

[Van Dyk on Bosworth, 'Pipeline Populism: Grassroots Environmentalism in the Twenty-First Century'](#)

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Kai Bosworth. *Pipeline Populism: Grassroots Environmentalism in the Twenty-First Century*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2022. xv + 269 pp. \$27.00 (e-book), ISBN 978-1-4529-6754-7.

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Commissioned by Daniella McCahey (Texas Tech University)

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In the preface to *Pipeline Populism: Grassroots Environmentalism in the Twenty-First Century*, Kai Bosworth situates himself within the history of youth climate action and pipeline opposition. From this beginning point, *Pipeline* offers a nuanced and thorough conversation about pipeline activism in the contemporary moment. In his recognition of situational politics, Bosworth (intentionally or not) demonstrates how personally engaging with a community poses unique, and essential, insights into any environmental conversation, while also attending to the potential biases wrought by experience in the climate struggle and resisting the over-insertion of personal experience within a research study. *Pipeline Populism* comes out of a place of personal passion and concern, which succeeds in creating a wider argument relevant across activist networks and research fields. The aim of *Pipeline* is twofold: first, to understand the environmentalist struggles against the Keystone XL and Dakota Access pipelines that shaped the populist genre of environmental politics; and second, to describe populism as “a genre and transition” to understand the shifting and dynamic processes and beliefs attached to populist movements (p. 30).

Bosworth’s introduction provides a comprehensive history and intellectual genealogy of populist movements, environmental movements against pipelines and the extractive energy industry, and environmental politics. This grounding enables the following chapters to focus on particular activist groups, movements, or historical moments that speak back to larger questions of environmental political history and affect.

Chapter 1 investigates the complexities of private property, land ownership, and populism in the context of pipeline activism. The politics of land, Bosworth contends, are complicated by a populist vision of activist mobilization—the “power of the people”—and the affective polarity (and simultaneous possibility) within the groups opposing the Keystone XL pipeline. Focusing particularly on white/settler land ownership, Bosworth’s study of territorialized resentment (as he terms it) makes compelling connections between the affective responses of those property owners in opposition to the Keystone XL pipeline and the implicit maintenance of white/settler values and systems of rights. In chapter 2, Bosworth considers the affective use of public participation in political decision-making and action. This chapter argues that frustration at public processes and inaction—and the paradoxical continuation of public participation—further encourages a populist environmentalism, introducing the frame of “resigned pragmatism” (p. 92) to examine the democratic processes (either exhausting or

fruitful) involved in opposing pipeline infrastructure.

Chapter 3 considers the dynamics of globalization and affective ideologies around oil transportation, using the campaign against Canadian oil for Chinese consumption launched by NextGen in 2013 to demonstrate that “the examination of such heartland melodramas in the affective geopolitics of KXL challenges contemporary assumptions that nationalism and xenophobia are reserved for right populists” (p. 128). Bosworth examines the pervasiveness of this anti-Chinese and anti-Canadian sentiment as a precursor to general antiglobalism sentiments relating to foreign oil dependency. In order to examine the affective underpinnings of these populist beliefs, Bosworth utilizes the concept of “heartland melodrama,” critiquing the American ideologies around nationalism and transnational rivalry (from both leftist and right-wing political groups) as rooted in settler empire, racial capitalism, and border imperialism. In the final case study (chapter 4), Bosworth considers the populist framework of “anti-expert sentimentality” in relation to pipeline opposition groups and environmental populist action. Focusing on the regulatory hearings and scientific counter-evidence around the Keystone XL and Dakota Access pipelines, this chapter grapples with the use of public knowledge and counter-evidence in legal action against the proposed pipelines, asking what the affective response and potential for success of this action is in a post-truth society.

In concluding, Bosworth examines the globalized populist environmental movement, asking: “Is it possible that we are no closer to producing radical, transformative climate action in 2021 than we were ten or fifteen years prior?” (p. 200). Tying together the experiences and case studies found throughout the text, Bosworth examines the overall affective influence of populism in the climate movement and the specific insufficiencies of populist action to creating lasting social change.

Bosworth’s study of the possibilities of populist pipeline opposition movements, as well as their limitations, seeks to show that “populism is a transitional genre, waxing and waning as one among many genre conventions for performing pipeline opposition. Populism both emerged from and provided the retroactive understandings of inchoate emotions, channeling them into political action. It eventually reached limits—failures—that forced either attenuations or transformations in political approach” (p. 203). Bosworth aims to clarify populism as a transitional force, one that ebbs and flows within environmental movements and which may ultimately require further (or different) modes of action to achieve change.

Pipeline’s focus on populism is a unique approach to defining and engaging with the climate movement, bringing together geographical and political concerns to approach questions of community organization and activist movements. Its aims and scope are well defined, and those areas of thought that remain less interrogated (such as specific grassroots groups) are acknowledged by the author from the outset. Bosworth states that he aims to craft a text that is useful for young climate activists and organizers (p. xi), and while *Pipeline’s* prose is accessible and compelling, it remains punctuated with academic terminology and jargon that may preclude the general reader from investing fully in the important topics raised within the book. Indeed, *Pipeline* seems to require a previous grounding in the topic of grassroots activism in order to fully appreciate the arguments laid out here. One can imagine it would read well alongside on-the-ground accounts of the movements (Keystone XL and Dakota Access pipeline resistance) described by Bosworth. This is a valiant attempt at the difficult balancing act of crafting a text that meets both academic and general nonfiction standards, that—while not always succeeding—proves itself as valuable to both fields of

engagement.

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