment” for an enjoyment that is necessarily partial and fragmented (90). For settler Canadians, a solidarity of the rupture would mean breaking with the privileges tied to inclusion (being “culturally Canadian,” for example) and the safety of a stable and whole identity; against the temptation of settler nationalism, settler Canadians must confront, and commit to, the rootlessness of a cosmopolitan internationalism.

The railway blockades that spread across the country in early 2020 in response to the Wet’suwet’en land defence against the Coastal GasLink pipeline was a clear example of solidarity of the rupture. The choice of railways as the point of intervention is significant for two reasons: first, because it is a tactical way of halting the flow of capital, and, second, because the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway was a “symbolic project of nation-building” (Ishiguro 131), a major site of Indigenous resistance to dispossession since the late nineteenth century. To render those historical conflicts visible, to restage them in light of contemporary Indigenous resistance to pipeline development, Canadian colonialism is

laid bare as an ongoing process. By sustaining the trauma of colonialism, the blockades confront settler Canadians with the repetition of this history, while providing clear possibilities for solidaristic intervention in the present, or intervention with stakes and risks.

It is also useful to clarify the political stakes and purpose of siding with decolonization movements that push for the repatriation of land and the restoration of Indigenous jurisdiction. This is especially necessary at a time and place when the discourse of “reconciliation lite” is hegemonic and when decolonial calls for redistribution of land and wealth are often smoothed over with a “politics of recognition” that “tend to focus on and attack injustices in the cultural realm” (Coulthard 34). As Spice argues, “Indigenous peoples remain in a deeply subordinated relationship to Canada, and political claims to land and self-governance are repeatedly squashed in favor of cultural exchange,” such as Justin Trudeau’s “facile suggestion that reconciliation can be practiced by Canadians reading more books by Indigenous authors” (44). That said, while critical left perspectives often critique the liberal preoccupation with “cultural politics” at the expense of “materialist politics” (political-economic matters of meeting basic needs, wealth, inequality, health, wellbeing) Glen Coulthard complicates this distinction, underlining the materialism inherent to Indigenous cultural claims: “[I]nsofar as Indigenous cultural claims always involve demands for a more equitable distribution of land, political power, and economic resources, the left-materialist claim regarding the displacement of economic concerns by cultural ones is misplaced when applied to settler-colonial contexts” (19). Moreover, as Pasternak and Scott argue, citing the IPCC Special Report on Climate Change and Land, “where Indigenous peoples are stewards of their lands and their customary tenure is recognized, their knowledge and conservation economies hold powerful mitigation and adaptation strategies for holding the global temperature rise to 1.5 degrees C. This is the materialism of struggle, survival beyond rhetoric and hyperbole, keeping Indigenous justice in the foreground” (212). In this sense, prioritizing the political goals of a particular “cultural” community (Indigenous decolonization movements, the restoration of Indigenous jurisdiction and territorial sovereignty, Indigenous environmental justice) can contribute materially to a universal benefit (mitigating and adapting to climate change). In short, a left-materialist, psychoanalytic, and Indigenous resurgence politics are compatible in their critique of the reduction of emancipatory politics to the domain of cultural recognition. Specifically, the reduction of Indigeneity to a purely cultural category obscures the economic primacy of land, dispossession, and ownership.

Foregrounding Indigenous resurgence in the domain of Canadian environmental politics also brings to the fore the question of how to integrate anti-capitalist and decolonial politics. Considering that the vast majority of people in Canada are non-Indigenous, the question of how to appropriately and effectively engage in solidarity has emerged as a pressing political question. When Naomi Klein asked Leanne Simpson about how to learn from Indigenous peoples without engaging in knowledge extraction or cultural appropriation, her response was that there is a requirement for “a shift in mindset from seeing indigenous people as a resource to extract to seeing us as intelligent, articulate, relevant, living, breathing peoples and nations. I think that requires individuals and communities and people to develop fair and meaningful and authentic relationships with us” (Simpson and Klein).

Both a political transformation and culture shift are necessary, and psychoanalytic theory, Marxism, and decolonial perspectives hold promise for shared critiques and political aspirations. One such critique concerns the individuation and compulsion to consume that characterizes neoliberal or late-capitalist culture. From a Lacanian standpoint, Kapoor writes that “capitalism ... successfully exploits the fundamental (unconscious) lack that lies at the heart of our desires. To ensure the endless expansion of its productive engine, it provides a panoply of commodities and services that promise to satisfy us (and fill our lack)” (“Capitalist Development” 69). Enjoyment increasingly functions as an imperative, and this imperative is one way of characterizing the current historical moment. As Lacan writes, “nothing forces anyone to enjoy (*jouir*) except the superego. The superego is the imperative of jouissance—Enjoy!” (*Seminar XX* 3). Many who write in a Lacanian vein, where the subject is understood as constitutively lacking and desiring, have discussed the “society of enjoyment” thesis (McGowan; Healy), which concerns a shift in the function of the superego—from the prohibition of enjoyment to enjoyment as an imperative. This idea can, in turn, be expressed in political-economic terms in relation to the logic of capital accumulation: “[A]s imperative of enjoyment, the superego comes significantly closer to the demands of continuous economic growth, creation of value, mobility of labour, adaptability of interests, etc. The imperative of enjoyment is the true inscription of liberalism and neoliberalism into the ‘mental apparatus’” (Tomšič 149).

(Neoliberal) capitalism’s drive to accumulate surplus produces in its subjects a structural compulsion to consume beyond the bounds of rational need or ecological capacity. This is not to claim that the average North American has enjoyed “irrationally high” levels of consumption in general

(especially not, following decades of austerity and stagnating wages) but, rather, that significant portions of their consumption are deeply embedded in carbon-intensive infrastructural configurations, what Mathew T. Huber calls an “ecologically irrational system of privatized provisioning” characterized by suburban sprawl, single-detached home ownership, and automobility (*Climate Change as Class War* 154–55). A neoliberal subject is compelled to interface with most of its socio-ecological world as an individuated consumer; neoliberalism seizes upon the point where individual market-driven rational calculations give way to the irrational tendency (of capitalism in the aggregate) to produce for the sake of realizing exchange value and accumulating surplus. This relates to what LaDuke and Cowen have called the Wiindigo economy, “an economic system predicated upon accumulation and dispossession,” one that “denigrates the sacred in all of us” (244). The Wiindigo is a “cannibal monster of Anishinaabe legend” (244), one that “symbolizes the potentially addictive part of the human condition—when certain desires are indulged ... until all reason and control are lost” (Simpson quoted in LaDuke and Cowen 244). Leanne Simpson details the “Wiindigo illusion” of late-capitalist consumer culture as follows:

they cut themselves down, flooded themselves, they fevered themselves. they ate, drank, swam, and breathed in the toxic soup they'd inadvertently created, all in an attempt to fill the bottomless hole. they sat in front of screens for most of their waking hours. they became cannibals ... without the weight of large gaping holes in their beings, people would no longer be willing to pay for disconnection. with nothing to feed, the entire system would fall apart ... for now, her battle with the wiindigo was in its resurgence stage. gezhizhwazh was building an army—a diffuse, scattered group of souls that could see through the wiindigo illusion, because they were whole. (“Gezhizhwazh”)

Clearly, both these perspectives (the psychoanalytic idea of the society of enjoyment and the Anishinaabe idea of the Wiindigo economy) share in a critique of bottomless consumption and the promise that contemporary capitalist consumer society is capable of generating satisfaction. Where they might differ is in whether or not wholeness is understood as being (ontologically/politically) possible, desirable, and advantageous for undergirding a politics. It remains “unsettled” as to whether psychoanalytic theory is better understood as a critique of colonial, capitalist ideologies—the Wiindigo illusion—or whether it itself expresses and eternalizes the

presuppositions of these ideologies. At the very least, as a set of theories and concepts emerging out of the symbolic orders of colonialism and capitalism—situated within the conflicts and struggles for meaning that they analyze—psychoanalytic Marxism will remain indispensable to the critique of ideology.

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