

# Settler Canada's Trans Mountain Pipedreams: An Ideology Critique of Western Alienation

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## Abstract

Applying concepts from Žižekian and Lacanian psychoanalytic social theory to the case of the Trans Mountain Expansion (TMX) project, this paper offers an “ideology critique” of the environmental discourses surrounding the TMX. Chapter One argues for the applicability of psychoanalysis to social and political theory, and to environmental politics in particular (climate change, environmental justice, the politics of energy infrastructure). Chapter Two examines TMX discourse as a network of settler Canada’s social fantasies – namely, (a) “Western alienation” and the settler origin story of Buffalo, (b) “landlocked” Alberta oil and mythical markets in Asia Pacific (with the promise of total enjoyment), (c) the (sexual enjoyment of) scapegoating environmentalists and “foreign” threats, and (d) denial and disavowal of the climate change implications of tar sands development. My overall argument is that “Western alienation” serves as an origin story for Alberta’s extractive industries, one that configures resistance to pipeline development as a centuries-long attempt by “external entities” to hold back Alberta from realizing its autonomy and self-sufficiency. Ultimately, each of these social fantasies works in concert to disavow and conceal the antagonisms inherent to tar sands expansion and pipeline development (Canadian settler colonialism, fossil capitalism, and global climate change), serving to mobilize consent for the TMX.

**Keywords:** Trans Mountain Expansion (TMX) project, ideology critique, psychoanalysis, settler colonialism, environmental politics

## Foreword

Three (ever-unfolding) historical events punctuated the period when this paper was written: the railway blockades and land defence in opposition to the Coastal GasLink pipeline, the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic across the globe, and the anti-racism protests spurred on by the murder of George Floyd. In a matter of weeks, from the height of the blockades to the beginning of the COVID-19 quarantines, the slogan “shut down Canada” had taken on a completely different meaning. The pandemic halted the momentum of anti-pipeline resistance, providing a window of opportunity to nationalize more “critical infrastructure,” subsidize a fossil fuel industry once again in crisis, and resume construction on pipeline projects with minimized threat of physical interference. The murder of George Floyd and the uprising that followed offered a necessary reminder that the prospect of a “return to normal” post-COVID is impossible. The old “normal” had already been a world of systemic racism and injustice careening toward ecological catastrophe. Paraphrasing Žižek, the task today is to understand the dynamics of global capitalism in light of the connections between systemic oppression, pandemics, and ecological crises.

“Settler Canada’s Trans Mountain Pipedreams: An Ideology Critique of Western Alienation” is a major research paper in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master in Environmental Studies. The Area of Concentration is “Ideology Critique and Climate Change Discourse,” comprising the following components: ideology critique, climate change discourse, and post-capitalist political alternatives. This paper is the culmination of an interdisciplinary program where I broadly researched psychoanalytic Marxism, climate change, environmental politics and justice, political economy, and ecology. The following learning objectives were fulfilled in the process of researching and writing this major paper:

1. Study foundational texts in psychoanalysis, Marxism, and ideology critique to gain a deeper theoretical ability to approach contemporary discourses on climate change.
2. Gain an understanding of the methodologies relevant to the intersections of knowledge production, discourse, education, and climate change. Learn about research methods that can illuminate how climate change discourses are shaped and how messages about the climate are communicated to broad audiences.
3. Consider how the possibilities offered in post-capitalist alternatives could facilitate a re-routing of desire and unconscious drive to foster will and consensus toward an environmentally sustainable and post-capitalist future.

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– Isaac

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## Introduction

In all Canada there is no more interesting stretch of waterway than that upon which we are entering. An earth-movement here has created a line of fault clearly visible for seventy or eighty miles along the river-bank, out of which oil oozes at frequent intervals...Tar there is... in plenty... It oozes from every fissure, and into some bituminous tar well we can poke a twenty-foot pole and find no resistance.

– Agnes Deans Cameron, educator and Canadian government representative in Britain, describing the Athabasca region in 1909 (quoted in Gismondi and Davidson 2012, 71).

Applying concepts from Žižekian and Lacanian psychoanalytic social theory<sup>1</sup> to the case of the Trans Mountain Expansion (TMX) project, this paper will offer an “ideology critique” of the environmental discourses surrounding the TMX in the news media and public sphere. Such a critique involves: first, uncovering the social fantasies at stake in the dominant TMX narratives; and second, examining how such social fantasies are sustained by particular forms of desire, enjoyment (*jouissance*<sup>2</sup>), envy, and disavowal. Chapter One will theorize how to effectively do an ideology critique of environmental discourse and Chapter Two will apply those concepts and theories to the case of the TMX. My overall argument is that the public discourses of the TMX constitute a matrix of social fantasies that involve a number of elements: (a) “Western alienation” and the settler origin story of Buffalo, (b) “landlocked” Alberta oil, mythical markets in Asia Pacific, and the promise of total enjoyment, (c) scapegoats and frustrated (sexual) enjoyment, and (d) denial and disavowal of climate change and the environmental impacts of pipeline construction and tar sands development. “Western alienation” serves as an origin story for Alberta’s extractive industries, one that configures resistance to pipeline development as a centuries-long attempt by external entities to hold back Alberta from realizing its autonomy and self-sufficiency. Ultimately, each of these social fantasies works in concert to disavow and conceal the antagonisms inherent to tar sands expansion and pipeline development (Canadian settler colonialism, fossil capitalism, and global climate change), and serves to mobilize consent for the TMX and other projects.

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example: Žižek (1989; 2008; 2010), Stavrakakis (2007), Swyngedouw (2010a; 2010b), Kapoor (2014; 2015; 2018), Fletcher (2013; 2018).

<sup>2</sup> *Jouissance* (enjoyment) refers to a paradoxical form of “(unconscious) excessive enjoyment” (Kapoor 2018b, 18), a pleasure in suffering that results from the subject’s repeated failure to satisfy its desire and capture once and for all its forever elusive object (the *objet petit a*). Thus, *jouissance* helps to explain the unconscious passions, the irrationality at play, when the subject fails to get what it wants, but still comes back for more. For a more detailed explanation, see Kapoor (2015, 69) and Žižek (1999, 293).



## TMX Background

Resistance to the TMX represents one of the largest and most complex Indigenous and environmental justice struggles currently underway in Canada. The pipeline has been in operation since 1953, but the expansion project now under construction will twin the existing pipeline and nearly triple the capacity to transport bitumen from the Alberta tar sands to the west coast of British Columbia. The primary justification for the project is to ensure that Canada “gets full value for its oil” (Trans Mountain Corporation 2020). According to Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, the TMX will open up new markets in Asia Pacific, lessen Canada’s dependence on the United States as its exclusive trade partner for oil, bring short-term economic prosperity to Alberta and to Canada, and provide a long-term revenue stream to invest in the environment and in environmentally friendly forms of energy (Global News 2019).

The federal government’s announcement in May 2018 to purchase the project from Texas-based energy company Kinder Morgan implicated all tax-paying Canadians in the outcome of this struggle, but what precisely is at stake? First, the expansion of tar sands production spurred by the project will increase GHG emissions and intensify climate change, with global environmental implications. The pollution resulting from the extraction, refinement, and transportation of bitumen will also have deleterious effects for local environments and for the people who rely on them for sources of water, food, and cultural significance. Pipelines distribute not just oil, but pollution, environmental harms, and health risks to nearby communities; thus, “the routes we choose for the pipelines have consequences for the spatial organization of environmental inequities in Canada” (Scott 2014, 14-15). Second, TMX has been and will continue to be a site of contestation for Indigenous sovereignty vis-a-vis “reconciliation,” ownership (of land, resources, infrastructure), and legal tests for what constitutes meaningful consultation with (and consent from) Indigenous communities. Finally, TMX is a federally owned infrastructure mega-project, one that embodies both Canada’s internal national contradictions (between Alberta and B.C., between Western Canada and the rest given the rise of “Wexit” and “Western alienation,” between Indigenous communities and the settler-colonial state, and disagreement within Indigenous communities regarding pipeline and infrastructural development) and its ambivalent global position vis-à-vis the political economy of oil and climate action (Canada as a simultaneous promoter of the Alberta tar sands while advocating environmental and climate change responsibilities that are emblematic of Trudeau’s tenure as Prime Minister). In short, TMX is a dynamic space of material and discursive contestation,

situated within multiple scales of local, national, and global environmental politics and political economies of oil.

### **TMX and the Alberta Tar Sands**

To argue that the public discourses promoting the TMX constitute a matrix of social fantasies is to say that the TMX has become a site of material and discursive struggle: an object invested with conflicting ideologies (settler nationalist, right-wing populist, environmentalist, Indigenous sovereigntist, to name a few). As one Edmonton-based journalist put it, the TMX “has moved into the realm of the utterly irrational. It has transformed into a fetish object. It’s like a voodoo doll – keep sticking pins in it and maybe you can feel safe from all the real dangers of the world that you can’t do anything about” (Lisac 2018). The TMX is not just about the fate of one infrastructure megaproject. Rather, it is about investing in (or resisting) a future of tar sands expansion and the attendant harms – carbon emissions amid climate change, cancers and poor health outcomes for communities near sites of extraction and transport, environmental degradation and harms to wildlife along the route of oil spills – while leaving thousands of workers stranded and dependent on an industry in decline. In short, pipeline projects like TMX “cement our reliance on fossil fuels in a way that is dismissive of the rights and well-being of future generations at the same time that [they exacerbate] existing environmental injustice in Canada” (Scott 2014, 14). TMX is the latest and greatest manifestation of a conflict that has been intensifying over the past two decades. To understand how the TMX, and pipeline conflicts more broadly, have emerged as flashpoints in Canadian politics, it is helpful to examine the TMX within the broader history of tar sands development.

The Trans Mountain pipeline began operation in 1953 and has since “served as the key transportation link between the Alberta oilsands and the west coast of North America” (Trans Mountain Corporation 2020). The pipeline runs from Edmonton to Burnaby and transports 300,000 barrels of oil per day, 85 per cent of which is crude oil, with refined products (jet fuel, diesel, gasoline) making up the remainder (The Canadian Press 2019). The expansion project (TMX) will twin the existing pipeline, adding a new pipe that runs parallel to the existing one, approximately tripling the capacity. All new capacity will be used to transport diluted bitumen (or “dilbit”), a highly viscous, acidic, and corrosive form of crude oil, one with considerable challenges of extraction and transport deriving from its material properties. Bitumen (relative to other kinds of oil) is more

difficult to produce and transport and requires considerable refining processes to become useful as a fuel.

A pipeline that would connect the Alberta tar sands to “tidewater” (whether Pacific or Atlantic) has been a major point of contention in North American energy politics over the past decade. Other projects, such as TC Energy’s Keystone XL and Energy East pipelines and Enbridge’s Northern Gateway pipelines, have had a similar experience to the TMX: lengthy regulatory processes, legal challenges and delays, opposition by environmental groups and Indigenous communities, and (in the case of Northern Gateway and Energy East) project cancellation. For proponents of the TMX, connecting the tar sands to tidewater is seen as crucial for facilitating tar sands expansion and reducing Canada's reliance on the United States as its near-exclusive export partner:

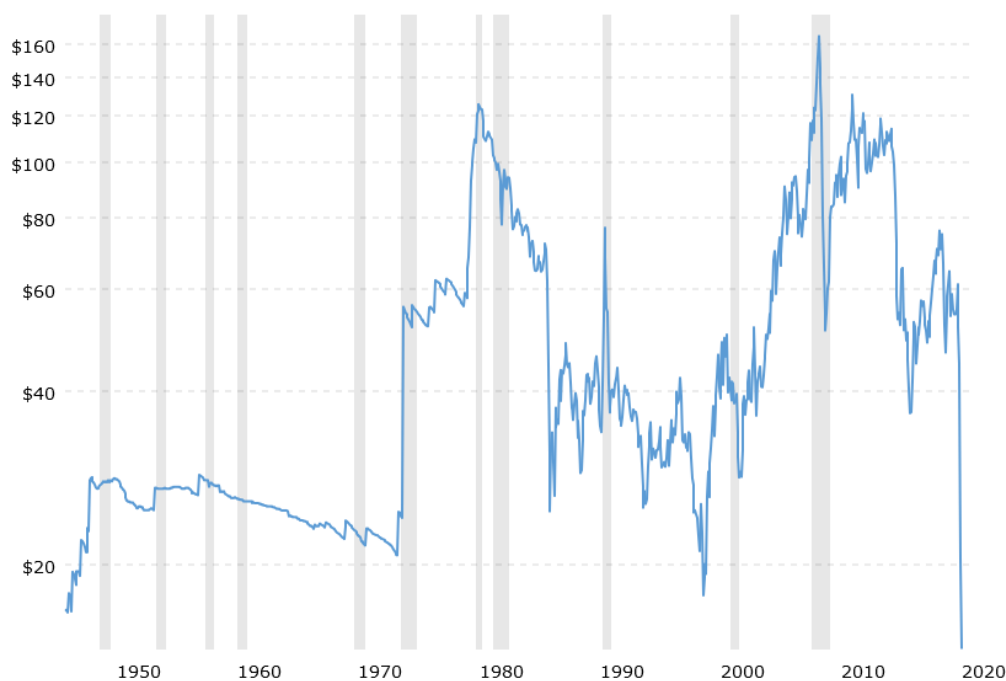
[Oil sands companies]’ interests in access to tidewater are really two-fold: 1. As the US demand for Canadian oil softens, access to global markets enables expansion of oil sands production and the associated increase in revenues and profits, and 2. it would reduce the discount oil sands products have faced because of their being confined to the North American market (Hoberg 2016, 5-6).

“The inability of tar sands producers to get this oil to ‘new markets’ via pipelines to the ‘tidewater,’ where it could be loaded onto tankers for export, means that Western Canadian crudes are selling at a deep discount in relation to world oil price benchmarks” (Scott 2014, 25). It should be noted, however, that historically “as oil prices have collapsed, so too has the discount” (Hoberg 2016, 6). As oil prices plummet to all-time lows in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, the problem of Canadian crude oil prices being sold at a discount to the US loses some relative importance. Tar sands development has always depended on a relatively high oil price to be economically viable. While Canadian tar sands production began in 1967, it was only in the context of the US war in Iraq in 2003 and a corresponding upsurge in oil prices that the tar sands became a major component of North America’s oil economy:

Before this period the extremely difficult extraction and production processes involved in developing tar sands was considered too expensive... but with oil prices heading toward \$150 per barrel, the tar sands not only became viable but the basis for a sudden American reliance on North American petroleum as a source of fuel (Huseman and Short 2012, 223).

In 2014, the price of oil fell, resulting in an estimated \$80 billion in bankruptcies among 123 oil and gas producers, contributing to market uncertainty about how price fluctuations affect pipeline

revenue and earnings; while pipeline companies had historically been considered a stable investment, since 2015 they have become riskier (Indigenous Network on Economies and Trade [INET] 2017, 17-18).



*Figure 1* Crude oil prices over the past 70 years. Source: MacroTrends.

Well before the price of oil collapsed amid the COVID-19 pandemic, there were serious doubts about the economic future of the tar sands in general, not to mention the specific uncertainties related to legal challenges, mobilized political opposition, and Indigenous land defense in the context of the TMX. “The entire oil industry is undergoing significant changes, which is in turn producing a great deal of volatility and uncertainty. Among the structural shifts with which the market is grappling is increased resistance to pipelines as part of the movement against climate change” (INET 2017, 18). There has been considerable divestment from the tar sands by international financial institutions, such as HSBC and BlackRock (Flavelle 2020), citing the irreconcilability of tar sands expansion and meeting global emissions reduction targets. In February 2020, Teck Resources withdrew the application for their proposed \$20 billion Frontier Mine, which would have been one of the largest tar sands developments in history. In announcing the company’s withdrawal of the project, Teck Resources CEO Don Lindsay acknowledged that “global capital markets are changing rapidly and investors and customers are increasingly looking for jurisdictions

to have a framework in place that reconciles resource development and climate change... This does not yet exist [in Canada] today” (Lindsay 2020). Similar to the TMX, Teck’s Frontier Mine had emerged as a “test” for assessing the federal government’s ability to balance conflicting priorities, committing to climate action versus supporting Alberta’s struggling economy (Cruickshank 2020).

Amid economic uncertainties deriving from tar sands divestment, the governments of Canada and Alberta have initiated a pattern of nationalizing “critical infrastructure” projects, i.e. the TMX and Keystone XL pipelines respectively. This strategy aims to sow up investor confidence and court new capital to replace investment flight, but with no indication of increased oil prices or demand, it may prove fruitless. While the discourse of guaranteeing the construction of infrastructure projects might be favourable domestically, it means little to international market demand. In the context of risk and uncertainty related to tar sands development, projects like the TMX emerge as either a saving grace or a desperate last gasp for an industry in inevitable decline.

### **Pipeline Politics: Discourse, Consent, and Environmental Justice**

Pipeline struggles are productive sites for ideology critique insofar as they involve discursive production on many fronts (in media, politicians’ speeches, legal decisions, policy documents, and PR materials) in advance of their construction to secure support from the public and from directly affected communities. Paradoxically, pipelines are at their most visible before they are built: “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” (Scott 2014, 23-24). They require the mobilization of consent from political actors with disparate interests to secure the rights to embed infrastructure beneath vast swathes of territory, crossing multiple jurisdictions. The TMX is set to cross the territories of more than 140 First Nations bands and Indigenous communities (APTN News 2018), with which Trans Mountain has signed 58 Mutual Benefit Agreements (MBAs), i.e. 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 2020). As Pasternak and King (2019) 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). Indigenous ownership stake, if not full ownership of the pipeline, has also been proposed. Federal Finance Minister Bill

Morneau has stated that the government's purchase of the TMX was always about "de-risking" it: "we see our function as de-risking the project, and once the project is de-risked then we see that it has the potential to get back into commercial ownership," which includes the potential of partial or full ownership by Indigenous organizations (CBC News 2019). The TMX has faced considerable opposition from Indigenous communities, both in the form of legal challenges and land defence. Because most of the Indigenous territories in British Columbia are unceded (i.e. no treaties were ever signed) (INET 2017, 7-8), the TMX emerged as a test for establishing a standard for the Crown's duty to consult Indigenous communities who are directly affected by a development project on territories to which they assert title.

Questions of ownership, risk, and benefit are crucial in considering the environmental justice implications of the TMX, but these are complicated by competing claims to community representation – often expressed as a conflict between an elected "band council" and a traditional form of Indigenous governance. Band councils have their origin in the *Indian Act* (1876); they were imposed as a "Western model of governance... which was meant to displace traditional forms of Indigenous governance" (Ishiguro 2017, 154). Competing jurisdictions (e.g. Canadian colonial law versus Indigenous laws) and competing representative bodies (e.g. band councils versus traditional governance structures) have contributed to uncertainty regarding who may consent on behalf of whom and what threshold of consent is required for projects like the TMX. While band councils are typically the representative unit with which private entities enter into MBAs, the Supreme Court of Canada (in the *Delgamuukw* [1997] decision) has "recognized *the nation* as the collective title and rights-holder, not the band council" (Pasternak and King 2019, 30). While Canada has committed to full implementation of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), including the principle of free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC), it has "insisted on further qualification stating that FPIC must be interpreted through domestic legal and constitutional frameworks" (Pasternak and King 2019, 19). In short, Canada "recognizes" the importance of the principle of FPIC in securing the consent of Indigenous peoples, but its implementation in law remains highly ambiguous and contested. These points are echoed by some Indigenous communities – most notably by representatives of the Secwepemc Nation, the Tiny House Warriors – in expressing opposition to the TMX: "we have never provided and will never provide our collective free, prior and informed consent – the minimal international standard – to the Trans Mountain Pipeline Project" (Tiny House Warriors 2020).

Pipelines affect the “spatial and temporal organization of environmental inequities” (Scott 2014, 15). “The greater the geographical distance between those who benefit economically and those who face environmental risks, the more challenging it is to weigh risks and benefits. This situation is common in energy systems where energy production is distant from its consumption” (Hoberg 2016, 4). Finally, there are intergenerational environmental justice concerns insofar as decisions about pipelines involve a temporal distribution of inequities. “Natural resource economies can become spatially locked into a specific configuration of infrastructure because of the inflexibility of the invested capital” (Scott 2014, 19-20). This highlights the fact that the risks of projects like the TMX are not strictly environmental, but also economic, insofar as they embody the tensions between the permanence of built infrastructure and the flux of oil prices (which ultimately determine their long-term viability).

### **TMX: Antagonism, Enjoyment, and Fantasy**

The *official discourse* surrounding the TMX (expressed in comments by Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, Alberta Premier Jason Kenney, in the public education materials by Trans Mountain Corporation, and in media discourse broadly) consists of straightforward, rational, economic justifications for constructing the project. Taken together, they form a narrative that has been often repeated and goes something like this:

Alberta, Canada in general, is being held back from enjoying the full value of its natural resources. The causes are twofold: first, the United States, as Canada’s exclusive trade partner for oil, wields excessive control over the fate of the Canadian oil economy; second, attempts to secure access to other markets are being thwarted by environmentalists, Indigenous peoples, out-of-touch Eastern elites, and international financial interests opposed to pipeline construction and tar sands expansion. The solution is to legally guarantee the construction of a pipeline that would connect the Alberta tar sands to the west coast of British Columbia to secure access to oil markets in Asia Pacific. While we know that tar sands production emits greenhouse gases that will exacerbate climate change and that the extraction and transportation of bitumen will put local environments and peoples at risk, we nonetheless must go ahead with the expansion as the only feasible way to deliver short-term economic gains and long-term sources of revenue to fund environmentally friendly forms of energy. Ultimately, the TMX will benefit everyone, Albertans and all Canadians.

The overall argument of this paper is that this narrative involves several interrelated fantasies: the scapegoating of environmentalists and other perceived “foreign” threats, an appeal to the “Western alienation” of Alberta, a mythical construction of Asia Pacific oil markets as the ticket to full enjoyment, a masculinist and phallic preoccupation with “laying pipe” at all costs, and a

disavowal of the climate change implications of tar sands expansion and pipeline investment. These social fantasies conceal the following antagonisms:

- 1) Economic anxieties in Alberta are inherent to the province's reliance on a boom-and-bust oil economy, not caused by a perceived external threat. There is not a "pipeline shortage;" there is irrational overproduction in the tar sands, which is still increasing and is projected to continue (Government of Canada 2018). This is both environmentally and economically unsustainable; a "sustainable" future is not in oil and gas. Alberta is both the wealthiest province in Canada (in terms of income per capita) (Statistics Canada 2019), and the province with the greatest amount of economic inequality (Block 2017) – both of which are directly connected to its oil economy. As the world moves away from fossil fuels in general, and emissions intensive forms of oil production in particular (such as those in the Alberta tar sands), Alberta will find its ability to enjoy "full value for its natural resources" thwarted time and time again.
- 2) Appeals to the consent of Indigenous peoples to the project often obscure the ongoing history of colonialism and the coercive economic and legal pressures that are its effects. Settler colonialism is both a historical and ongoing process with enduring material repercussions for Indigenous peoples (in particular, impoverishment resulting from the dispossession of land, among other things). The discourses surrounding the TMX commonly refer to the consent of Indigenous peoples by appealing to the number of signed "mutual benefit agreements" or by dismissing competing claims to representation (between band councils and traditional governance systems), both of which fail to acknowledge the way the effects of colonialism (i.e. impoverishment and competing modes of governance) complicate the possibilities for straightforward consent.
- 3) Trudeau's often-touted claim that we can integrate both environmental and economic interests is true, but for the wrong reasons (because in practice it leads to doubling down on environmentally damaging infrastructure and sustaining the grip of the oil industry on Canada's national economy amid considerable uncertainty). While so much of the discourse in favour of the TMX frames the issue as a negotiation between environmental risks and economic benefits, the economic benefits are far from guaranteed. The strategy of using revenues from the TMX to fund a transition toward renewable energy only works if the



project is economically viable, which remains uncertain amid a rapidly changing global ecosystem.

### **Structure of the Paper**

The following chapters will build upon these arguments, drawing on Žižekian and Lacanian theory. Chapter One will discuss the theoretical considerations necessary for an ideology critique of environmental discourses. Chapter Two will then apply this ideology critique to the case of TMX, evaluating how various fantasies emerge and serve to conceal social antagonisms. The Conclusion will highlight a few possibilities for solidarity and political intervention deriving from psychoanalytic theory.

## Chapter One: Environmental Discourse and Ideology Critique

Today... nobody seriously considers possible alternatives to capitalism any longer, whereas popular imagination is persecuted by the visions of the forthcoming “breakdown of nature,” of the stoppage of all life on earth – it seems easier to imagine the “end of the world” than a far more modest change in the mode of production, as if liberal capitalism is the “real” that will somehow survive even under conditions of a global ecological catastrophe.

– Slavoj Žižek (1994, 1)

Rather than assessing TMX discourses as strictly rational negotiations (environmental versus economic, public versus private), as discussed earlier, this paper employs a psychoanalytic approach that seeks to uncover and critique the irrational kernels of (unconscious) enjoyment, anxiety, disavowal, and envy that emerge in the discursive contestations around the project. In this chapter, I will identify and define some of the key concepts of psychoanalytic social theory that have fruitful application to environmental discourse and politics. I will make a case broadly for the applicability of psychoanalysis to social and political theory, and to environmental politics (climate change, environmental justice, the politics of energy infrastructure) in particular. Psychoanalysis is indispensable for social theory because it presupposes the irrationalities of human subjectivity and provides a framework for explicating them in reference to larger scales of political economy and ecology. In short, psychoanalysis grapples with the examination of subjective experience in view of broader, material conditions. I will describe the philosophical foundations of Lacanian theory, Žižek’s concept of ideology, and “ideology critique” as a method of discourse analysis. I will highlight the kinds of affect and “passions” expressed at the discursive intersections of environmental, populist, and nationalist politics (disavowal, denial, [racist] envy, guilt, blame). Finally, I will explore how these theories and concepts enable not just a critical project but suggest opportunities for intervention. Specifically, I will consider the possibilities for “traversing the fantasy,” “breaking attachments,” acting in solidarity, and imagining alternative drives and objects of desire.

## Why Psychoanalysis?

Psychoanalysis is one among many social theories attempting to account for how humanity discursively constructs, emotionally copes with, and politically responds to environmental conflict and injustice. Though many social and psychological theories are needed to make sense of environmental politics and conflict, a psychoanalytic approach is “particularly sensitive to dealing with issues around emotion, anxiety, and defences...” in its emphasis of “the unconscious psychological dimension of our individual, group, and social lives” (Dodds 2011, 6). Psychoanalysis offers theoretical tools capable of mediating between individual subjective experience, intersubjective symbolic networks, and large-scale levels of national and global political economy; it is therefore well-suited to an analysis of the discourses surrounding the TMX.

Recent literatures in the humanities and social sciences emphasize the inconsistent, ambivalent, and contradictory responses to large-scale, complex environmental conflicts, where a simultaneous knowing and not knowing (i.e. disavowal) and a failure to integrate knowledge into action are common.<sup>3</sup> As Fletcher (2018) points out, environmental discourses are often grounded in a “rational actor perspective, in which subjects are seen, by and large, as self-interested individuals coolly weighing the costs and benefits of alternative courses of action and choosing that which promises to maximize one’s material utility” (64). Psychoanalytic theory complicates this assumption by acknowledging “that knowledge and/or ‘rational’ argumentation are not enough as catalysts of change” (Stavrakakis 2007, 165). In short, one cannot assume that more information will always equate to more rational behaviour, concern, or political activity. In the case of climate change, for example, there can be a paradoxical relationship between the availability of scientific information and people’s sense of concern and personal responsibility; sometimes more information translates to less concern. In a survey of the American public, Kellstedt, Zahran, and Vedlitz (2008) found that those who had more information about climate change and more trust in climate science generally felt less concern and less personally responsible (120). Finally, as Žižek often insists, the scandal of knowledge is that it is insufficient in itself – one cannot simply know something; one must also *believe* it:

Why does knowledge have to be supplemented by belief?... Belief... supplements a gap, an imminent split, within knowledge itself, hence we are not dealing here with just a gap between knowledge and belief. The same goes for our stance towards the threat of ecological catastrophe: it is not a simple ‘I know all about the

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example: Žižek (2008); Norgaard (2011); Lertzman (2015); Kapoor (2018); Fletcher (2018).

ecological threat, but I don't really believe in it.' It is rather 'I know all about... and I nonetheless believe in it,' because I do not really assume my knowledge. (Žižek, 2014, 52)

This point is crucial and overlooked by mainstream science communicators who are often stumped, both by people who deny climate change in the face of ample evidence to the contrary, and by people who accept the reality of climate change but who nonetheless fail to act accordingly or “believe” their knowledge. One of Neil deGrasse Tyson's signature lines is “the good thing about science is that it's true whether or not you believe in it.” Žižek's reply might be something like this: “the unfortunate thing about science is that even if it is true you cannot simply know it, you must also believe in it.” Appeals to scientific evidence and the authority of climate experts are insufficient to bring about the immense political will necessary to address the ecological crisis; we must also consider desire, drive, and passion as conduits for action. An engagement with psychoanalysis is crucial for making sense of broad psychic motivations and for determining ways to channel desire into action.

### **Lacanian Social Theory**

Interpreting Freudian concepts in cultural rather than biological terms, Lacan ushered in the linguistic turn in psychoanalysis, famously stating that the unconscious is “structured like a language” (1977, 20) and applying concepts from structural linguistics (e.g. signification) to broader psychological and philosophical questions of subject and being. Lacanian psychoanalysis has fruitful applications to social and political theory precisely because “the unconscious is conceived intersubjectively,” thus “wresting it from any notion of a separate, individual mind; rather, because the unconscious is integral to language, it is part and parcel of a shared (albeit unstable) horizon of meaning” (Kapoor 2014, 1123). For Lacan and Žižek, the unconscious should not be conceived as a deep, internal, subterranean entity, something to be penetrated or excavated. Rather, the unconscious is “outside,” at the very limits of our shared symbolic networks of meaning. The unconscious is “*the form of thought whose ontological status is not that of thought...* the form of thought external to the thought itself” (Žižek 1989, 13).

Lacanian theory accounts for the split, ambivalent, conflictual, and contradictory experiences of individual subjects not as mere personal failing, but as an effect of the lack that constitutes subjectivity as such. Humanity's entrance into language (figured as a mythical trauma), our move from Nature to Culture, is accompanied by a profound sense of loss (a subtraction from the primordial unity-totality) which is generative of the subject. This model of subjectivity is intimately

bound up with the limitations of language, which is ultimately “nothing but a string of signifiers, with each signifier deriving meaning purely relative to other signifiers” (Kapoor 2014, 1122). When human beings enter into language, we experience a loss of direct access to Nature, capable thereafter only of relating to it linguistically, through the use of signifiers. The psychoanalytic implication is that we shift from experiencing reality in terms of *needs* to experiencing reality in terms of *desires*, which can never be satisfied “because [they are] mediated by a signifying system that is always imprecise and lacking” (ibid., 1122).

The insatiable object of desire is what Lacan terms the *objet petit a*, which corresponds to a surplus beyond symbolization (i.e. the Real) and involves a drive that compels the subject to repeatedly seek out a mythical and unreachable object. The impossibility of ever satisfying desire and experiencing total enjoyment is what produces *jouissance* – a kind of pleasure in pain, a joyful suffering resulting from and compelling further failure to acquire once and for all the *objet petit a*. Stavrakakis (2007) describes *jouissance* as an “unconscious energy, difficult to displace, which invests displeasure with a pleasurable quality” (181). The ambivalence of *jouissance* can be explained via the distinction between desire and drive. With desire, the subject attempts to rectify its ontological loss/lack by fixating on an object, only to miss it and re-enact that loss. With drive, loss is itself the object. Desire is the process of tending toward but always missing an object, while drive is the continual orbit around the object. “Desire is like the path of an arrow; drive is like the course of the boomerang” (Dean 2014, 221). *Jouissance* figures into both: it is always out of reach in the context of desire and impossible to get rid of in the context of drive, thus sustaining the repetition and failure.

The Lacanian triad (or three registers of psychic experience) consists of the Symbolic, the Real, and the Imaginary. The Symbolic is the realm of signification, meaning, language, signs, and symbols; “it designates our attempts to represent the Real and impose order upon it” (Fletcher 2013, 798). The Real is that which eludes symbolization; “just as the unconscious exists as the limit to consciousness, so the Real exists as the limit to our symbolic world” (Kapoor 2018b, 18). Finally, the Imaginary is the domain of consciousness and fantasy, where we attempt to cover up the gaps and obscure the antagonisms (the Real) in the Symbolic order; it is a “screen concealing the gap” between the Real and the Symbolic (Žižek 1989, 132). Lacan (1977) describes the unconscious as being “situated at that point, where, between cause and that which it affects, there is always something wrong” (23); “what occurs, what is *produced*, in this gap, is presented as *the discovery*” (25). The unconscious is the always unrealized (simultaneously excessive and lacking) causal gap between

a Real (not a whole, totality, oneness, but a negative, lack, rupture) and an effect (symptom, neurosis). Discontinuity is the essential form of the unconscious at the point of its discovery, provoking in the subject a feeling of surprise that is immediately and retroactively integrated as a rediscovery, concealing once again that which was always already there (ibid., 25). This temporal logic of retroactivity (*après-coup* or “afterwordness”) is a recurring feature in Lacanian theory. Desire, for example, posits its own cause (the *objet petit a*) retroactively. In a parallel way, the *point de capiton* “quilts” the chain of signifiers retroactively; it has the function of the master signifier that totalizes the discursive field, halts the endless chain of metonymic sliding, and provides the semblance of an ultimate Guarantee of meaning.

### **Žižek and Theories of Ideology**

In Marx’s earlier writings, the concept of ideology referred to a kind of illusion, a social consciousness, an inverted mirror of reality that serves to mystify social relations. In *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels (1968) argue that “in all ideology men and their circumstances appear upside-down as in a *camera obscura*.” They connect this conception of ideology to their historical-materialist method:

We do not set out from what men say, imagine, conceive, nor from men as narrated, thought of, imagined, conceived, in order to arrive at men in the flesh. We set out from real, active men, and on the basis of their real life-process we demonstrate the development of the ideological reflexes and echoes of this life-process. The phantoms formed in the human brain are also, necessarily, sublimates of their material life-process, which is empirically verifiable and bound to material premises... Life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life. (Marx and Engels 1968)

In this view, ideology is understood as part of the superstructure, a composite of ideas and consciousness determined by the economic base. Althusser (1994) expanded on this tradition, still locating ideology within the superstructure, but elaborating its reflexive element, the Ideological State Apparatus, which accounts for how ideology is materialized in and through the state (and the behaviour of subjects), and how subjects are interpellated by the state in and through ideology toward the goal of reproducing the relations of production. Žižek is chiefly responsible for resuscitating the theoretical relevance of ideology by reinterpreting classical Marxist motifs in the theory of ideology (commodity fetishism, reification) through the dual lenses of Lacanian psychoanalysis and Hegelian dialectics. Žižek applies the Lacanian concept of the unconscious to the question of ideology; ideology is both latent and spontaneously interactive within social reality. For

Žižek (1994), ideology is a “generative matrix that regulates the relationship between visible and non-visible, between imaginable and non-imaginable” (1). “Ideology regulates the dialectical relationship between” the Symbolic and the Real (Vighi and Feldner 2007, 29). It functions as a kind of knowledge immanently split between its explicit, rational, transparent ideas (i.e. the Symbolic) and its “unthinkable, unrepresentable... nucleus of disavowed enjoyment” (i.e. the Real) (ibid., 29). The Imaginary functions as the register of (ideological) fantasy and consciousness, that which structures the relation between the other two.

To understand Žižek’s theory of ideology, it is helpful to contrast his philosophy with that of Michel Foucault, whose project largely represented a rejection of both psychoanalysis and Marxism. Foucault was concerned with the relationship between knowledge and power. In his studies on sexuality he attempted to account for how power (via knowledge of sexuality and the body) is expressed at the level of individual subjectivity and pleasure. Foucault advanced a notion of “positive” or “productive” power, in contrast to “Power” understood as a top-down, external imposition: “power must be understood... as the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organization” (Foucault 1978, 92).

Relations of power are not in a position of exteriority with respect to other types of relationships (economic processes, knowledge relationships, sexual relations), but are immanent in the latter... relations of power are not in superstructural positions, with merely a role of prohibition or accompaniment; they have a directly productive role wherever they come into play. (ibid., 94)

Both Žižek and Foucault are interested in how the subject is constituted vis-à-vis discursive formations and how forms of pleasure and enjoyment emerge as political factors, as expressions of social power. This latter element is perhaps Foucault’s chief relevance for psychoanalytic social theory. As Stavrakakis (2007) sums it up, “by pointing our attention to the passage from a *purely* ‘negative’ (repressive and coercive) to a *predominantly* – although not exclusively – ‘positive’ (productive and enabling), but no less alienating, type of power relations, Michel Foucault has also highlighted the importance of the axis of enjoyment” (183).

On the other hand, Foucault’s psychoanalytically informed critics point to his insufficient engagement with the Real in his theory of power:

In the Foucauldian universe there are no cracks, no extra-discursive loopholes from where the new could enter. With the surplus dimension of the Real missing, all we can do, if we do not want to fall prey to the lures of ideology as a privileged-viewpoint theory, is to describe the workings of discourse and power-knowledge, and

feel encouraged by the fact that what we are facing is merely a historically contingent setting which might have been, and thus could be, utterly different. (Vighi and Feldner 2007, 27)

For Foucault, “ideology” must always stand “in virtual opposition to something else which is supposed to count as truth,” which renders the concept unusable (Foucault 1980, 118). Žižek’s (1994) response, however, is that “the concept of ideology must be disengaged from the “representationalist” problematic: *ideology has nothing to do with ‘illusion,’* with a mistaken, distorted representation of its social content,” (7) or with a “false consciousness.” In other words, “truth” and “ideology” do not necessarily stand in opposition; a statement can be fully true, but no less ideological: “what really matters is not the asserted content as such but *the way this content is related to the subjective position implied by its own process of enunciation,*” and the way this content is made “functional with regard to some relation of social domination ... in an inherently non-transparent way” (ibid., 8).

For example, following the Federal Court of Appeals unanimous decision on February 4, 2020 to dismiss the challenges brought by four First Nations groups opposed to TMX, Jason Kenney stated that “a hundred and twenty-nine First Nations groups were consulted and at least 120 were in favour or not opposed [to TMX]. That’s the number we should keep our eye fixed on” (Kenney quoted in Dean 2020). What makes this statement ideological is not that it is false or “distorted” in its positive content; rather, it is ideological for its silent presuppositions or “blind spots,” for its function toward social domination. Specifically, it accounts for neither the economic coercion (linked to colonialism and the impoverishment derived from land dispossession) at stake when Indigenous communities sign benefit agreements with the state, nor the tensions and disagreements within Indigenous communities related to who may consent on behalf of whom (Indian Act “band councils” versus traditional modes of Indigenous governance), nor which segments of these communities stand to benefit from the agreements at the expense of others. Unwilling or unable to address these elements, all of which are directly connected to the history and ongoing process of Canadian colonialism, Kenney prompts the public to “keep its eye fixed” on the numbers, as if they speak for themselves.

Both Žižek and Foucault agree that any notion of ideology that posits a privileged subject position (authentic access to Truth, outside of ideology) is untenable. For Foucault, this means the notion of ideology must be abandoned. For Žižek, this means the concept must be reworked with reference to Lacan’s notions of the unconscious and the Real – “a cause that is never present in the field of its effects” (Vighi and Feldner 2007, 23).



## Antagonism, Fantasy, and Ideology Critique

It should be noted that Žižek is not just a philosopher of enjoyment, but equally one of antagonism, and these two notions are closely connected in his work (Kapoor 2018a, 2). For Žižek (1989), antagonism is not just social but also ontological; the social antagonism (e.g. class struggle) is always an expression of “a fundamental deadlock (‘antagonism’), a kernel resisting symbolic integration-dissolution” (XXV). In other words, antagonism corresponds to the Real, that point at the limit of symbolization and language. In fact, Žižek remarks that “all ‘culture’ is in a way a reaction-formation, an attempt to limit ... this radical antagonism through which man [sic] cuts his umbilical cord with nature” (ibid., XXVIII). This is not to say that Žižek’s philosophy is one that naturalizes capitalist social relations or posits economic inequality as an inevitable, transhistorical feature of human nature, but rather that “struggle” itself, an ontological antagonism (whether expressed in terms of the relations between the sexes or class society) is constitutive of “*la condition humaine* as such” (ibid., XXVII). Antagonism is inescapable, regardless of the contingency of its social-historical manifestations. It is not something that can be overcome once and for all or avoided, but something that must be constantly acknowledged and faced head-on. “There is no escape from [antagonism]: the traumatic Real is constitutive of the human condition” (Kapoor 2018a, 2).

Fantasy is precisely this attempt at “concealing” the antagonism, of suturing the gap between the Real and the Symbolic. Fantasy is the scene through which desire is constituted; “what the fantasy stages is not a scene in which our desire is fulfilled, fully satisfied, but on the contrary, a scene that realizes, stages, the desire as such ... *through fantasy, we learn how to desire*” (Žižek 1991, 6). Fantasies establish the coordinates for both desire and enjoyment. The Real is the realm beyond symbolization and the *objet petit a* is precisely the embodiment of “this surplus of the Real over every symbolization” (Žižek 1989, XXV). It is in this sense that the *objet petit a* is not simply the “object of desire,” but the object-cause of desire, the little piece of the Real that presents itself to the subject as part of the Other. The *objet petit a* is a “trait or feature attributed to the other,” that which “defines the other’s being for the subject... As the cause of the subject’s desire, the [*objet petit a*] is a kind of mirage, existing as the material index of an empty place in the topography of the subject’s psychic constitution” (Eisenstein and McGowan 2012, 95). “Desire is not something given in advance, but something that has to be constructed” (Žižek 1991, 6). Desire posits retroactively its own cause and “fantasy designates the subject’s ‘impossible’ relation to *a*, to the object-cause of its desire” (Žižek 1991, 6).

One of the tenets of psychoanalysis is that we do not have full, conscious control over our thoughts, feelings, and desires, nor do we truly know what we want, let alone how to get it. Once again, this problem is not strictly social, but is deeply ontological. “The notion of social fantasy is therefore a necessary counterpart to the concept of antagonism: fantasy is precisely the way the antagonistic fissure is masked. In other words, “*fantasy is a means for an ideology to take its own failure into account in advance*” (Žižek 1989, 140). If an ideology is essentially split between its rational, transparent discourse and its irrational, disavowed promise of *jouissance*, it is undoubtedly this latter element that most profoundly hails a subject ideologically: “the last support of the ideological effect (of the way an ideological network of signifiers ‘holds’ us) is the non-sensical, pre-ideological kernel of enjoyment” (ibid., 140). It is in this sense that an ideology or social fantasy might posit a scapegoat, a phantasmatic externalization of an antagonism that is immanent to a given set of social relations. “In its essential function of explaining its own failure to fully satiate, fantasy commonly invokes a ‘scapegoat’, an ‘external element’ or ‘foreign body’ ostensibly ‘introducing corruption into the sound social fabric’ and thereby subverting the fulfilment that would otherwise be achieved” (Fletcher et al. 2014, 1206). Antagonism is “the constitutive contradiction of an entity with itself: things come to be out of their own impossibility, the external opposite that poses a threat to their stability is always the externalization of their immanent self- blockage and inconsistency” (Žižek 2020, 5). The scapegoat fantasy is precisely a way to conceal the immanence of an antagonism. The scapegoated Other is, in a sense, the “real” of a fully constituted symbolic identity, the element in excess of the subject’s self-recognition as Whole. As Stavrakakis (2007) puts it, “scapegoating, the sinister type of difference as exclusion and demonisation, always remains a real possibility inscribed at the core of any identity claim” (195).

Ideology critique aims to analyze each of the component parts of ideology and consists of two complementary procedures. The first involves a discursive or “symptomal reading” of how the antagonisms manifest; the aim is to “discern the unavowed bias of the official text via its ruptures, blanks, and slips” (Žižek 1994, 10). The second involves “extracting the kernel of enjoyment, at articulating the way in which – beyond the field of meaning but at the same time internal to it – an ideology implies, manipulates, produces a pre-ideological enjoyment structured in fantasy” (Žižek 1989, 140). Ideology critique is a way of analyzing the contradictions, antagonisms, inconsistencies, absences, and enjoyments at work in a text (whether a newspaper article, politician’s speech, or policy document). In short, the first step is to determine *how an ideological fantasy is constructed*, what it

leaves out, obscures, covers up, disavows; the second step is to determine *why an ideological fantasy is constructed that way*, uncovering the irrational desires, excitements, and enjoyment invested (Kapoor 2014, 1135). Simply describing a discursive field is insufficient because it fails to account for the degree to which antagonism and enjoyment form two sides of the same “real.” As Stavrakakis (2007) explains, “the persistence of political antagonism can be explained only when we become aware of the (libidinal and other) investment of political discourse, of the real of enjoyment” (194).

### **Denial, Disavowal, and Neoliberal Environmentalism**

Denial in its various forms is the most discussed psychic mechanism (or affect) related to climate change and environmental politics. Anxiety is typically understood as an alert system to aid in survival, but when we are overwhelmed by anxiety, we are prone to “quick fixes” aimed at avoiding or reducing the anxiety (Weintrobe 2013, 36). Denial emerges as a means to reduce anxiety in the subject, to temporarily avoid negative feelings such as fear, guilt, and the pain associated with loss. Within the psychoanalytic and psychosocial traditions there are many overlapping frameworks that attempt to categorize the different types of denial and disavowal. In her study of various forms of denialism in Norway, Kari Marie Norgaard (2011) describes the three following forms of denial: *literal denial* is the assertion that something is untrue (as is the case with people typically called “climate change deniers” or “climate skeptics”); *interpretative denial* involves accepting the facts, but offering different interpretations to their meaning (this is the terrain of euphemisms, technical jargon, and perhaps also the most brazen forms of green capitalism that frame climate change essentially as a market opportunity); finally, *implicatory denial* involves minimizing not the information, but the social, political, and moral implications which follow (10-11).

Norgaard is particularly interested in this third form and describes it alternatively as “the failure to integrate... knowledge into everyday life or transform it into social action” (ibid., 11). Sally Weintrobe (2013) distinguishes three further forms of denial with some overlap: *negation* (akin to literal denial) is saying that what is, is not; *disavowal* (similar to implicatory denial) is where reality is accepted, but the significance minimized, resulting in *a simultaneous knowing and not-knowing*; finally, *denialism* involves campaigns of misinformation aimed at undermining the authority of climate science and promoting climate change skepticism (7). Though this third form is less strictly psychological, it is an important reminder of the economic interests that underpin much of how climate change is communicated and politically responded to. It is necessary to evaluate psychic

mechanisms, anxiety defences, and discourses surrounding climate change in the context of their political-economic and ideological embeddedness.

Zižek's classic formula of fetishistic disavowal – “they know very well how things really are, but still they are doing it as if they did not know” (1989, 30) inverts and reinterprets Marx's (1887) description of human behaviour in relation to commodity fetishism: “whenever, by an exchange, we equate as values our different products, by that very act, we also equate, as human labour, the different kinds of labour expended upon them. *We are not aware of this, nevertheless we do it*” (49, emphasis added). Zižek's (1989) point here is that “they [i.e. humans in contemporary late-capitalist society] are fetishists in practice, not in theory” (28). People know through common sense that money has no intrinsic value and functions as a system of symbols used to facilitate exchange – but for this to function, they must act effectively as if it does have value in itself. They know that money is but the embodiment of a social relation, but they do not know that the practice of exchange depends on effectively ignoring that fact, i.e. it is only upon a closer consideration that the unconscious ideological fantasy at work in the practice of exchange can be perceived. It is in this sense that the illusion is not on the side of knowledge, but already on the side of social reality itself, i.e. at work in people's spontaneous social activity (ibid., 30), their practice; and this is what is at stake when Zižek claims that ideology is functioning. He thus defines ideology not as “an illusion masking the real state of things,” but rather as “an (unconscious) fantasy structuring our social reality itself” (ibid., 30).

Not only is the phenomenon of fetishistic disavowal crucial for Zižek's concept of ideology, it has explanatory power in a range of contemporary psychological, social, political, and economic contexts. As Zižek states, “not only the market, but our entire social life is determined by such reified mechanisms” (2008, 453). For example, the theme of disavowal is frequently applied to a critique of neoliberalism. Fletcher (2013) applies the concept to analyze how proponents of neoliberal interventions pave over and avoid discussing the gap that often separates the vision (or fantasy) from the execution (set of practices) of a neoliberal project. This ties into what has been described as the “virtualistic” character of neoliberalism (Carrier and Miller 1998), whereby neoliberalism paradoxically seeks to impose a particular market mechanism justified by the premise that such a mechanism already exists. It is in this way that the failure of neoliberal policies to realize their visions can be accounted for in advance, paving the way for further neoliberal interventions to

be framed as solutions to problems that they create, thus serving the ideological function of “effacing the traces of [their] own impossibility” (Žižek 1989, 50).

Disavowal is also expressed in neoliberal environmentalism. As Fletcher (2018) 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” (66). “Neoliberal environmentalism” is, in short, the idea that market mechanisms (carbon markets, cap and trade programs, etc.) 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 2012 quoted in Fletcher 2013, 796).

### **Extractive Populism: Affect and Ideology**

While pro-TMX discourses are configured within a broader neoliberal environmentalist perspective (especially as articulated by Justin Trudeau and the federal Liberal party), the discourse also exists as a point of mobilization for populist politics, specifically “extractive populism” (or “petro-nationalism”). Slogans such as “Build the Pipeline,” “I Love Oil and Gas,” “Make Alberta Great Again,” are embedded in a network of ideological fantasies (Western alienation, Wexit) that foreground particular settler subjectivities and obscure social antagonisms (climate change, settler colonialism, class conflict), in part by activating strong feelings and symbolic identifications. As Kapoor (2018a) argues, “it is affect – the deployment of unconscious desire and enjoyment – that is key to understanding the recent global rise of populist politics” (225-226). Noting that “populism” has a plurality of competing definitions, Paul Saurette (2019) identifies two broad traditions for understanding what populism is: the first treats populism as “a particular type of political and social movement” defined by criteria such as who supports the movement, what their interests are, who funds them, and how they are organized; the second tradition “treats populism as an ‘ideational’ phenomenon or worldview” that “‘frames’ the political view of its adherents” and influences what they see and how they feel about politics (16). This latter definition – populism as ideology, as a site of ideological fantasies – is well suited to psychoanalytic intervention.

For Saurette (2019), populism is an “archetypal political narrative” (i.e. “ideological fantasy”) or “rhetorical style,” “an emotional story that tries to *move us emotionally*, by invoking three common

elements: (1) a protagonist that stands in for “the common people,” (2) antagonists described as “elites,” and (3) a plot characterized by “an emotionally charged clash between good and evil” (17). Shane Gunster (2019) describes the phenomenon of “extractive populism” in Canada, which he sees as “an inflammatory brand of political rhetoric that has increasingly taken centre stage across the country” (13). Gunster points out that one of the basic contradictions of extractive populist discourse is its simultaneous promotion of oil and gas industries in the name of the “national interest” while remaining firmly opposed to actual nationalization: “while the oil and gas sectors fiercely opposed... ‘real’ nationalization as a threat to corporate profit and private sector-led development, they gradually realized that *symbolic* forms of nationalization were extremely useful in legitimating the tar sands for publics outside of Alberta” (Gunster 2019, 14). This strategic ambivalence to nationalization continues to play out in the context of both the TMX and the Keystone XL pipeline, where billions of public dollars have been recently earmarked for investment in the private sector. Thus, Alberta premier Jason Kenney had this to say on March 31, 2020 when he announced the government’s plans to invest in the Keystone XL pipeline:

This investment... is a bold move to retake control of our province’s economic destiny and put it firmly in the hands of the owners of our natural resources, the people of Alberta. Now, let me be blunt: I’ve always been sceptical about government intervention in the market, but our failure to get pipelines built has been a failure of government policy and politics, not of markets... [Keystone XL] was delayed for years because of a very political US presidential veto and legal tactics by foreign-funded special interests trying to landlock Alberta energy. (Jason Kenney quoted in Government of Alberta 2020, 4:02)

Gunster describes the primary claims of Canadian extractive populism, which are on display in the above Kenney quote, as follows: (1) extractive industry is the core of the Canadian economy and provides universal benefits, (2) extractive industry is under attack by a foreign threat, and (3) we must therefore mobilize in support of extractive industry for the “national interest” (14-15).

The extractive populist discourse is bolstered by a particular kind of nationalism: “the principal rhetorical strategy through which ‘the people’ and the petro-industrial complex are sutured together is *symbolic nationalization*” (Gunster 2019, 14). The paradox is that symbolic nationalization is mobilized in part to counter actual, substantive forms of nationalization that could more effectively redistribute the wealth produced by extractive industry and natural resources. While it is common today to think about identity “as an invariably fluid, multiple construction,” certain religious, cultural, and national identities have remained a stubborn “sticking point” (Stavrakakis 2007, 191), including the petro-nationalism that has become synonymous with the cultural identity of Western

settler Canadians. Forms of nationalism and national identity have fixity not merely because they are sustained in a discursive network (one which provides meaning and wholeness), but also because they involve the mobilization of *jouissance* and passions such as envy. In short, the discourse “sticks” because it is able to channel *jouissance*.

Nationalist fantasies typically involve an “original state” characterized by happiness, prosperity, lack of conflict, and community wholeness. That the present state, for example, shows signs of conflict and imperfection is taken as proof of a foreign, corrupting entity (the Other, the scapegoat) who has deprived the national subject of its enjoyment. Nationalist ideologies therefore are often based on “the assumption that the desire of each generation is to try to heal this (metaphoric) castration and restore the lost full enjoyment” (Stavrakakis 2007, 199). The scapegoated Other is not simply the entity onto which blame for social antagonism is displaced; it is not strictly a kind of social explanation. The scapegoat is also an entity saturated in excess forms of enjoyment which stirs envy in the subject. The subject, in turn, derives its own *jouissance* from envying the enjoyment of the Other. In short, the scapegoat fantasy provides not just meaning but pleasure. Thus, the Other is written into the very logic of symbolic identification; the “foreign,” corrupting entity is the oppositional complement of the phantasmatic, “whole” community or nation. One of the political implications of this, as highlighted by Eisenstein and McGowan (2012), is that “there is an inextricable bond between enjoyment and envy, as if we can enjoy only through the envy of the Other’s enjoyment” (88). Moreover, “the envy of the Other’s enjoyment will sabotage every attempt to constitute social solidarity... To write envy out of our social arrangements would be to do the impossible: to write enjoyment out of them at the same time” (ibid., 89).

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued for the applicability of psychoanalytic theory to environmental politics. Psychoanalytic theory posits a concept of subjectivity that is constitutively lacking, split, and prone to ambivalences, thus making it useful for understanding how humankind responds to large-scale, complex socio-political issues (such as climate change). While it is broadly accepted that modes of discourse and meaning shape social reality, what (Lacanian) psychoanalysis adds is the concept of the unconscious, the Real, the limits to symbolization and shared meanings. Žižek’s main contribution to social and political theory has been to resuscitate “ideology” as a useful category of critique by re-reading Marxist motifs via Lacan. His theory of ideology accounts for how subjects (individual and social) construct fantasies in order to cover up both the gaps in language’s

constitutive failures and the antagonisms immanent to human society. Žižek's theory of ideology understands enjoyment as a political factor. Proponents of "ideology critique" seek to understand not just how an ideological fantasy is discursively constituted, but how *jouissance* is mobilized in support of various racist, nationalist, and populist fantasies. The following chapter will apply these concepts to the case of the Trans Mountain Pipeline Expansion (TMX) project and offer an ideology critique of the fantasies within which pro-TMX discourses are embedded.



## Chapter Two: Ideology Critique of TMX Discourse

“Let’s drill that well. Let’s take that land. Let’s not talk about this for the rest of the day. And let’s not have a bloody committee. And if we fail, we fail big. But if we win, we’re gonna win big.”

– Jim Gray, geologist who discovered the Elmworth Deep Basin (gas basin) in 1976 (CBC 2001)

On one hand, the TMX represents something unprecedented and new: with recent cost estimates at \$12.6 billion, it is arguably the largest fossil fuel subsidy in Canadian history (Leavitt and Ballingall 2020); it is an example of the emerging trend of nationalizing “critical infrastructure” projects in Canada; and it is an embodiment of the Trudeau government’s attempts to balance climate change mitigation, support for Alberta’s oil and gas industry, and reconciliation with Indigenous peoples. On the other hand, the TMX is a familiar story about the extractive, expansionist tendencies of Canadian settler colonialism and fossil capitalism. Having passed through several years of regulatory processes and legal challenges – perhaps most significantly, a transfer of ownership from Texas-based energy company Kinder Morgan to the federal government – the TMX is currently under construction at the time of writing, though the question of its completion, operation, and economic viability remain open. This chapter will examine the ideological landscape within which the TMX became embedded and assess how the project became materialized in a network of settler Canada’s social fantasies – namely, (a) “Western alienation” and the settler origin story of Buffalo (b) “landlocked” Alberta oil, mythical markets in Asia Pacific, and the promise of total enjoyment (c) scapegoats and frustrated (sexual) enjoyment, and (d) denial and disavowal of climate change and the environmental impacts of pipeline construction and tar sands<sup>4</sup> development.

My overall argument is that “Western alienation” serves as an origin story for Alberta’s extractive industries, one that configures resistance to pipeline development as a centuries-long attempt by external entities to hold back Alberta from realizing its autonomy and self-sufficiency. The subject constituted through this fantasy (what I call the subject of Western alienation) is driven to seek total enjoyment and regain its lost *jouissance* and in so doing posits various objects (a unified

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<sup>4</sup> In this paper, I opt for the term “tar sands” in lieu of “oil sands” (unless the latter is used in a source), in following the rationale of Huseman and Short (2012): “the term oil sands fails to convey the constituent complexity of the tar sands..., serves to sanitize the environmentally destructive industrial processes intrinsic to this particular form of oil production... Thus, if one is not seeking to minimize the impact of these externalities the term ‘tar sands’ is preferable” (220-221).

Buffalo, an independent Western Canada, Asian markets for Canadian bitumen, and the TMX itself) that promise a final satisfaction, but never deliver. To explain why its enjoyment is perpetually frustrated, the subject of Western alienation invokes various scapegoats, which serve to intensify the drive to repeat the failure to achieve political autonomy, (sexual) satisfaction, and economic stability. Ultimately, each of these social fantasies work in concert to disavow and conceal the antagonisms inherent to tar sands expansion and pipeline development (Canadian settler colonialism, fossil capitalism, and global climate change), and serve to mobilize consent for the TMX and other projects.

### **Western Alienation: Colonialism Without Settlers**

The most passionate pro-TMX discourse comes from the part of the country that has the most at stake economically: Alberta. The “boom and bust” cycles of the province’s oil-dependent economy are as well known across the country as they are devastating for the people who live there. After the price of oil fell in 2014, more than 100,000 oilpatch workers lost their jobs (Cattaneo 2017) and the suicide rate spiked 30 per cent (CBC News 2015). The COVID-19 crash promises to be worse, with already more than 117,000 jobs lost in March of 2020 alone (Stephenson 2020). Economic anxieties had been steadily building in the province, rallying a strong base of support for pipeline projects and tar sands development. “Western alienation” is not a new phrase or phenomenon in Canadian politics, but in the aftermath of the 2019 federal election, a result that saw nearly all of Alberta and Saskatchewan elect Conservative MPs, it gained a new set of contemporary rallying cries: #Wexit, “make Alberta great again,” modelled after the two well-known populist slogans.

Within the discourses promoting the TMX, “Western alienation” is the central fantasy; it sustains historical continuity from settler origin myths to contemporary pipeline struggles. In Lacanian terms, Western alienation functions as a *point de capiton* (“quilting point”) for pro-TMX discourses. It is a master signifier that “quilts” a network of other signifiers, providing the semblance of a stable ground for their meanings. In short, Western alienation confers a set of cultural meanings and social explanations that prefigure the (political) subjectivities of Western settlers in the struggle over the TMX. The ideological space of the TMX is “made of non-bound, non-tied elements, ‘floating signifiers’ [e.g. pipeline shortage, oil glut, landlocked oil, tar sands divestment, foreign-funded conspiracy, dirty oil, oil sands, tar sands, ethical oil, OPEC dictatorships], whose very identity is ‘open’, overdetermined by their articulation in a chain with other elements” (Žižek 1989, 95). Master signifiers like “Western alienation” serve as “more than mere anchoring points; they

refer to a beyond of meaning, a certain enjoyment that becomes structured in fantasy” (Swyngedouw 2010b, 305). Master signifiers and meanings are “fixed only by such factors as convention, habit, acts of authority and/or leaps of faith” (Kapoor 2014, 1122). Western alienation is the element that provides a (phantasmatic) continuity, from settler origin myths to contemporary desires for pipeline development. “The experience of a linear ‘organic’ flow of events is an illusion... that masks the fact that it is the ending that *retroactively* confers the consistency of an organic whole on the preceding events” (Žižek, 1991, 69) – this is precisely how Western alienation (as a *point de capiton*) functions in a historical narration to mobilize support for tar sands development in the present.

While they appear to be saturated with meaning, providing a stable Guarantee, a *point de capiton* performs a “purely structural function,” (Žižek, 1989, 110), and is in itself nothing but “pure difference” (ibid., 109). This partially explains how populist and nationalist discourses can appear homologous to Marxist or leftist ideologies; in this case, “Western alienation” functions as a substitute for class struggle, “Laurentian consensus” for bourgeoisie. Benedict Anderson (1991) argues that nationalisms are both capable of commanding “profound emotional legitimacy” as well as being “modular,” i.e. “capable of being transplanted, with varying degrees of self-consciousness, to a great variety of social terrains, to merge and be merged with a correspondingly wide variety of political and ideological constellations” (4). My claim is that Western alienation is a fantasy – the fundamental fantasy in the context of pro-TMX discourse – that both stages a desire for tar sands expansion and pipeline development and provides an explanation in advance for why the satisfaction of such desires are often thwarted. In so doing, it ultimately functions as a form of nationalism that disavows the violence of settler colonialism, displaces the inequalities inherent to Alberta’s oil economy onto a supposed power imbalance along Canada’s east-west axis, and reaffirms the legitimacy and necessity of neoliberal extractivism.

One particularly potent expression of Western alienation can be found in the Buffalo Declaration, a 13-page document penned by four Conservative MPs from Alberta, released on February 20, 2020 amid the land defense and solidarity blockades in opposition to TC Energy’s Coastal GasLink (liquefied natural gas) pipeline. The Declaration articulates the frustrations of Albertans, provides social explanations given for those frustrations, insists upon the cultural distinctiveness of Alberta, and constructs an origin story of a time and place called “Buffalo.” It also makes a set of demands with the threat of secession, the first of which is “restore investment stability in Alberta’s energy sector by formally acknowledging and promoting Alberta’s energy sector

as a source of sustainably produced energy” (Rempel Garner et al. 2020, 11). The document is particularly relevant insofar as it narrates a history of Alberta from the nineteenth century to the present day, one that weaves together Western alienation, settler innocence, and contemporary political conflicts related to energy infrastructure and environmental policy (including the TMX) in Canada.

The Declaration’s main argument is that there is a fundamental inequality in Canada between the Eastern provinces (specifically between the so-called “power class” or “Laurentian consensus” of Ontario and Quebec) and the West (specifically Alberta and Saskatchewan), the roots of which “have been historically repeated and are entrenched in our political system” (ibid., 1). Moreover, “the economic and social challenges faced by Canada today... are the symptom of the colonial power structures from which Alberta and Saskatchewan were born” (ibid., 1). The latter sentence is particularly striking insofar as it appears to reverberate with a kind of leftist, decolonizing orientation. The Declaration is filled with statements that express anger and struggle in the face of Canadian colonialism – crucially, a notion of colonialism that is wholly divorced from any acknowledgement of settler violence or complicity, one that presents Canadian colonialism as a system imposed from outside on inhabitants, “settler and Indigenous alike,” “without consultation” (ibid., 2).

The particular critique of colonialism advanced in the Declaration responds to the history of the North-West Territories (present-day Alberta and Saskatchewan), which in the second half of the nineteenth century “were governed by the Canadian Department of the Interior, essentially as a colony without representative institutions” (Ishiguro 2017, 128). In short, the “colonial relationship” being identified and critiqued in the Buffalo Declaration is one of taxation without representation. While there is no question that the Canadian state established a relation to the Western provinces and territories in the nineteenth century that was fundamentally extractive and colonial, the Declaration simultaneously flattens the difference of Indigenous and settler peoples in their experience of Canadian colonialism while effectively indigenizing Western Canada’s settler population: “Indigenous and settler alike, we were a people who forged a strong connection to the land in order to survive, and we still do so today” (Rempel Garner et al. 2020, 6). This aligns with previous analyses of settler colonialism that argue that “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

2008, 373). To paraphrase Veracini (2008), a settler society (1) is by definition premised on the violent dispossession and displacement of Indigenous others, (2) often expresses a need to disavow its own founding violence, (3) often narrates itself as a fantasy of communities devoid of conflict, and (4) appeals to a situation where the transplanted settler collective would get back the *jouissance* that was historically taken away (364-365).

“Buffalo” was the name proposed by Sir Frederick W. A. G. Haultain, the first premier of the North-West Territories (modern-day Alberta and Saskatchewan) when seeking provincial status in the early twentieth century; the proposal was rejected, unsupported by then-prime minister Wilfred Laurier, and Alberta and Saskatchewan were separated when they became provinces in 1905. Western alienation, and its most recent expression – Wexit – can be understood as an enduring attempt to retrieve this original (mythical) unity that was lost at the hands of the governing Liberal party. The irony of the name, not lost on Indigenous critics of the Buffalo Declaration, is that by this point in history (i.e. late nineteenth and early twentieth century) the bison herds of North America had been decimated, an event that both symbolized and materially contributed to the settler-colonial consolidation of power of in Northwestern North America:

Especially as bison herds disappeared in the 1870s and Indigenous communities experienced ensuing starvation and disease, an emerging and increasingly powerful Canadian state project sought to dispossess Indigenous people and resettle white newcomers through treaties, reserves, land acts, immigration agreements and interventions into family life (Ishiguro 2017, 128).

In response to the Buffalo Declaration, the Confederacy of Treaty Six First Nations Chiefs (2020) released a statement, which included the following: “the Buffalo are a sacred being to our ceremonies and our culture, and in no way should it be used for a political gain. The audacity to select the very four-legged being that your ancestors attempted to wipe out in an effort to annihilate our existence, is an insult to our people.” It is illustrative that for a segment of Alberta’s white settler population “Buffalo” signifies a time and place characterized by the unity of hardworking people (“settler and Indigenous alike”) living off the land, “innocently busy” (Veracini 2008, 371), while for many Indigenous peoples it is a reminder of the violence, dispossession, famine, disease – genocide – brought upon by settler colonialism.

The Buffalo Declaration also disavows the degree to which settlement in Alberta in the late nineteenth century was a colonial strategy of the Canadian state. By framing white settlement largely in terms of the spontaneous movement and free will of individual families, the Buffalo Declaration

fails to acknowledge how “agricultural white settlement became a predominant British and Canadian goal for the Prairie West [between 1857 and 1885]” (Ishiguro 2017, 128). Moreover, “during the mid-nineteenth century, the Canadian government... began to seek to attract white settlers to the Prairie West through immigration promotion and land policies intended to facilitate small-scale agriculture on individual homesteads” (ibid., 129). As elaborated by Barker et al. (2016),

“This period [1880 – 1940] featured a transition from early forms of settlement and imperial economics towards private property regimes and the engineering of Settler-Indigenous segregation. It is no coincidence that many of the foundational myths and narratives of Canadian nationalism and identity emerged during this time” (154).

The Declaration states that “immigration patterns of settlers to Alberta are also historically distinct. At a time when the East attracted bankers, lawyers and other capitalists into established industries, Alberta was drawing families who survived harsh climates and had an ability to live off the land,” (Rempel Garner et al. 2020, 5) as if it was the land itself that beckoned for settler migrants. Such an origin story supports an enduring narrative that rather than being a site of colonial expansion and capitalist exploitation (of people and nature), Alberta is a place of independent, hardworking, self-sufficient people who simply want to “control their own destiny” (ibid., 3). And yet, the control that the average Albertan has over their own destiny seems to be thwarted time and time again by a political economy of boom and bust promoted by the same political class who penned the Buffalo Declaration.

### **The Lost Object: Landlocked Oil and Mythical Markets**

To appreciate what is at stake for a Western alienated subject desiring the TMX, it is necessary to identify what emerges as lost at the point of origin, i.e. Buffalo. The history of Buffalo provides a perfect illustration of the logic of the signifier. As Eisenstein and McGowan (2012) explain,

signification creates a retrospective illusion of loss. The subject of the signifier... has lost its privileged object as a result of its entrance into signification, but it has lost what it never had. The distortion created by the signifier produces the illusion of an actual object that was lost. But the lost object is not a privileged object that has been lost... but an object that attains a privileged status through being lost (194).

The emergence of the signifier “Buffalo” coincides with the birth of the separate provinces of Alberta and Saskatchewan and their integration into Canadian confederation. In short, Buffalo emerged historically as something already lost to be regained. It is precisely this loss that elevates it to the status of privileged object or *objet petit a* – “the original lost object which... coincides with its

own loss” (Žižek 1989, 178). “Buffalo” expresses both an original unity, “a society which is not split by an antagonistic division, a society in which the relation between its parts is organic, complementary” (Žižek 1989, 142), and an original trauma, separation, and loss. The *objet petit a* is fleeting and the desire for it insatiable. The object’s relation to desire is also characterized by a particular form of temporality and causality. As Žižek (1991) argues, “the paradox of desire is that it posits retroactively its own cause, i.e., the [*objet petit a*] is an object that can be perceived only by a gaze ‘distorted’ by desire” (12). In other words, the subject’s desire (for pipeline construction, tar sands expansion) is staged by looking back at a (phantasmatic) history of Western alienation. Over time, the *objet petit a* becomes embodied in new and different objects, sustaining the subject’s drive toward repetition and failure:

throughout its existence, the subject will place forms of this object in its path, and it will repeat its failure to obtain the lost object. The subject will always seek its lost object in whatever particular empirical object it pursues, but no particular object will ever be the lost object. Any object that the subject does obtain ceases at just that point to embody the lost object (Eisenstein and McGowan 2012, 195).

This explains some of the ambivalence relating to the TMX’s purchase by the federal government: once the TMX’s final regulatory hurdles had been overcome – once it was “obtained” – it ceased to embody the *objet petit a* for the subject of Western alienation. On one hand, polling data shows that Alberta is by far the province that supports the TMX the most; an “unwavering” 87 per cent of Albertans want the project built (CBC News 2020b). On the other hand, the response to the federal government’s purchase of the TMX has been lukewarm, if not negative, despite the fact that the project could not have proceeded without it. The authors of the Buffalo Declaration, for example, state that the “nationalization of the TMX pipeline” (along with the carbon tax, Bills C-69 and C-48, and the demise of Northern Gateway and Energy East pipelines) has “served to close Alberta’s economy to investment and job growth” (Rempel Garner et al. 2020, 4). Many Albertans make sense of the TMX’s nationalisation by assuming “that Trudeau bought the pipeline to kill it – a conspiracy that doesn’t make much sense when you consider the expansion would be dead already if the federal government had done nothing” (Gerson 2019). Critics of nationalization also see it as an indication “that Canada’s regulatory approval process for major infrastructure programs is profoundly broken” (Green 2018). Nationalization of the TMX is perceived once more as a kind of loss, a loss for the private sector and a loss for the capacity of Albertans “to control their own destiny without handouts from Ottawa” (Rempel Garner et al. 2020, 3).

The repeated failure to secure control over its (economic) destiny is the source of *jouissance* for the subject of Western alienation. As previously discussed, the fantasy of Western alienation examined here involves a struggle against a colonial Canadian government, one where the establishment of settler society in Western Canada occurred independently of the structures of this colonial government and its founding violence. It is also a story about struggling to integrate political autonomy, economic independence, individual liberty, and an economy predicated on extraction – particularly of oil and gas from the twentieth century onward. This ongoing struggle is constitutive of the identity of the Western alienated settler subject; while its desires to integrate freedom and extraction are repeatedly thwarted, it nonetheless derives meaning and *jouissance* from this failure.



Figure 2 Pro-pipeline protestors gather outside a venue where Finance Minister Bill Morneau was speaking in 2018. The protestors chant “build that pipe now!” Source: Jeff McIntosh.

If the numerous fantasies quilted through Western alienation are predicated on a disavowal of settler colonialism – colonialism with neither settlers nor founding violence – this serves to obscure both the ongoing harms of settler colonialism against Indigenous peoples as well as the exploitation (of workers and natural environments) inherent to extractive capitalism. Colonialism and capitalism are based on and sustained by extraction (Simpson 2018). “In the Canadian case, capitalist development has had a quintessentially extractive and exclusionary history,” one predicated



on excluding Indigenous peoples from their own land, extracting natural resources from the environment, and extracting paid and unpaid labour from workers and families (Fast 2014, 31). Capitalist social relations require workers to be maintained at a level of economic development where they can only reproduce themselves as workers, unable to accumulate enough wealth to change the class structure (Lynch et al. 2016, 148). Workers are placed “in a position where they destroy nature (in legal and sometimes illegal ways) for capitalist accumulation. This is also seen in the Canadian tar sands, where workers are placed in a position where they must support oil sands development” (ibid., 149).

Beyond mere support for the tar sands, for many Albertans oil and gas is a point of pride and identity. However, “the industry with which Albertans have for so long been encouraged to identify is in fact not ‘Albertan,’ but transnational. What drives its investments decisions has little to do with the provision of long-term, sustainable livelihoods for any particular community in Alberta” (Adkin and Miller quoted in Massie and Jackson 2020, 53). Most tar sands production (70 per cent) is owned by foreign companies and shareholders; this means the majority of profits leave the country, while the majority of liabilities (abandoned wells, tailings ponds) stay in the country and fall to the public to pay for (Stand et al. 2020, 1). Several factors make the Alberta government’s reliance on the oil and gas industry as a primary source of revenue damaging for the average Albertan. The extractive sectors are more capital intensive than labour intensive (in short, they rely more on technology than workers); as a result, there is “a strong correlation between extraction (particularly oil and gas and mining) and high levels of inequality in the primary distribution of income” (Fast 2014, 50). Relatively low corporate tax rates and weak royalty regimes mean that less and less of the surpluses produced through extraction end up as government revenues that are redistributed to the public (ibid., 54).

Reliance on resource extraction also leaves government revenues at the mercy of commodity prices; when prices inevitably drop (or crash), governments are left with revenue shortfalls and a public that has grown accustomed to high-quality social services paired with relatively low taxes (ibid., 55). In response to Jason Kenney’s claim that a Green New Deal represents a “pie-in-the-sky ideological scheme,” Stephen Buhler (an oil and gas worker who organizes with Climate Justice Edmonton) had this to say: “frankly, it was pie-in-the-sky... to base an entire provincial budget on projections of \$58 per barrel oil... With oil prices catering, the most responsible thing... would be to chart a new course through the interconnected crises of climate change, mass inequality and oil

volatility” (Heidenreich 2020). The economic precarity of Alberta is not reducible to the province’s peripheral position relative to the centre of Canadian political power, as authors of the Buffalo Declaration would have us believe. Rather, crisis, inequality, and instability are inherent to the political-economic foundations of Alberta’s regime of neoliberal extractivism. There is a basic antagonism, an incompatibility between the frontier ethos articulated in the Buffalo Declaration (one that celebrates self-sufficiency, a desire for individual freedom, and a drive to achieve personal economic liberty) and the political-economic foundations of the province.

An ideological fantasy functions to smooth over and obscure a social antagonism. Fantasies establish the coordinates for both desire and enjoyment. In this regard, one of the most common fantasies in the pro-TMX discourse involves the relationship between “landlocked oil” and “Asian markets.” There is a common refrain that Alberta oil is “landlocked” and that constructing the TMX will open Canadian oil to new Asian markets, thus freeing Canada from relying on the United States as its near-exclusive trade partner for oil and thereby addressing the discount on Canadian oil prices. When Justin Trudeau first approved the TMX in November 2016, getting “Canadian energy resources to international markets beyond the United States” was given several times as the primary justification (Government of Canada 2016). And this justification has been repeated countless times by those who support the construction of the TMX. Rarely acknowledged is the fact that the existing Trans Mountain pipeline has since 1953 supplied crude oil from the tar sands to Pacific tidewater. There already exists a transportation route to get Canadian energy products to Asia, but it is rarely used. Only 10 per cent of the tankers leaving the Westridge Marine Terminal between 2013 and 2018 were destined for refineries in Asia or Hawaii (Donaghy 2018, 6). While the expansion project would triple the pipeline’s capacity, expand production in the tar sands, and increase the scale of tanker shipments leaving the Pacific coast, there is simply no guarantee that there will ever be more of a market in Asia for Alberta crude than what already exists.

Alberta oil is more difficult and expensive to refine compared to the light sweet crude from countries in the Middle East, and countries in East Asia currently lack the refining capacity to make Alberta crude useful and economically viable. Compared to light and medium crude oils from places like Nigeria and the Middle East, Alberta bitumen is expensive to produce, difficult to handle, and provides no security of supply advantages (Kane 2019). Moreover, the TMX will have to compete with producers in countries that can pay far less to ship their cheaper-to-refine oil in much larger ships (Wilt 2018). While investment in pipeline infrastructure by the Canadian federal government

signals to Canadians and to the international community the intention to increase tar sands production, the business case for the project (let alone the economic justification weighed against the environmental risks) is highly contestable. In short, “nothing about a new pipeline will change the fact that Alberta’s heavy oil takes more effort to refine into usable products and is located farther from major markets than most other sources” (ibid.). An apparent confidence in the existence of Asian markets persists despite the acknowledgement of the economic risks of the project. The TMX was ultimately deemed too economically risky for Kinder Morgan, which prompted the federal government to purchase the project in order to “de-risk” it, with a view to selling it back to the private sector down the road.

With so much uncertainty surrounding the long-term economic viability of the TMX, specifically the demand for Alberta crude by Asian countries, the repeated appeals to “Asian markets” hints at an economy of enjoyment beyond the confines of a strictly rational business case. “Asian markets” stand in opposition to Alberta’s “landlocked oil:” if the latter is the embodiment par excellence of the province’s centuries-long experience of Western alienation (of being frustrated at the hands of confederation, or some other external imposition, despite the hard work and best efforts of Albertans), then the former stands in for the exact opposite – a new and unbounded frontier, a fantasy that promises a kind of limitless “total enjoyment” that is fundamentally illusive. Moreover, an unstable, boom-and-bust oil economy paired with a frontier culture that privileges individual economic liberty through self-sufficiency might be particularly harmful and prone to anxiety. As Healy (2014) notes,

“the danger is that when we imagine we are completely in charge of our enjoyment the structure of fantasy changes from an explanatory compensation for our lost enjoyment to a space for believing we can ‘somehow recover our lost *jouissance* (enjoyment)’, that total enjoyment is possible... The delusion of total enjoyment is dangerous to the psyche because it instills unreasonable expectations and inexorably generates an anxiety as the subject encounters enjoyment’s spatio-temporal limits” (185).

“Total enjoyment,” the kind hinted at in the discursive emphasis on “Asian markets,” involves an overestimation of the degree of control that the subject has (or ought to have) over its own enjoyment. Thus, the relationship between landlocked oil and Asian markets in TMX discourse constitutes a fantasy, one which conceals the antagonisms intrinsic to Alberta’s oil economy and expresses an enduring attempt by the subject of Western alienation to recover its lost *jouissance*. In order to understand why the fantasy is configured in this way and how it structures enjoyment, I will

now turn to the function of scapegoats, the enjoyment of the Other, and sexual and gendered images intrinsic to extraction.

### **Laying Pipe: Sex, Scapegoats, and Climate Change Disavowal**

In analyzing the discourses in support of the TMX, I have identified Western alienation as the *point de capiton*, the primary nodal point through which the ideological field is totalized, unified, and provided meaning, and through which settler origin myths are brought to bear retroactively on the present moment. I have argued that the subject of Western alienation, in promoting the TMX, orients itself around an *objet petit a*, which is embodied variously in Buffalo (the original, unified whole), in the TMX itself, and in mythical Asian markets for bitumen. In this section, I examine how the *jouissance* that the subject of Western alienation derives from repeatedly failing to secure control over its economic destiny is organized around a litany of scapegoats and sexual images. Beyond the “symptomal reading” offered so far, which sought to describe the ideological field and its discursive components, I will now assess how “ideology implies, manipulates, produces a pre-ideological enjoyment structured in fantasy” (Žižek 1989, 140).

“Landlocked oil” conveys a blend of (sexual) denial, frustration, and envy. Read against the backdrop of the sexual logic of extraction, “landlocked oil” is an unbearable interruption of the libidinal flows of oil and capital. This fantasy stages the subject as constrained to a marginal position, forced to bear witness to the widespread enjoyment of others. In order to snatch back some of its *jouissance*, the subject of Western alienation centres itself in a conspiracy aimed at denying its enjoyment. It is precisely this re-positioning (as chief victim of a conspiracy plot) that allows the subject to take back *jouissance*, derive enjoyment from its (alleged) erstwhile loss. The subject regains a sense of control by understanding its loss of autonomy and enjoyment as a coordinated set of activities by “foreign” entities. This fantasy is more meaningful and palatable to the subject of Western alienation than the alternative: that the subject’s loss of autonomy and (libidinal-economic) enjoyment derives from a set of conditions that are much less coordinated and much more contingent (e.g. the material properties of bitumen, the geo-physical location of Canada’s pacific coast, global concerns around GHG emissions related to climate change mitigation). If “landlocked oil” captures the denial, frustration, and envy of the subject of Western alienation, “Asian markets” are precisely the embodiment of the Other’s excessive enjoyment. They are the ultimate sites of “total enjoyment” (excessive consumption and reproduction) from which the subject of Western alienation is perpetually denied. As I will elaborate later, it is specifically China’s growing demand for

energy that provides a twofold justification for tar sands expansion and pipeline construction: first, as an economic opportunity for export; and second, as a cynical justification for domestic climate inaction and disavowal.

To explain the function of the scapegoat, it is necessary to reiterate the relationship between antagonism, fantasy, and enjoyment: antagonism is a fundamental deadlock, an intrinsic impossibility; fantasy serves to obscure antagonism, constitute desire, and structure enjoyment. A fantasy is commonly expressed in the form of a scapegoat, which provides a compensatory explanation for why a fantasy does not deliver on its promise. In other words, a “fantasy is a means for an ideology to take its own failure into account in advance” (Žižek 1989, 142) and this element of “failure” is often expressed in the form of an external, “foreign” entity. A scapegoat correlates to what Žižek calls a “social symptom” (1989, 143): an intrinsic social antagonism is displaced onto an external entity which is perceived as a threat to the stability and order of an organic Whole. The scapegoat can also be understood in reference to the relation between the subject and the Other. As Kapoor (2014) explains, the subject’s enjoyment is bound up with the enjoyment of the Other; the subject enjoys in part by envying the Other’s enjoyment (1131). In short, “we form our subjecthood and desires through the Other” (ibid., 1123). The scapegoat is the subject’s phantasmatic projection onto the Other, in opposition to which the subject constructs its identity. The subject has multiple “blind spots,” i.e. elements that it cannot come to terms with, and so projects them onto an external or “foreign” entity (ibid., 1127). For the subject of Western alienation, such “blind spots” include the disavowed elements of settler-colonial violence, the economic antagonisms of extractive neoliberalism, and the ecological and climatic effects of tar sands extraction.

Appeals to various scapegoats, foreign threats, and conspiracies have been integral to Alberta premier Jason Kenney’s rise to power and to his strategies of mobilizing consent for tar sands development and pipeline construction. Against the backdrop of perceived external threats (“foreign-funded special interests,” “the green left,” “OPEC dictatorships”), Kenney’s 2019 election campaign championed a “fightback strategy” for Alberta and a promise to create “a rapid response war room” to “rebut every lie told by the green left” (Globe and Mail Editorial 2020). The so-called “Alberta War Room” (officially named the Canadian Energy Centre) is an “independent provincial corporation” with a mandate “to promote Canada as the supplier of choice for the world’s growing demand for responsibly produced energy” (Canadian Energy Centre 2020). With a budget of \$30 million per year, the War Room is essentially an arms-length government communications

organization that promotes the province's largest industry. What makes the War Room significant is not that it exists as a communications channel for disseminating positive stories about the province's most important sector, but rather that it is "an agency of government... masquerading as an independent news organization" (Globe and Mail Editorial 2020), similar to *Ontario News Now*, launched by Doug Ford's Conservative government. Moreover, the combative tone, hastiness, and antics surrounding the War Room (its logo was found to be plagiarized, for example) make it an embodiment of an industry and province desperately aware of its uncertain economic future. In February 2020, after the *New York Times* published a piece about divestment from the tar sands (Flavelle 2020), the CEC responded with (and later apologized for) a mish-mash of attack tweets: "[The *NY Times*] aren't the most dependable source...and have been called out for anti-Semitism countless times... so their track record is very dodgy."<sup>5</sup> In December 2019, the CEO of the Canadian Energy Centre (CEC), Tom Olsen, made a slip of the tongue while explaining the role of the CEC: "we are not about attacking; we are about disproving *true* facts" (Gerson 2020, emphasis added). Both the denial and slip are significant here. First, the CEC's mandate is part of a government ("fightback") strategy that couches a great deal of its activities in terms of combat and war; in other words, the CEC actually *is* about attacking. Second, the CEC devotes a large portion of its efforts to creating content that minimizes the environmental impacts of Alberta's extractive industry.

Kenney's overall strategy for promoting Alberta's oil and gas sector, as evidenced by the activities of the War Room and by other comments that he has made, has been about attacking on all fronts, pointing fingers in every direction, a seemingly paranoid discursive strategy that has been described as "Facebook-era McCarthyism" (Turner 2019). Perhaps the best example is the \$2.5 million public inquiry that Kenney's government launched in July 2019 "to expose the foreign interests behind the anti-Alberta energy campaign" (Walter 2019). Kenney has alleged that for more than a decade Alberta has been the target of a well-funded, sophisticated, multi-pronged political propaganda campaign to defame Alberta's oil and gas industry and landlock the province's energy resources (Government of Alberta 2019). The conspiracy theory loosely ties together the Rockefeller Foundation, Russia, OPEC, and an alliance of North American ENGOs in a plot to specifically

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<sup>5</sup> Original tweets deleted by CEC but screenshots re-posted by Jason Markusoff, *Twitter*, February 12, 2020.

target Alberta's oil and gas industry – in short, a case of “American billionaires killing Canadian jobs” (ibid.). In his speech announcing the launch of the inquiry, Kenney said the following:

What I have always found most curious about this is that the same groups and the foundations behind them, the other sources of shadowy funding, have apparently done *little or nothing* to forestall a doubling of oil production in the United States or a 10 per cent increase in global oil production and consumption... We've seen huge increases in production and consumption from the OPEC countries, from the Russian autocracy, from the Venezuelan dictatorship, and even from our neighbours to the south, but *almost all* of this political pressure has been focused on this liberal democracy with the highest human rights, labour, and environmental standards. And we want to know why, who, and how much. We want to understand what exactly lies behind this campaign to defame and landlock Canadian energy. That's why I'm pleased to announce today the launch of a formal public inquiry into all facets of the foreign-funded and directed attempts to landlock our energy... Most importantly, [the public inquiry] will serve notice that Alberta will no longer allow hostile interest groups to dictate our economic destiny as one of the most ethical major producers of energy in the world (emphasis added) (ibid.).

Perhaps the biggest myth in the foreign funding conspiracy theory is the idea that Alberta is being disproportionately targeted, the recipient of “almost all” the political pressure. In analyzing the granting data from charitable foundations and non-governmental funders, Garossino (2019) concluded that Canadian environmental organizations do not receive disproportionately high amounts of foreign funding, and in fact receive surprisingly little considering Canada is the fourth-largest producer of crude oil and holds 10 per cent of the world's oil reserves. While Kenney cites the increased oil production of Alberta's competitors over the past 10 years, he fails to mention that Alberta's production also rose during the same period. The past 10 years have also seen highly visible mobilizations against fossil fuel developments outside of Alberta. Resistance to the Dakota Access Pipeline in the US, for example, was so charged that it inspired some people in Canada to refer to opposition to the TMX as “Standing Rock of the North” (INET 2017). Resistance to pipelines is a North America-wide (and global) political issue, not something that strictly affects Alberta. “Climate change” is the unspoken phrase (or “blind spot”) in this conspiracy theory, as if the primary motive of environmental organizations and Indigenous land defenders is to send Alberta into economic ruin (rather than environmental protection, carbon emissions reduction, or territorial sovereignty). During the rail blockades and land defense in opposition to CGL pipeline in February 2020, Kenney argued that the opposition represented a “dress rehearsal” in anticipation of TMX's construction; he further added: “this is not about Indigenous people. It's not about carbon emissions. It's about a hard-left ideology that is, frankly, opposed to the entire modern industrial

economy” (Snyder 2020). Kenney’s statements are a refusal to acknowledge the relationship between capitalism, settler colonialism, and climate change. Moreover, Kenney’s position on “foreign funding” is fundamentally inconsistent; he sees it as an excessive and undemocratic influence on ENGOs, but apparently has no issue with 70 per cent of tar sands production being owned by “foreign” capital. While Jason Kenney courts international investment for the tar sands he simultaneously uses “foreign funding as a scare tactic to distract the public from climate change and to discredit, silence, and intimidate environmentalists” (Garossino 2019). The foreign funding conspiracy theory appeals to those people who feel left behind by telling them that they are actually at the centre of a global conspiracy to undermine their economic wellbeing. Feeling unfairly targeted is more compelling than feeling ignored in the face of shifting global-ecological and political-economic conditions well outside of the control of the average Albertan.

As Žižek (1989) notes, “fantasy is, in the last resort, always a fantasy of the sexual relationship, a staging of it” (141), and extractive industry and pipeline development are replete with sexual metaphors and gendered connotations. As Parson and Ray (2020) have pointed out, “references to extraction, like the sexual slang, ‘laying pipe,’ suggests the discursive link between the female body and oil extraction is familiar enough to be embedded in popular culture” (249). One enduring narrative in the history of tar sands extraction involves pairing together technological-scientific mastery with rugged hard work (both gendered masculine) in overcoming and deriving value from a wild natural landscape (gendered feminine). The basic frustration (or challenge) of the tar sands is the abundance of bitumen paired with the difficulty of its extraction, refinement, and transport (the elements that have always haunted the commodity’s economic viability). This abundance of difficulty has necessitated large-scale infrastructural development and technological intervention, images of which have been discursively mobilized in support of extractive industry. Historically, images of the Alberta tar sands have been characterized by a certain “wow factor,” displays of “massive machinery dwarfing humans and devouring landscapes,” images that convey the “immensity of the resource, the jobs, and the wealth to keep the scale of destruction at bay, displaced by the wonder of huge technologies” (Gismondi and Davidson 2012, 94).





*Figure 3* Image of an evaporator, a large machine that treats water for tar sands steam generators, on a highway leaving Edmonton, Alberta. Source: Andrew Scott.

Beyond the physical appearance and technical application of these machines (such as the evaporator pictured above), the symbolic function of their images can also be described as “phallic” insofar they express “the embodiment of a lack, of a chasm of non-sense gaping in the midst of ideological meaning” (Žižek 1989, 110). Specifically, the emphasis on the sheer size of the machine, the preoccupation with the grand scales in which it operates, obscures the basic conditions of its necessity: capital flight or divestment from the tar sands. Technologies like the evaporator have emerged in order to make bitumen extraction “more cost-effective and competitive in a low oil price environment” where “it is necessary to reduce capital investment in equipment;” low oil prices increase the demand for “modular and prefabricated solutions to reduce site construction costs and minimize project risks” (Shmidt 2016). In short, what is glossed over in such mainstream popular science articles as “Super-sized load the length of a football field hits the road to oilsands” (CBC News 2020a) is precisely how this large machine emerges (materially and symbolically) from the lack of any guarantee of economic viability in the future of tar sands extraction.

If traditional masculinity is embodied in both the roughneck labourer and the phallic technologies of extraction, so too is the feminized (and sexualized) body “implicated in the way the extractive industry describes its relationship to the environment and in the way it imagines its social obligations” (Parson and Ray 2020, 248). Sexualized images of women’s bodies “are part of a larger project to develop fossil fuel labor as ‘masculine work’ and to connect resource extraction to virility, both personal and national” (ibid., 260). In February 2020, an Alberta energy company (X-Site Energy Services) came under fire after an image began circulating online of a decal that showed a woman or girl with her braids being pulled from behind, the name “Greta” written across her lower back, alongside the company’s logo. The image provoked outrage from people who interpreted it as a depiction of rape of Greta Thunberg, the Swedish climate activist who had visited Alberta months earlier. When the company’s general manager was asked whether he was fine with an image of his company that condones the rape of children, he allegedly answered, “she is not a child, she is 17” (Bartko 2020).

The gendered associations and sexual logics of extraction are not strictly “symbolic” (expressed solely through the language, images, and discourses of extraction); they express themselves also “in practice,” in the activity of people in and around sites of extraction. High rates of sexual violence that disproportionately affect Indigenous women and two-spirit people are linked to “man camps,” i.e. “temporary housing facilities often operated by [extractive] industry to house their transient workforce” (Women’s Earth Alliance and Native Youth Sexual Health Network 2017, 30). In opposition to the construction of the TMX (and specifically to the Blue River Campsite in B.C.), the Tiny House Warriors (2020) released a statement that articulated the links between sexual violence, extractive industry, and settler colonialism:

Man camps provide temporary employee housing to thousands of mostly non-Indigenous male workers – who are legally disallowed from bringing their families – in the resource sector. This is a consistent pattern of the settler state over the past century. Hudson’s Bay Company prohibited European women from accompanying and flooded Indigenous lands with non-Indigenous men who kidnapped, sexually exploited, enslaved and sold Indigenous women. Today, wherever man camps are set up, we face exponential increases in sexual violence.

Extraction’s backdrop of sexual images and activities activates forms of affect (envy, feelings of masculine-nationalist inadequacy) and enjoyment that can become mobilized in support of pipeline projects. Envy is crucial insofar as it encapsulates the subject’s thwarted enjoyment, but also the fact that “we most often enjoy by envying the Other’s enjoyment” (Kapoor 2014, 1131). One of

the tropes that has emerged in the discourse of “landlocked oil” is the story of the foreign Other issuing a disingenuous “thank you” to Albertans for failing to build pipelines. Jason Kenney has shared a story in speeches about an alleged interaction he had with an OPEC representative:

Just three weeks ago, at the margins of a major international investment conference, I chatted with a former... senior representative from OPEC. When I tried to explain to him the problem of the landlocking of Alberta energy, he turned to me and he said to me with a wry smile, ‘I know, Premier, all about it, and on behalf of OPEC I’d like to thank you for not getting those pipelines built (Government of Alberta 2019).

Kenney himself smiles wryly as he tells the story and impersonates the OPEC representative, displaying his own enjoyment and the satisfaction he gets from the “confirmation that other energy producers have benefitted massively from the campaign to landlock our energy” (ibid.).

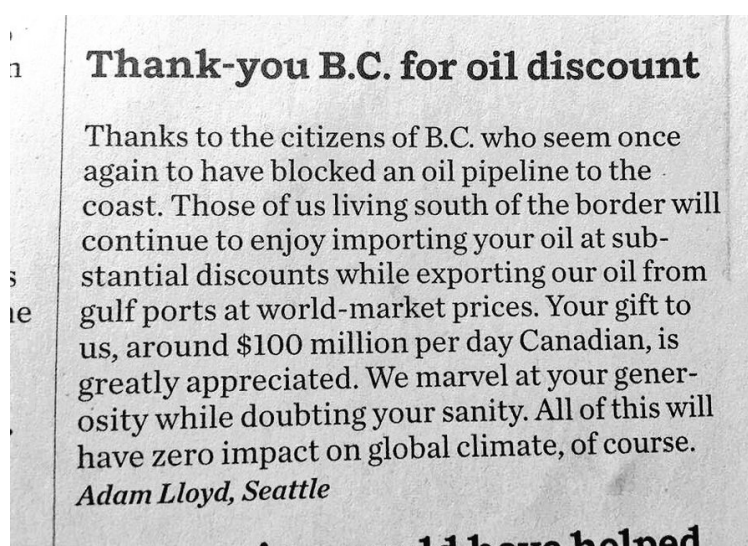


Figure 4 Photograph of “Thank-you B.C. for oil discount” letter to the editor, from April 18, 2018. Source: Canada Action.

The example above (allegedly) from a Seattle resident displays a kind of *Schadenfreude* that is readily mobilized – via an affect of envy – into Canadian support for pipeline construction. This image, found on the website of Canada Action (an organization that promotes Canadian oil and gas and produces the “I <3 pipelines,” “I <3 oil and gas” merchandise), ties together three crucial discursive elements: (1) landlocked oil or “blocked” pipelines, (2) the (sadistic, excessive) enjoyment of the Other, and (3) a cynical-realist perspective on climate change. The implication is that opposition to pipelines grounded in climate change concerns are at best naïve and misguided and at worst serve the obscene enjoyment of the Other.

Returning to the question of “Asian markets” for Alberta bitumen, and recalling the uncertainty that characterizes the future of those markets, my claim is that part of what makes them “stick” in the discourse, is an implicit preoccupation with (excessive) Asian consumption. The subject of Western alienation finds itself caught between its contradictory desires. On one hand it wishes to cash in on the growing demand for energy in countries like China. On the other hand, it wishes to justify its own extractive activities and climate disavowal by pointing to the energy consumption and carbon emissions coming out of the same countries with which it hopes to export its energy and carbon products. The inflated sense of certainty with which proponents of the TMX imagine the untapped potential of “Asian markets,” paired with the paranoia about the conspiracy to “landlock” Alberta oil, hints at both a fascination with the enjoyment taking place elsewhere and the denial that such an economy of enjoyment could take place without Canadian participation. Once again, the subject of Western alienation would sooner position itself at the centre of a conspiracy to have its enjoyment denied than to acknowledge the possibility that it is irrelevant for the enjoyment of the Other. In this way, the subject of Western alienation manages to recover lost *jouissance* by imagining its loss of economic wellbeing and autonomy as a coordinated plot imposed from without.

There is often a link between climate change denial and disavowal: the subject’s desire to absolve itself of climate responsibility, along with a racist preoccupation with the (excessive) enjoyment of the Other (“they” reproduce too much, consume too much energy, etc.). Fletcher et al. (2014) have identified “overpopulation” as a “sticking point” in international development discourse, a phantasmatic scapegoat that conceals the failures of development policies and practices by fixating on the (excessive, unrestrained) sexuality of people in developing countries (1207-1208). In a similar vein, a focus on the enjoyment and (over-) consumption of people in large, developing countries can obscure the realities of local emissions and consumption. This phenomenon is well documented in the work of Milnes and Haney (2016), who examine the relationship between masculinity, economic dependence on oil production, and climate change denial by interviewing men who had been directly affected by the 2013 Southern Alberta flood. The interviewees were both economically dependent on extractive industry and directly affected (in some cases losing their

homes) by a flood that has been tied to “anthropogenic GHG emissions” (Teufel et al. 2017, 2896).<sup>6</sup> Milnes and Haney’s (2016) research aligns with previous literatures that find that traditional masculinity and economic dependence on extraction “can work to produce climate change skepticism and inaction” (263). More important, however, is Milnes and Haney’s observation that the men provide (often contradictory) reflections on how climate change relates (or not) to the flood they experienced and to their economic futures:

The men argue that Canada should not have to pay the economic price for a problem [i.e. climate change] they feel is largely caused by someone else. The irony here, of course, is that while many of the men speak about the tendency for the Global South to produce more carbon, they also say they do not believe that carbon emissions are responsible for climate change (ibid., 268)

The logic of disavowal here is that climate change is not occurring, but if it is, it is a natural occurrence; and if it is not a natural occurrence, it is someone else’s fault. Climate change deniers variously assert

that climate change does not exist, or that it does but it’s largely natural, or that it does but its effects will be benign. This surplus of explanations reveals a deep investment in preserving social and economic order against any disturbing incursion ... From a psychoanalytic perspective, part of what alerts us to the fact we are dealing with fantasy is not the absence of logic but the surplus of explanations (Healy 2014, 191).

The relationship between cynical climate inaction and a preoccupation with the Other is concisely expressed by Peter Jones, one of the men interviewed by Milnes and Haney (2016): “if we shut the oil sands down tomorrow it’s not even going, going to make a lick of difference in the grand scheme of things, because of big contributors like China and India” (269).

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I have attempted to account for how the discourses promoting the Trans Mountain Pipeline Expansion Project (TMX) constitute a network of social fantasies active amongst Canada’s settler population, particularly in the Western provinces. I have argued that “Western alienation” functions as the central fantasy through which the others (“landlocked oil,” “foreign-funded conspiracy,” and “Asian markets”) are grounded and provided with meaning. Western alienation is

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<sup>6</sup> Specifically, Teufel et al. (2017) found that “anthropogenic GHG emissions are likely to have increased the probability of occurrence of extreme precipitation events, including the heavy precipitation on 20 June 2013,” which contributed to the Southern Alberta flood (2896).

an origin story that posits an ideological subject, weaving together a disavowal of settler violence and dispossession of Indigenous peoples with a centuries-long struggle experienced by the people of Alberta at the hands of Canadian confederation and contemporary resistance to pipelines and tar sands development. This story is retroactively deployed to mobilize support for contemporary pipeline construction and provide an explanatory compensation for why the average Albertan so often feels that their economic wellbeing and political autonomy are thwarted by interests that are “foreign” to them. Moreover, I have argued that at the heart of both this explanatory fantasy and the desire for the TMX is an economy of *jouissance* in excess of a rational business case. Both the discursive “stuckness” of “Asian markets” and the exaggerated narcissism of the conspiracy to “landlock” Alberta oil signal an irrational investment in the enjoyment of the Other (envy) and the (excessive) sexual subtext at the heart of both extractive industry and the (over-) consumption of energy. Finally, I have highlighted the connections between envy and climate change denial and disavowal. Throughout the chapter, I hope to have shown how social fantasies serve to both mobilize support for the TMX and conceal the (often unspoken or disavowed) antagonisms of settler colonialism, fossil capitalism, and climate change.

## Conclusion: Traversing the Fantasy and Sustaining Solidarity

“Kinder Morgan” might be translated from approximate German as “tomorrow’s children” ... (31)

In some future  
what I’d want  
not to have  
happened to or  
by what species  
of privilege  
do I say *we*” (100)

– Stephen Collis, *Once in Blockadia* (2016)



*Figure 5* Protestors gather in opposition to the TMX in Burnaby, British Columbia in 2018.  
Source: Getty Images.

## Choosing Futures, Choosing Natures: Why the TMX Matters

Resistance to the TMX is a struggle over what kind of future we wish to collectively invest in. It is also a struggle over how to constitute this *we*. As others have remarked (Agarwal and Narain 1991, Klein 2014), “while climate change is a global problem, there exists massive inequality in terms of both who causes it and how its impacts are and will be experienced” (Fletcher 2018, 61). Within Canada, despite common claims that extractive industry is in the “national interest,” the harms and benefits associated with pipeline developments such as the TMX are (spatially and temporally) distributed in fundamentally inequitable ways. Constituting politics and subjectivities that are attendant to particular inequities while retaining a universal horizon is one of the great challenges of this historical moment. This challenge is complicated both by the historical decline of working-class organizations and the emergence of a plurality of new social movements and political identities.

Zižek (2008) reflects on the problem as follows:

How are we to think the singular universality of the emancipatory subject as not purely formal, that is, as objectively-materially determined, but without the working class as its substantial base? The solution is a negative one: it is capitalism itself which offers a negative substantial determination, for the global capitalist system is the substantial “base” which mediates and generates the excesses (slums, ecological threats, and so on) that open up sites of resistance (420-421).

The interconnected systems of settler colonialism, global capitalism, and ecological crisis are the “negative substantial determination” highlighted throughout this paper. They are the nexus of antagonisms that the ideological fantasies promoting the TMX serve to conceal; they are also the negative space (or “trauma”) in which solidarity can be sustained between Indigenous land defenders, Alberta energy workers, and urban environmentalists across Canada.

Throughout this paper, I have argued that the discourses promoting the TMX constitute a network of settler Canada’s ideological fantasies. With reference to the settler origin myth of Buffalo, the discursive stickiness of “landlocked oil” and “Asian markets,” and the preoccupation with various “foreign” scapegoats, I attempted to explain how ideological fantasies mobilize *jouissance* (forms of [sexual] enjoyment, envy, denial, and disavowal) and conceal social antagonisms. Economic crises, environmental degradation, and violence against Indigenous peoples have been intrinsic to the historical development of Canadian settler colonialism and fossil capitalism. Nevertheless, fossil fuel development is still touted as a solution to the boom-and-bust cycles afflicting Alberta, a mode of reconciliation and redress for the historical impoverishment of



Indigenous communities, and a viable way to fund a transition to renewable energies. To grapple with the “logic” of neoliberal environmentalism, where doubling down on fossil fuel infrastructure is presented as the only solution, it is useful to apply concepts from psychoanalytic theory, a set of approaches grounded in the acknowledgement that human thought and action are prone to irrationality and contradiction. As such, I have argued for the necessity of supplementing political-economic and ecological analyses with psychoanalytic concepts in order to assess the passions at stake in large-scale, complex material-discursive contestations.

### **The Politics of Psychoanalytic Intervention**

While I have thus far mostly elaborated the critical possibilities of psychoanalytic social theory and ideology critique, I will conclude by briefly sketching out some of the “positive” ideas that illuminate interventions toward post-capitalist, post-carbon futures. These ideas have in common the underlying position that in the face of ecological crisis it is necessary to insist on large-scale, coordinated, international collective action grounded in a radical notion of universal human freedom. Such a notion of freedom involves abandoning the fear of loss, breaking attachments to the current state of imminent ecological catastrophe, and traversing the fantasies that presently serve to conceal and sustain the antagonistic and environmentally degrading features of global capitalism.

For Žižek (2008), the dominant form of ecology today is the ecology of fear; it is an ideology bound up with nightmarish fantasies of destruction and apocalypse; its basic promise is one of safety and protection against the threat of loss. It is an essentially conservative position that frames any change as a change for the worse (441), which raises particular suspicions for large, collective acts and mass movements (ibid., 440). As such, the ecology of fear is part and parcel of a “post-political” frame “structured around the perceived inevitability of capitalism and a market economy as the basic organizational structure of the social and economic order, for which there is no alternative” (Swyngedouw 2010a, 215). The image of the apocalypse is a kind of negative social fantasy which obscures (disavows) the Real of capitalism – the intrinsic contradictions which propel the exploitation of humans, non-humans, and natural environments, while sustaining a drive toward ever more accumulation and consumption. The post-political frame presents climate change as a predominantly techno-managerial problem requiring compromise between economy and environment. This is precisely the approach taken by Justin Trudeau and the federal Liberal party to the TMX, who approved the TMX less than one day after declaring a “climate emergency” in June 2019. The “great pipeline compromise” vows to ease economic anxieties in Alberta by securing a

pipeline to tidewater for international bitumen export, establish new standards for consultation with Indigenous peoples and provide opportunities for Indigenous ownership stake, and secure a revenue stream for long-term investment to transition away from fossil fuels. This approach, however, amounts to a shallow and politically calculated policy solution, one which attempts to please divergent political actors without transforming the structural conditions that give rise to the conflicts.

To confront a complex, global issue like the ecological crisis necessitates large-scale international coordination capable of enforcing limits. Žižek (2008) affirms “the risk will have to be taken to endorse once more large collective decisions” (459) and that “the difficult ethical task is thus to ‘un-learn’ the most basic coordinates of our immersion into our life-world” (445), instead of grasping at what we perceive to be the last vestiges of Nature. In practice, this might mean imposing large-scale, universal environmental protections, GHG emissions limits, and limits to fossil fuel production and consumption per capita. Žižek (2008) emphasizes that these norms must be both universal and equitable:

All people should pay the same price in eventual renunciations... The developed nations should not be allowed to poison the environment at the present rate, blaming the developing Third World countries, from Brazil to China, for ruining our shared environment with their rapid development. (461)

Swyngedouw (2010b) echoes this point: we “need to make ‘a wager’ on natures... to choose politically between this rather than that nature... plunge into the relatively unknown... and... fully endorse the violent moment that is inscribed in any concrete or real socio-environmental intervention” (313). Žižek introduces the concept of “terror” in opposition to “fear,” reminding us that in order for ecology to be transformative it must be foregrounded in the radical antagonism between the Included and the Excluded: “The political expression of this radical antagonism, the way the pressure of the Excluded is experienced within the established political space, always has a flavour of terror” (2008, 430). “Terror... is what fear changes into once we accept that there is no way back, that what we are afraid to lose ... (nature, the life-world, the symbolic substance of our community...) has always-already been lost” (ibid., 434). The move from fear to terror expresses the basic principle of psychoanalytic theory applied to politics: the subject must “traverse the fantasy” and take responsibility for its desires (Healy 2014, 184).

Insofar as the scapegoated Other is the correlate of what Žižek calls the “social symptom,” to traverse the fantasy entails the subject’s “identification with the symptom” (Žižek 1989, 143). The

subject must acknowledge the social antagonism and “recognize in the ‘excesses,’ in the disruptions of the ‘normal’ way of things, the key offering us access to [a social system’s] true functioning” (ibid., 144). In the boom-and-bust cycles, the oil spills, and the standoffs between Indigenous land defenders and the RCMP, we must recognize not moments of exception, but the necessarily antagonistic relationships that sustain the transportation of fossil fuels and the accumulation of capital, rendered visible.

Fletcher (2018) emphasizes the importance of mourning and breaking attachments, i.e. “of facing the pain of loss necessary to let go of present circumstances and embrace a novel future” (60). In the age of ecological crisis, this means acknowledging (for the average consumer subject in a developed nation) the basic impossibility of sustaining the current material standard of living predicated on fossil fuel extraction and consumption. It also means acknowledging that the livelihoods of many people throughout Canada will be in jeopardy for as long as we stall on investing in transitions toward clean and sustainable energy. What is needed to politically address climate change is “a vision of a sustainable society sufficiently motivating to compel a large and increasing number of subjects to become willing to undergo the process of mourning requisite to breaking attachment to the modern industrial capitalist system currently suffocating the earth” (70-71). As Stavrakakis (2007) explains it, mourning involves “withdrawing desire from representations” and a “dialectics of dis-investment and re-investment” whereby the subject channels its *jouissance* into a new kind of drive (167). Whether articulated in terms of “degrowth,” a Green New Deal, or something altogether different, there is a clear need for a set of universal programs that address environmental and economic inequities, national and global.

Eisenstein and McGowan (2012) explain that true solidarity (what they term the “solidarity of the rupture”) must be 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). Solidarity cannot be predicated on creating new communities or insisting on old ones at the expense of some exclusion or Other. The solidarity of the rupture “does not exist in the symbolic community” of shared identity, but rather is sustained “within the trauma of subjectivity itself” (ibid., 92). Echoing the logic of traversing the fantasy, this notion of solidarity involves “identification with the excluded” (ibid., 108). Ultimately, this entails breaking with the benefits tied to inclusion, with the safety of a stable and whole identity.

The railway blockades that spread across the country 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 2017, 131), a major site of Indigenous resistance to dispossession in the late nineteenth century. To render those historical conflicts visible, to restage them in light of contemporary Indigenous resistance to pipeline development, lays Canadian colonialism bare as an ongoing process. By sustaining the trauma of colonialism, the blockades confront settler Canadians with the repetition of this history, their past complicity, while providing clear possibilities for solidaristic intervention in the present. The future of the TMX and of Canada's fossil fuel industry remains uncertain. What is certain is that public investment in infrastructure will be contested as long as the economic and environmental risks remain fundamentally inequitable.

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