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ON THE POLITICS OF REGION

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Indifferent Systems

In November 2017, the Nebraska Public Service Commission voted 3-2 in favor of allowing the proposed Keystone XL pipeline to be built in the state. Actively opposed by groups such as 350.org and blocked during the presidency of Barack Obama, Keystone XL was revived by the new administration under Donald Trump as one of its very first acts of state. When finished, it will extend over 1,000 miles from Hardisty, Alberta, to Steele City, Nebraska, where it will join up with the existing Keystone network. The pipeline system will move Canadian oil from the Alberta tar sands and US oil from Montana and North Dakota to refineries on the Texas Gulf Coast and to tank farms in Cushing, Oklahoma and Patoka, Illinois. It will have a capacity of up to 1.1 million barrels per day. For a world still hungry for fossil fuels, this "export limited" (the "XL" in the name) pipeline is expected to generate profits for TransCanada Corporation—the owners of Keystone—as well as for the oil companies that use its massive infrastructure to move their products to market.

One of the surprises of the Nebraska decision was that the Commission shifted the pipeline's route through the state. Instead of sticking with TransCanada's preferred route, for which the company has already secured easements from the majority of impacted property owners, the Commission proposed to follow an existing Keystone line through the area. Environmentalists who object to the expansion of the fossil fuel system and to the possible repercussions of oil spills along pipeline routes—like the one TransCanada was dealing with in South Dakota at the time of the decision—drew attention to the fact that no environmental studies had been done on this new route. Impacted landowners objected for similar reasons, as well as for the fact that no easements had been negotiated. While TransCanada expressed unhappiness with the extra cost implications of the new route, they were also pleased that, at long last, a decision had been made and the final stage of the full Keystone system could be built.

Pipelines like the Keystone obliterate the spaces and environments that exist between oil source and its end users. They cut straight lines across landscapes, indifferent to the specifics of geography. For city dwellers, these technologies of energy transport generate indifference not only of a spatial kind, but also of an ethical or political one: extraction zones and networks of transport have little impact on the majority of those who use fossil fuels, for whom the stuff of energy appears, as if by magic, in their furnaces or at gas stations. The protracted and public struggle over Keystone XL shows that other lines on maps—the borders of states or countries, the lines around property—can

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inhibit or block the easy passage of pipelines through space. Property owners can, at a minimum, make financial claims against pipeline companies when ribbons of steel make their way across their fields and gardens. Everything else that shapes geography—from distinctive geologies to watersheds and animal habitats, and from indigenous communities to histories of human habitation other than property and politics—gets ignored and left out of cost-benefit calculations.

From the perspective of the Nebraska Commission, which nudged the vector of the pipeline without considering what regions it traversed and brought into its danger zones, one route is as good as any other. Yet regions are where the consequences of technologies—whether physical technologies such as pipelines or the *technē* of governments that establish borders and property—are felt most determinately. The region in which the November Keystone spill of 5,000 barrels took place will take years to clean up (a 2016 spill of 400 barrels at another site in South Dakota took ten months to ameliorate). Spills always take place in-between, in the space of the region, as far away from the abstract legislative space of a state or country as the cities to which the black pools of fuel were intended to move.

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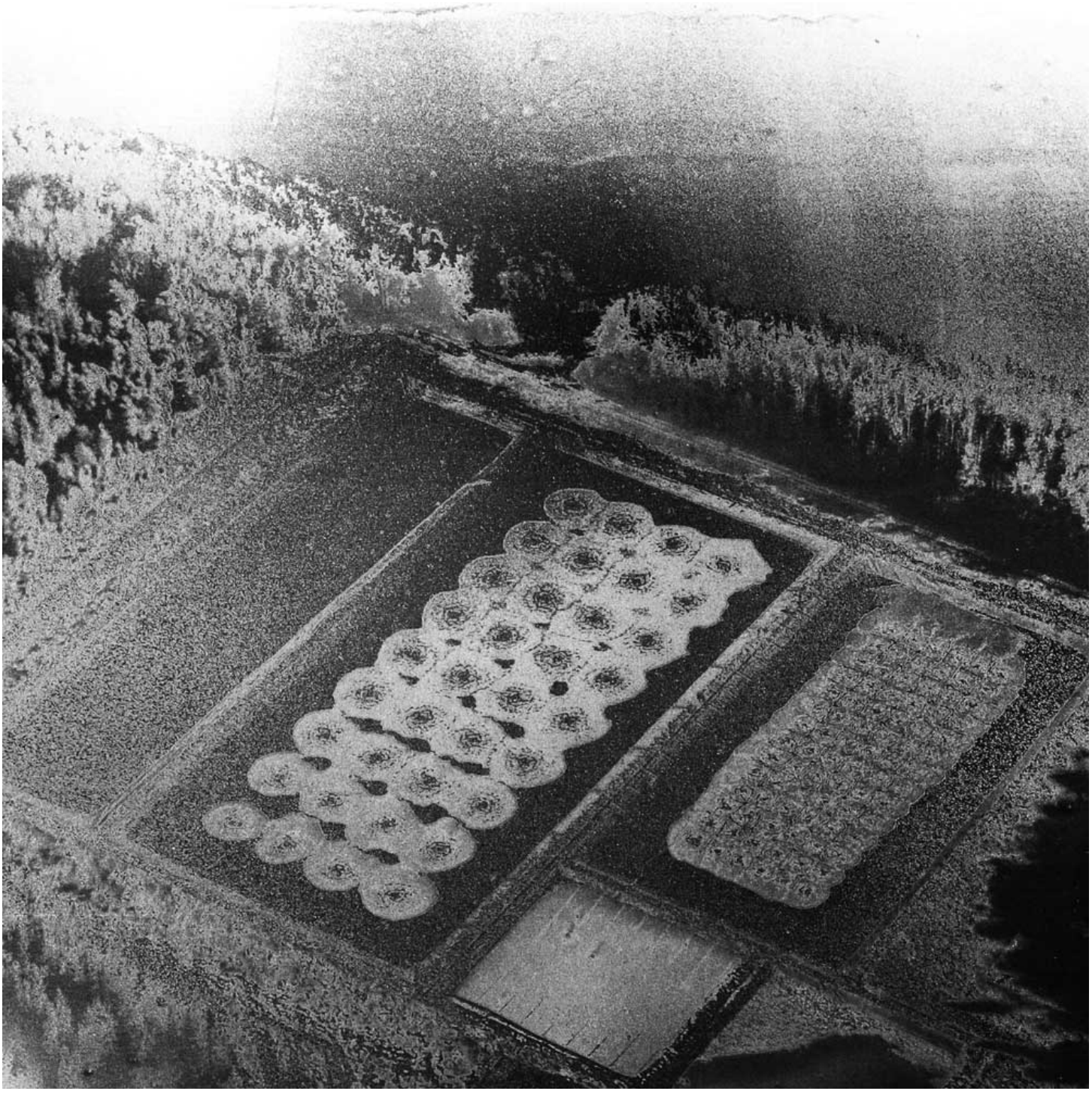

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Warren Cariou, *Water Treatment Facility on Bank of the Athabasca River*, 2017. © Warren Cariou

Region is a term and a concept that we rarely consider, even if much of the trauma and crisis of modernity is happening there. We need to understand the dynamics of region if we are going to challenge the indifferent systems of infrastructure and politics that carve up and control everything in their orbit. Region owes nothing to the forms of citizenship granted to subjects by states, or to the power that comes from indifference to the spaces traversed by the infrastructure of modernity. Might region allow us to understand anew the connections of space, belonging, and environment needed to take on the political challenges of our era?

Toward a Theory of Region

On a scale from the global to the local, the region hovers somewhere in between. Where in between is difficult to determine, in part because region lacks any precise definition. A region can be an expanded sense of the local—a city and its suburban and exurban pseudopods. It can be comprised of a series of nations, linked by trade, history, religion, or ethnicity. Region can point to zones within nations, demarcated by as little as the points on a compass (Northeast, West, Midwest, etc.). It can be understood in relation to religion (Bible Belt, Borscht Belt, Jell-O Belt), or be shaped around labor and industry (Wheat Belt, Rust Belt). Region can also be defined in relation to geology (the Rockies, the Mississippi Delta), a configuration that overlaps only inexactly with the spaces staked by existing political forms and laws that intend to make a claim on spaces and their inhabitants (e.g., the Rockies run through both Canada and the US).

Region is thus a messy term. But to develop a precise definition of region would be to miss the point of the demand that the concept makes on us. It is in the indistinct nature of region, in the broad and shifting set of characteristics and qualities that extend from one idea of region (the Middle East) to another (the Ogallala Aquifer), that its power lies.

What is inherent in every idea of region is a contiguity of geographic space. On a map, regions are paramecium-like zones of connection that refuse to obey the sharp lines of state borders or property. No nation-state is a region (even if region is sometimes used to designate groups of nations), and no region has laws, police, and military—the apparatus of modern power that has so deeply shaped ideas of community and subjectivity. Regions rub raw the self-certainties of modern state formations. A region is that spot on the Achilles tendon (of capitalism, property, or liberal democratic governance) where an ill-fitting shoe raises a bloody patch and threatens to sever altogether both the tendon and the power mythically contained within it.

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In addition to contiguity of space, what is of primary importance to a region is that there is a there. Every region can be seen as a type of ecology—an environment (a contiguous geographic zone), the subjects that animate it (whether these are animals and plants, specific religious groups, the resources that lie beneath the ground, or the strata of the inanimate), and the relation between these two. Just as important to note is that there is never a single there there, but rather, of necessity, a rich, heterogeneous set of overlapping ecologies that speak to the multiple relations that exist in any geographic zone.

Against the abstraction of the nation-state and other political boundaries, regions demand that we be alert to the innumerable ecologies that constitute the lives of individuals and their communities. Their multiplicity asks not that we try to name all of these relations in order to codify them into some new logic of regionality. The necessary multiplicity of ecologies, each environment linked in an essential way to the organisms that dwell there (people, animals, plants, fuel, minerals, non-humans, forces, processes) asks that we undo the abstract mechanisms of power, which pay little attention to the planet's ecologies and operate instead via well-established modes of power linked to inclusion and exclusion. Nations and cities do not seem to pay attention to the demands that multiple ecologies make on them. Regions, on the other hand, are attuned to the realities of the shifting ideas and realities of being there—including the there of nations and cities—and spill over beyond established political borders.

Regions thus pose a challenge to accepted ideas of citizenship that lie at the heart (of the myth) of the modern democratic state. A citizen belongs to a nationstate. With this belonging come responsibilities (such as defending the nation, when necessary) as well as, at least potentially, rights and opportunities (security from internal and external threats, education and health, and the right to own property). One of the powers of the concept and practice of citizenship is that it insists that all citizens within the spaces it delineates are equal. A map of the globe shows every nation-state to be a single, flattened color. The jigsaw shapes of red, blue, green, and yellow differentiate the citizens of one country from another, and at the same time assert that inside these flattened color fields all citizens are the same. But in truth, citizenship is shaped around inclusions and exclusions, around violent delineations of belonging. The differential quality of citizenship extends not just to who one is, but what they do and where they live within a nation-state.

Even before the law there are enormous inequalities between citizens, which are recognized by the disparate zones of policing, incarceration, and state violence against its citizens. There are zones of opportunity and hardship, wealth and poverty, black and white. Regions speak the lie of nations with

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respect to their claim on space by drawing attention to differential experiences of citizenship that exist within any nation at any point in its existence.

There are still other regions to which we need to be alert—regions of dispossession, of poverty and wealth—which emerge from the extension of the logics of capitalism to the whole of the planet. Free trade zones, spaces of cheap labor, abandoned spaces of productions—all emptied of the faintest traces of workers' rights—appear as spaces in which nations have forsaken the commitments that they might have once promised to their citizens in favor of the logics of globalization that would render the entire world (and not just the internal space of nations) into a single indifferent space.

The environmental consequences of global, neoliberal capitalism create further regions—of ecodestitution, monocultures, commodity frontiers, soils drained of life, polluted geographies. These toxic ecologies emerge out of the utter disinterest shown by capitalist states to the specificity and complexity of regions. These spaces might often be described in the language of region (as in "regions of pollution"), but they are regions in name only. These ecologies are the consequence of the abstract logic of power, control, property, and profit, the outcome of the instrumentality of statecraft as well as extrastatecraft.

It is essential to grapple with the forces that generate these toxic ecologies, since they offer up a false idea of political change. One can understand why inhabitants of dispossessed and distressed regions might want to restore what was removed or taken away, such as the factories that once provided jobs. But it is a mistake to imagine this dispossession as a deficit of true citizenship, which now needs to somehow be restored or made full (the national restored from the global; regional differences inside the nation flattened out to restore the promised equality of citizenship). Neoliberal citizenship has ensured that *all* citizenship has been torn asunder; it no longer even hides behind the narrative that citizenship ensures equality, as it might have once done. If citizenship is based on inclusion and exclusion, then it is only natural that those once included in its fold should want the safety and privilege that had been (minimally) accorded them. Yet at a moment when we need to pay greater attention to the complex ecologies we inhabit, citizenship is a crude, abstract device of being and belonging that doesn't help make it possible to understand the multiplicity and heterogeneity of regions or to address the forces that generate the toxicity of all too many regions on the planet.

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Warren Cariou, *Bitumen Strip Mine with Pipeline and Truck Turning Loop*, 2017. © Warren Cariou

We have to be alert to the limits, too, of existing practices and techniques of region, such as those that exist in the practice of architecture. "Critical regionalism" names structures that employ the codes and character of modern architecture, while also paying attention to a building's geographic

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context. Even as it challenges the flattening universality of dominant forms of architecture (such as the International Style), the way in which critical regionalism foregrounds geography provides little more than shading to a style—the modern—that exists before and beyond it. At best, the region in critical regionalism appears as small adjustments that different geographies might demand of modern architecture. These modern buildings can congratulate themselves for being attuned to differences of landscape, while still being modern and not truly dealing with the challenge of region at all.

Critical regionalism speaks only to a single ecology—the environment of modern buildings, which exist within the dictates and demands of capitalism. A true critical practice of region would instead explore multiple ecologies, attending to the full range of relationships that exist in any geography. What defines the environment and organisms that make up a region can and should vary widely. How might architecture respond to regions defined, for instance, by different forms of energy? Or by diverse modes of labor and income? Or by immigration and political counter-narratives? How might an architectural practice react to and interact with multiple regions—with geographies of living and non-living bodies, or with geological and environmental zones that might assert that the construction of modern architecture is akin to the abstraction of the nation-state, whatever shading style one might apply?

To the Region!

The Keystone XL pipeline system operates both in and outside of the logic of region. It draws on discrete regions of resources (e.g., the Athabasca Tar Sands, the Bakken Oil Shale), artificially assembling them together in order to move resources elsewhere. Region matters to the XL, but only as sites of entry and exit. Everything in between is a hindrance, whether due to scale (the length of pipeline requires forty-one pump stations to keep the oil moving), the geology it has to navigate (e.g., the Ogallala aquifer, which stretches from South Dakota to Texas, the Missouri River, or the Sandhills of Nebraska), or its impact on communities that might challenge its logics and embedded presumptions. While the Keystone XL and pipelines like it depend on the existence of resource regions, the primary logic they follow is that of capitalist modernity and its understanding of resource as a "standing reserve."

The flattening of geography, geology, and community (and every other region) along the path of a pipeline mirrors the operations of citizenship, a political infrastructure that uses the cloak of equality (especially before the law) to deny or disavow all manner of inequalities and the disequilibria

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between its citizens. The logic of region laid out here is intended as a heuristic rather than something like a law of nature—rough around the edges, not always workable in each and every evocation of region. What attention to region offers is a rejoinder to protocols of dividing up space that do not attend to the rich and multiple ecologies that exist there. As the path of a pipeline shows us, the sovereign space of the state and private property, along with other practices of spatializing, have consequences for the ecologies of these regions. Yet what a pipeline can never name are the relations between people, place, environment, objects, animals, gases, and plants that inhabit and shape a region. If for no other reason than the environmental challenges we face, we need now to actively and attentively inhabit non-flattened, non-empty spaces.

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Warren Cariou, *Bitumen Mine Abstract with Pipeline*, 2017. © Warren Cariou

Could region act as a possible site of citizenship— an alternative to the one to which we presently seem fated? We have examples of regions creating powerful new forms of belonging and community. The protests that took place near the Standing Rock Indian Reservation against the Dakota Access Pipeline in 2016 and 2017 brought together indigenous people from across North

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America, as well other protestors. Those assembled at Standing Rock wanted to draw attention to the threat of the pipeline to sacred burial grounds as well as to the quality of the community's water. Attempts by members of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe to use the mechanisms of official citizenship (e.g., appeals to the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, the Department of Interior, the Environment Protection Against, and suits filed in court) went nowhere. And so a new community—one intimately alert to the reality of region and the multiplicity of ecologies in their lifeworlds—came into being in the protest camps that blocked the abstract, indifferent logics of the pipeline.

It seems difficult to adapt the old language of citizenship to truly new modes of being and belonging in space, like those enacted at Standing Rock. The moment one declares citizenship in relation to a region, it fixes a single ecology in place, creating something akin to a micro-nation. Citizenship is a damaged concept that insists on inclusions and exclusions, on the establishment of borders and sovereignty. It might be that region allows us rethink how to commit to one another and to the ecologies we inhabit without the necessity of sovereignty. Region constitutes a powerful redefinition of the political on a planet where borders have threatened the health of communities and ecologies far more than it has helped them.

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