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Spaces of consent and the making of fracking subjects in North Dakota: A view from two corporate community forums

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ABSTRACT

Although hydraulic fracturing (fracking) has become a key area of analysis in extractive studies, North Dakota's Bakken Formation has been largely ignored. In addition, while scholars have begun to link subject formation with environmental behavior, explicit reference to existing theories of environmentality have been noticeably absent. This essay seeks to both introduce the Bakken to ethnographic studies of fracking as well as explicitly provide a model for using environmentality alongside existing political economic approaches. Such engagements help not only to better connect fracking subjectivities to larger societal processes, but also allows for the drawing of connections with bodies of literature on subjectivity and institutional analysis.

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1. Introduction

Hydraulic fracturing (“fracking”), the unconventional process by which petroleum is extracted from shale, has provided employment, economic development, and a possible pathway toward U.S. energy independence, but concerns have been raised about environmental and human health impacts (Tollefson, 2012; Howarth et al., 2011; Macey et al., 2014). Existing social science studies on fracking have focused on topics such as landowner coalitions and rely upon large-*n* opinion surveys (Anderson and Theodori, 2009; Jacquet and Stedman, 2011; Boudet et al., 2014), although scholars have begun using ethnographic approaches informed by political economy in Appalachia (Malin, 2014; Simonelli, 2014) and Australia (Mercer et al., 2014). However, while ethnographic studies have elucidated constraints that individuals in extractive zones experience in their everyday lives, with notable exceptions there has been little engagement with literature on subject production. Such engagement would provide explanation as to how support or opposition develops over time at both the individual and collective levels, a gap which the authors of the recent landmark anthology *Cultures of Energy* (Strauss et al., 2013) have identified as in need of addressing. Moreover, those that have attempted to examine subjectivity, rationality and

emotion have done so superficially, ignoring subjectivity theory from both philosophy and environmental social science. While established literature in these areas has demonstrated that subjects can be made to support development projects on economic grounds, the reasons why subjects accept the risks from such projects even if they expect significant negative disruption to their own lives are less clear. Indeed, it is this question which this essay seeks to address through a case study based in North Dakota's Bakken Formation.

The Bakken is a hydrocarbon rich shale in the Upper Great Plains that covers approximately 200,000 square miles of North Dakota, Montana, Manitoba and Saskatchewan. The vast majority of recoverable oil and gas is contained within Western and Central North Dakota and Eastern Montana (Gaswirth et al., 2013). While fracking in the Bakken has allowed North Dakota to become the United States' second largest oil producer after Texas (EIA, 2015), the state has been ignored by social scientists in favor of more populated areas. Using ethnographic methodologies applied in events not normally considered in critical studies of extractive activities, I seek to introduce the Bakken to the burgeoning ethnographic literature on fracking as well as to examine subject production at two social forums: a barbecue and information session hosted by the state-level petroleum lobby and a telecommunications conference that serves as an arena for rural politicking. I develop the argument as follows. First, I briefly introduce literature on environmental subjectivity and review its

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use in energy and extractive studies, followed by a review of its limited application in ethnographic studies of fracking. Although much useful work on environmental subjectivities regarding energy and extraction has been done in the developing world, these reviews focus chiefly on the developed world, given this paper's scope. After outlining my ethnographic methodology, I focus on case studies of the two forums mentioned above. These two forums constitute "spaces of consent", where dominant, pro-industry discourses on fracking are presented to closed audiences and structural and political barriers limit effective rebuttal on the part of skeptics. In the discussion, I reflect on my case studies in relation to the literature, offering the following conclusions: 1.) while fracking studies have not explicitly engaged with environmental subjectivity, they have done so implicitly, thus providing opportunities for a fruitful future engagement. 2.) Although themes of rationality, petrocitizenship and consent are major undertones in many social studies of fracking, explicit engagement with these theories would help to connect subjectivity and landscape change while also providing opportunities for framing fracking within a broader project of post-political and neoliberal state-making. 3.) Further engagements with theories of pro-environmental behavior and mainstream institutional approaches to extractive landscapes can help to bridge the energy and extractive gap by examining the relationship between materiality of extracted resources and the social and cultural landscapes produced by their use as energy in society.

2. Energy and extractive subjectivities

Environmental social science has drawn on Foucaultian concepts of governmentality in order to understand the interconnected relationship between human identity and behavior and environmental change.¹ Scholars such as Luke (1995) and Agrawal (2005) have sought to explicitly build theories of subjectivity that recognize individuals' subject positions as an outgrowth of interactions with changing landscapes and vice-versa. However, Cepek (2011) has argued that "environmentality" places too much weight on governance while ignoring the effects of culture on subjectivities. Robbins (2007) specifically draws on Althusser to argue that culture, politics and economy are so intimately enmeshed that subjects become unable to resist certain choices, often consciously violating their stated beliefs. Thus, subjects are formed not solely through coercion, but through complex, ideologically-mediated encounters with both social and physical environments.

Within energy and extractive social science, environmental subjectivity research has been largely focused on the developing world. Although this paper is specifically concerned with developed-world phenomena, I will briefly highlight key concepts valuable to extractive subjectivities as a whole. Given the contentious nature of environmental politics in the developing world (Aldrich et al., 2012), many subjectivity studies have focused on livelihood struggles inherent in neoliberal restructuring (Fletcher, 2010). Of particular importance are studies on how individuals reconcile imposed Western frameworks with traditional knowledge in order to create new forms of subjectivity and behavior (Newberry, 2014; Singh, 2013; Ward, 2013). Along a similar vein, research on post-neoliberalism in Latin America (Kaup, 2014; Valdivia, 2008; Perreault and Valdivia, 2010; Kohl and Farthing, 2012; Davidov, 2013) has shown that building neo-extractive economies requires demarcating appropriate behavior necessary to maintain a collective nationalist enterprise. As these studies have shown, affected groups seek to reclaim resource

citizenship to demonstrate that traditional environmental management produces better, more sustainable outcomes.² Thus, the most important takeaway from these studies is that while participants' behaviors and environmental perceptions can be shaped by outside influence, new technologies of governance cannot completely eliminate the old, resulting in variegated sociocultural environments (Brenner et al., 2010).

In the developed world, lack of overt violence and coercion in energy development has led scholars to examine residents' opinions of risk in production landscapes. Studies on various low-carbon landscapes have confirmed that while residents often support economic benefits such projects provide, they disavow environmentalist rhetoric that underpins their expansion. Parkhill et al.'s (2010) research on nuclear power in England and Jepson et al.'s (2012) work on wind energy in West Texas, have shown that, despite social and political differences residents of both landscapes support low-carbon development for similar reasons: such strategies are not important in and of themselves, but as vehicles for economic development, community revival and preparation for inevitable transitions away from fossil fuels (see also Haggerty, 2007). On the other hand, scholars examining projects as varied as hydroelectricity (Armstrong and Bulkeley, 2014; Shaw et al., 2015), wind (Devine-Wright and Howes, 2010; Pasqualetti, 2011) and biofuels (Gillon, 2010) have found that when individuals are sympathetic to environmental arguments regarding low-carbon projects, they oppose them in their own communities due to fears about scenic beauty and rural ways of life, including existing agro-resource regimes, being compromised. However, it has also been argued that local residents are easily swayed by prevailing arguments made by both project proponents/detractors and media regarding their civic duty to support or oppose specific low-carbon projects (Walker et al., 2010; Delshad and Raymond, 2013). Therefore, while it may be easy to convince the public that energy development can support both economic and environmental goals, it is more difficult to convince them that individual sustainability projects are worthwhile, especially if they feel their lifestyles and autonomy will be compromised.

Subjectivities in traditional extractive industries have received less coverage than renewables, yet these studies more fully connect landscape and behavioral change, perhaps due to tangible social and environmental disruptions inherent in subsurface exploration (England and Albrecht, 1984; Bridge, 2004). Recent literature has examined the relationship between extractive legacies and contemporary expansion. Somerville's (Billett et al., 2007; Abrahamson and Somerville, 2007) work on Australian coal mining shows that older male workers reject occupational health and safety regimes as both detrimental to tried-and-true practices and as the imposition of feminine (and therefore, weak) workplace culture. On a similar gendered note, Jensen-Ryan's (2014) study of the legacy of uranium mining in Wyoming shows how narratives about rugged, masculine, individualism and the emptiness of the American West have created resource "colonization" which marks both people and places as appropriate for future exploitation. Research on arctic mining has also address this, arguing that Native understandings of minerals must be eliminated in favor of Western ones, thus marking the landscape as permanent extractive territory (Cameron, 2011; LeClerc and Keeling, 2015). McAllister et al. (2014) have found that historical frontier narratives still condition how mining corporations approach corporate social responsibility: communities are expected to take care of themselves and deal with development consequences. Indeed, such

² See Watts (2005), Holterman (2014) and Obeng-Odoom (2014) for similar efforts to demarcate appropriate citizenships and behaviors in West African petrostates.

¹ See Rutherford (2007) for a comprehensive review.

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