

## Chapter 16

# Events Collectives

## The Social Life of a Promise-Disappointment Cycle

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At a meeting I attended in 2004, Alaska governor Frank Murkowski invited oil executives and members of his staff to discuss plans for building a \$30 billion natural gas pipeline. One of the participants, Joe Marushak, a vice president for ConocoPhillips, stated, “What we see happening over and over again is that Alaska [oil companies] come together to start working on a pipeline project when natural gas prices get quite high. And then, gas prices get as low as \$2.25 [per thousand cubic feet]. Well, that \$2.25 clearly does not support a pipeline, and just highlights—for whatever reason—periods where there’s huge price volatility. That volatility puts a dampening effect in trying to invest thirty billion dollars at one point in time.” Also in attendance at the meeting was Terry Koonce, then president of ExxonMobil, who expressed his own ambivalence about the project: “Governor, we love you,” Koonce began, “but we have to make sure that we don’t develop in my own terms a sinkhole or a problem for the next generation of management or shareholders coming behind us.”

The discovery in the 1960s of a large natural gas reservoir located at Prudhoe Bay has inspired frequent exchanges between Alaska state officials (including at one time myself as associate director of energy under Governor Murkowski, primarily working with Congress on energy issues) and industry sponsors about the delivery of Alaska gas to southern markets. For oil executives, the sizable reward for monetizing Alaska gas and its extraordinary positioning in relation to energy markets links two elements of one chain: first, the uncertainty of delivering Alaska gas to markets located thousands of miles away, and second, addressing this uncertainty

against the kind of economic value that shareholders expect. For me, as an observer of Arctic natural gas predicaments, this chain of commitment raises a question: Under what rubric can events of expectation remain a promise that repeatedly excites despite its record of disappointment?

In this chapter I specify a collection of ritual and rhetorical manifestations that express expectation and disillusion over Alaska natural gas development. For analytical purposes I refer to this promise and disappointment cycle as an *events collective*. My aim is to recognize an effective bundling of potentials that mobilizes interest, entanglement, deception, and confusion in Arctic hydrocarbon development—where the enormous value of monetizing reserves is significantly diminished by the extraordinary construction costs, environmental risks, and market uncertainties of connecting Arctic resources to global markets. Most of the events that I speak of are government and industry sponsored. Their duration usually lasts no longer than two hours but can run as little as fifteen minutes or as long as several days, and in the case of legislative sessions, several months. Sometimes, the significance of the event can be attributed to how it is being reported afterward in news outlets. None of these publicized happenings are organized collectively; that is, each event is singular and not purposefully strung together with other events, although in some cases the gatherings, such as policy council meetings, convene during interim periods and travel to several locations.

Events take many guises—unconditioned, discursive, critical, cascading—and are inseparably related to their mode of registration (Ardener 1989; Appadurai 1996; Das 1995; Foucault 1972). Such happenings, as with mythical thought, often act as liberators of meaning, providing the grounds for a protest against the rational assembly of explanation (Lévi-Strauss 1968, 22; Faubion 1995, xix). They also give rise to an unbridled kingdom of fact, wish fulfillment, and imagination, whose stagings of verification invoke an anthropology of religion, magic, and fraud (Munn 1992; Turner 1969; Tsing 2000). Here, I consider the events collective as a category of expectation oriented toward building protected spaces that play a role in the sociocultural processes that are part of technological developments (N. Brown, Rappert, and Webster 2000; Geels and Smit 2000; Pollock and Williams 2010). An events collective is a strategic resource for attracting attention from sponsors (financial, regulatory) to stimulate agenda-setting processes; as such, it contributes to a narrative order that governs the distribution of social power (Van Lente 1993) and a hierarchy of discourses that would otherwise atrophy (Foucault 1971).

Increasingly on display at Arctic events collectives are the social authorities, intellectual technologies, and anticipatory strategies capable of reconfiguring the Arctic into hydrocarbon-rich and accessible landscapes (Kristofferson 2014; Johnson 2010b). Their logics of geopolitical

expansion and prophesy dimension raise scholarly concern over privatized knowledge systems that license the intervention of experts in debates about community plans (Bravo 2009; Powell 2008), extractive industry (Harsem, Eide, and Heen 2011; Nuttall 2013; Stammer 2011), and infrastructure development and security (Hoogensen Gjorv et al. 2013), as well as the efficacy of integrating Indigenous knowledge systems with Western institutional apparatuses (Buxton and Wilson 2013).

Recent statements of support for Russian-Norwegian Arctic natural gas development (Moe 2010; Offerdal 2010) offer a sampling of the varying scripted formal and informal geographically diffused material information networks that comprise an events collective. As an example, in June 2013 I caught a glimpse of Maria van der Hoeven, the executive director of the International Energy Agency (IEA), speaking enthusiastically of capturing high natural gas prices in Asia. During the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum, van der Hoeven described “hypothetical” pipelines shipping Arctic natural gas to China in efforts to resolve the contractions of an industry that stubbornly resists globalization. Days later, many of the St. Petersburg forum players flew to the Moscow Oil and Gas Congress to voice approval of IEA scenarios. Ivan Grachev, energy chairman for the Russian State Duma, and Vitaliy Yermakov, director in Moscow for Cambridge Energy Research Associates, both affirmed anticipated rises in natural gas prices: “One-hundred percent certainty,” remarked Grachev. Meanwhile, at the Arctic Summit in Oslo, Henrik Madsen, CEO of Det Norske Veritas (a strategic knowledge firm), spoke to me of an industrialized Arctic, which he later pronounced to the assembly under the title of the “Near-High North,” as opposed to what he called an “unthinkable High-High North.” Offering further details, Runi Hansen, head of Statoil Arctic, referred to three categories of oil and gas development: *Workable Arctic*, by which he meant “no ice”; *Stretch Arctic*, a region of seasonal ice; and *Extreme Arctic*, referring to regions with year-round ice. According to Hansen, these categories offer a “step-wise approach” for developing shallow to ultra-deepwater projects. Back in Russia, at the Corinthia Hotel in St. Petersburg, I joined a Russian-Norwegian task force that focuses on step-wise development in the Barents Sea region. We poured over charts unofficially titled *Parallelity*, by which they meant Arctic energy projects moving forward through coordinated Russian-Norwegian time frames with additional foreign investment. These differently expressed opinions form a part of the events collective—the talking simultaneously, getting excited, and making the unreal into a probability by putting wishes into words.

Looking over my notes taken at the turn of the millennium, I can identify similar discursive commitments in favor of expanding the U.S. continental energy supply (Mason 2008, 2005). Without ever having established

one project, target completion dates of 2007 to 2012 promised the delivery of Arctic natural gas from locations at Alaska's Prudhoe Bay, Canada's Mackenzie Delta, and Russia's Barents Sea. Optimism for these projects was widely disseminated in trade and national news outlets. In what follows below, I offer an events collective as a framework for a particular route of agency in Alaska energy politics. Specifically, I string together a series of unstructured publicized happenings (gatherings, announcements) so as to formulate an archetype of hydrocarbon development taking place at both the limits of rational expectation and its entry into mystification. Instead of words expressing what is actually desired by the persons involved and individuals being seen as planners, creators, and causes, I argue that in reality an events collective is an expression of the total social network of people and their wishes, the constellation of the total social field as a whole, and the opportunities it gives to individual groups and persons. In doing so, my aim is to consider the enrollment of actors into frameworks of understanding and consensus, where certain truths emerge even while disagreement and ignorance reign and resentment and distrust remain. I want to know how strategic partnerships intersect and how sequestered conversations open up and become public conversation, drawing attention to individuals (careers, attitudes) and fleeting phenomena (modes of talking, attire) as objects of representation that structure the images my informants have of themselves (Mason and Stoilkova 2012).

As I demonstrate, an Alaska events collective is an underworld of empiricism whose formula of need reflects the nature and degree of interdependencies that hold together the various people and groups forming Alaska hydrocarbon development—interdependencies that always require the so-called owners (the State of Alaska), de facto owners (Exxon, BP, Conoco), pipeline builders (Foothills Pipe Lines), and so forth. As such, policy is peripatetic, as issues travel from city to city and announcements take place in various places. An entire entourage travels about, with the governor, lawmakers, aides, journalists, consultants, and lobbyists traveling from the economic hub (Anchorage) to the capitals (Juneau, Washington, D.C.) and back again. In this way the arteries connecting provincial life with the Capitol, rural Alaska with the metropolis, are not constricted. A process of distancing is taking place, but the constant movement of the political entourage prevents the distances from becoming petrified, creating an awareness of the networks and entanglements in and through which everyone must act and think (Elias 1983).

### **The Promise**

The potency of emotional markers that I attribute to an Alaska events collective arises from knowledgeable persons working in the financial and

petroleum industries who publicly announced converging global energy threats, thus suggesting the potential for building a \$30 billion Alaska natural gas pipeline. A potential suggests a state of possibility for developing into a state of actuality. Rumors in December 2000 of a potential pipeline project were taken quite seriously by the Alaska state lawmakers who began the first session of the twenty-second state legislature in January 2001. During that session, awareness of just such a potential translated the imagined possibilities of a pipeline into fact in the minds of the lawmakers. It produced the belief that, after thirty years, a window of opportunity had finally opened for commercializing the state's natural gas reserves.

In this period, financial analysts described a "state of the world" where natural gas fuel had become the energy of choice. They pointed to India, a coal-intensive country with a growth rate of natural gas consumption four times that of coal during the 1990s, and to California, where new electricity capacity was almost entirely fueled by natural gas. They spoke of China, where bureaucrats had announced the construction of a gas pipeline from the west to Shanghai, and they mentioned Japan, where energy leaders had struck a natural gas deals with the Islamic Republic of Iran and Qatar, involving nearly \$3 billion. They referred to the completely unexpected price levels of natural gas (\$5.15 per million Btu) compared with one year earlier (\$1.75/mBtu) and to the New York Mercantile Exchange, where on several occasions prices had risen to double this amount. They noted the maturity of traditional natural gas supply areas and of drilling in the United States and Canada, which, though averaging twenty-five thousand new wells a year, a seemingly robust number, had not resulted in any significant increases in supply, while the decline rates for wells were extremely high during initial years of production (40% annually).

In their turn, energy consultants explained the probability and embraced the plausibility of the rise of a new technological formation. The energy industry, they argued, was fixed on a very ambitious target. They referred to a *growth imperative* likely to fundamentally alter the structure and functioning of the North American natural gas market. Through specialized client privilege reports and descriptive scenarios available on the Internet, in newspapers, and on news-talk outlets, they explained that the industry had embarked on a path—*The Long Ascent* as they put it. The road promised to be an interplay of conflicting supply and demand forces and accentuating boom and bust cycles. As the path spiraled upward, indeed, they guaranteed that the climb would be a "wild ride for the entire industry." The size of the challenge, the current strength of the market, and improved technological and infrastructure advancements, though with some inevitable twists and turns, would lead to the construction of a \$30 billion, thirty-five-hundred-mile pipeline to deliver Alaska gas reserves to the United States midcontinent. "In this new environment," they opined, "the greatest value will be exploited by those who can understand

the new cycles and who position themselves to take advantage of them” (Robinson and Hoffman 2000).

In Alaska, these events circulated as the convergence of a triple threat: natural gas shortages, oil price shocks, and disuse of coal, with one University of Alaska economics professor announcing a “perfect energy storm,” in reference to the movie *The Perfect Storm*, in which three weather systems converge at the same time and location to overwhelm fishermen at sea (Reynolds 2003). State newspapers opined that as America faced its perfect energy storm, Alaska could benefit from high energy prices if a pipeline could transport Arctic gas to midcontinental markets. The alignment of circumstance had Governor Tony Knowles wide-eyed as he addressed the state via radio and television, and the world via live Webcast on January 10, 2001: “After decades of false starts and broken dreams, the economic and political stars are finally aligned in our favor. Natural gas is the fuel of the twenty-first century.” In supportive statements, then-Alaska senator Frank Murkowski pronounced that Alaska might once again become a destination for workers seeking adventure and fortune, and he envisioned an Arctic pipeline as “a snowball that would initiate an avalanche of development statewide.” During this period, Alaska lawmakers heard upbeat testimony in support of building a pipeline by spokespersons for Cambridge Energy, British Petroleum, Phillips Petroleum, ExxonMobil, Yukon Pacific Corp., Marubeni Corp., and Foothills Pipe Lines. Company representatives noted that oil prices in New York had jumped to \$30 a barrel in anticipation of production cuts by Saudi Arabia, the world’s largest exporter of oil, which was set to reduce shipments by five hundred thousand barrels a day starting in February. The rising cost of oil, they emphasized, was increasing demand on natural gas as a fuel for electricity power plants and home heating, while American resentment was rising over being held hostage by OPEC, an organization with 40% of the world’s crude oil and control of 75% of the world’s accessible oil reserves.

### Reverberations

In the Alaska events collective, a small number of energy leaders created focal points in time and space that reverberated in the minds and speech of others. Consider the December 6, 2000, announcement by vice presidents of ExxonMobil, Phillips Petroleum, and British Petroleum of a \$100 million joint work program to evaluate an Alaska natural gas pipeline project. At a press conference in Anchorage, Joe Marushak of Phillips described the formation of a project team, the North American Natural Gas Pipeline Group. Marushak promised an “economically viable project” that would encourage new investment in exploration of Alaska gas, maximize state

revenues, and provide employment opportunities and access to natural gas within the state. A joint press release called for an “economic project” to provide “the kind of value that shareholders expect.” These three companies, among the world’s largest, own nearly all of the discovered oil and gas reserves in Alaska. As owners of the gas, one of these companies, or all collectively, would likely carry the risk of investing the multiple billions of dollars required to move Alaska gas to consuming markets. On several occasions since the discovery in 1968, these producers, or their predecessors in interest, have considered options for natural gas commercialization.

The announcements from Alaska oil companies float like air and permeate into spaces that typically exercise security in the traffic of all things. In the sequestered rooms of the state capitol building in Juneau, including the governor’s office, news of the proposed study traveled freely and circulated without restriction. It traveled via speakerphone into the Office of the Alaska Governor in Washington, D.C., located on the Senate side of Capitol Hill, where it then further penetrated the congressional offices of Senator Murkowski. Weeks earlier, responding to high natural gas prices, Murkowski had called a hearing to gather recommendations for energy legislation he planned to introduce into Congress. The hearing was titled “To Consider the Transportation of Alaska North Slope Natural Gas to Market and to Investigate the Cost, Environmental Impacts and Energy Security Implications to Alaska and the Rest of the Nation for Alternative Routes and Projects.” Testimony was given by Terry Koonce, president of ExxonMobil, as well as fourteen other highly placed industry and government officials.

The reverberations of the goings-on inside capitol buildings quickly spilled out, beyond the steps and into the reception halls, hotels, and civic auditoriums. In the weeks following the announcement, legislative luncheons, tournaments, parties, auctions, and banquets all became oriented toward Alaska pipeline proposals. Afterward, at late night drinking soirees and midnight suppers, at Democratic and Republican party auctions, fund-raisers, and dances, discussion over the Alaska pipeline continued. The reverberations intensified as leading state lawmakers unleashed a veritable torrent of press releases, memos, speeches, updates, 7 a.m. briefings, press conferences, Senate bills, House bills, and concurrent resolutions. Press release headlines of political deeds were ubiquitous. Alaska lawmakers hired natural gas experts and energy forecasters. They introduced bills to the Alaska Legislature on such topics as right-of-way, bonds, and development. They provided resolutions establishing task forces, joint committees, equity ownership, opposition to routes, support for gas sales, ad valorem taxes, and construction.

What quantities the government tabulates, journalists publish as figures. By adjournment on May 8 of the first session of the twenty-second

state legislature, Alaska lawmakers had introduced dozens of Senate and House bills, substitute bills, and resolutions specific to Alaska gas development. Phillips Alaska Inc., the state's second largest oil producer, was the highest spender on lobbying, at \$416,000 for fees and expenses. BP, the largest oil producer, was second, spending nearly \$300,000. ExxonMobil came in third at \$236,000. Veco Corp., an oil and gas contractor, spent \$180,000. Yukon Pacific Corp., seeking rights to construct the natural gas pipeline, spent nearly \$120,000, and Foothills Pipe Lines, which owned permits to build a pipeline along the Alaska Highway, spent \$92,000. Nearly one million dollars of state funds was "steered" (the word chosen by journalists) to outside consultants, while another million dollars was directed toward increasing government activity on pipeline development by establishing committees and councils and by hiring new staff in select departments. Legislators filed administrative orders and concurrent resolutions creating a Natural Gas Policy Council and a Joint Committee on Natural Gas Pipelines.

An events collective is an obligatory passage point for an atmosphere of potentials where facts and artifacts struggle over establishing "a measure of renown," or what the Oxford English Dictionary calls "fame." As such, fame complements a process of fact-building through dissemination and performativity, what Bruno Latour calls inscription, the convincing of others, controlling behavior, the gathering of sufficient resources "to make claims spread out in time and space" (1987, 131). An events collective is a reverberation: according to Nancy Munn (1992), the extension and circulation of a person or thing through its name in the minds and speech of others. It channels the separation of elements and expansion through repetition of those elements in time and space.

Undeniably, a central feature of the oil and gas industry is the special connection between proportions of quality to spatial and temporal quantity. Quantifiable matter includes linguistically coded economic values and political relations—the establishment of socially recognized standards of measurement (Friedrich 1989). Everything of value, everything that is valorized positively and economically for the energy industry, must achieve its full potential in temporal and spatial terms as a value of quantity. In the Alaska events collective, quantity appears as an avalanche of numbers. It is the capacity volume of gas for various pipeline proposals (1.2 to 5.6 billion cubic feet per day), and amounts in trillion cubic feet (Tcf) of natural gas reserves on Alaska's North Slope (26–35 Tcf known reserves; 100–285 Tcf potential reserves) and in nearby Canada's MacKenzie Delta (13 Tcf known reserves; 55 Tcf potential reserves), or within the reserves of a given gas well (Prudhoe Bay: 26 Tcf; Point Thompson: 3–5 Tcf; Kuparuk, Lisburne, and Endicott fields considered together: 2–6 Tcf). It is ownership percentages of natural gas (BP 32%, ExxonMobil 30%,



Phillips 30%, State of Alaska 12.5% royalty share), pipeline diameters (36", 42", 48", 56"), distances to market (1,700 mi., 1,200 mi., 3,500 mi.), pipeline pressure rates (1,260 psi, 3,000 psi, 1,440 psi), steel strengths (100x, 80x, 70x), construction costs (\$2.85 billion to \$20 billion), percentages of in-state pipe (41%, 16%, 0%), construction times (2 yrs. to 5 yrs.), tariff rates (\$0.90-\$1.25 mcf), completion dates (2007 or 2012 or 2018 or 2025 or ?), associated jobs (40,000 to 400,000), and expected billions of dollars in revenue.

Such numbers fuel strategies of translation for how knowledge is modified and made public, the constant shuffling between the world and the inner circles that creates the pathways, content, and context of enlisting the interest of human actors, as well as the interest of nonhuman actors (gas deposits) so as to hold the interest of the former. Inside Juneau's capitol building, numbers appear in repeat performances at hearings, overviews, and presentations where gas pipeline knowledge streams out of committees, caucuses, press conferences, councils, and clubs. Bulletins, memos, and press releases announcing presentations by industry experts and organizations promoting specific pipeline routes appear like news flashes on legislative websites, committee schedule printouts, daily journals, and industry gas-line reports. In hallways, lobbyists, legislators, and staffers mull over different options for monetizing Alaska natural gas, including overland pipes to the continental United States, pipes to southern Alaska, liquefying gas for transport to Asia, or conversion of natural gas to liquids for shipment down the trans-Alaska oil pipeline.

### The Occult Diary

An events collective employs implicature, stating one thing but intending something else, for the delivery of sarcasm, irony, and contempt across agents within the field of interest. The *Juneau Report*, a glossy twenty-page brochure describing proposals for constructing an Alaska pipeline, provides one example. Weeks prior to the December 6 announcement, BP distributed the *Juneau Report* among Alaska state officials and lawmakers. Despite its focus on the pipeline, the report reminds Alaskans of BP's revenue contribution to the state through corporate taxes on Prudhoe Bay oil and gas production. In 2000, BP's contribution, along with Phillips and Exxon, which also produce oil in Alaska, totaled nearly \$2 billion. Collectively, these producers provide the third largest source of state revenue, behind federal transfer payments and investment earnings on an oil-based permanent wealth fund. On the right side of the second page, just facing the reader as you turn the cover, is a photograph of Karl Kidders, the BP team leader for the North American Natural Gas Pipeline Group. In

the photograph Kidders appears cheerful, an image that contrasts with how I remember his behavior in front of Alaska state officials, whom he regards with mild contempt. Under the photograph is Kidders's personal address to Alaskans. He states, "Before the end of this decade, and hopefully much sooner, Alaska's vast supply of natural gas should be flowing to the largest natural gas market in the world, the North American market."

Weeks later, in January 2001, the *Anchorage Daily News* reprinted the *Juneau Report's* numbers, including the \$2 billion figure. They appeared in a popular biweekly column written by satirist Mike Doogan. In his commentary, Doogan writes that in 2000 the three oil companies reported large net incomes, "that's profit to anybody but an oil company accountant: Phillips, \$1.86 billion; BP, \$11.87 billion; Exxon, \$17.72 billion" (see "Alaska a Resource State?," January 15, 2001). The *Anchorage Daily News* is the most widely circulated newspaper in the state, and nearly half of all Alaska state lawmakers are elected from Anchorage.

The circulation of these statements—of revenue contributions and profits by oil companies appearing in forums that expose voters and lawmakers to the state's reliance on corporate development—intensifies a sentiment of equitable share that informs attitudes toward shifting oil production rents in exchange for votes or campaign contributions.

In the events collective, the printed brochure, newspaper article, and gossip column serve as a kind of epistemological glue, working together in some supernatural way as if creating an "occult diary" (Stringberg 1979) of public announcement. Take one example, the news of the arrival of Dick Olver, the London-based head of global production for BP, who flew to Anchorage to speak before the Alaska Support Industry Alliance, a consortium of companies serving the oil industry. In September 2000, one week prior to the release of the *Juneau Report*, Olver stated that BP intended to begin selling Prudhoe Bay gas within seven years. On the morning after his speech, a quote by Olver, appearing in bold lettering in the *Anchorage Daily News*, states, "The stars appear to be aligning for Alaska." It is printed on page 1 of the business section under the headline "BP Aims for Gas by 2007" (September 21, 2000). Several days after his address, the *Anchorage Daily News* devoted the entire front page of the business section to a photograph of Olver. The man appears seated at a glass table with his hands reaching forward in a cupped manner, giving the appearance that Olver is grasping an imaginary globe. The article is headlined "Global Positioning: Prudhoe Bay Natural Gas Plays into BP's Worldwide Plans." The last part of the headline, "plays into BP's worldwide plans," echoes the expression "plays into one's hands." It is wordplay suggesting that the development of Alaska gas is at the manipulative whim of BP.

The photograph of Olver is striking. On the one hand, there is a clear image of Olver's face and upper body, attired in jacket and tie. Olver casts

a grimacing smile. But in a curious display of newspaper editing, the full bottom half of the photograph depicts the mirror image of Olver as he appears on the glass table, upside down. His head is shown in a Janus-faced expression, blurred by the reflection. Directly at the center of the photograph are four hands. Two of the hands belong to Olver, while the other two appear in the reflection upon the table. In a vulgar perversion of his appearance, Olver has four thumbs and sixteen fingers. A large glass half filled with water or, depending on perspective, half empty, stands near Olver's wrist, highlighting his gold cufflinks. The mirrored reflection from the table gives the water container the attributes of an hourglass figure. It appears, thus, like the sands of time half poured out. The article begins by reminding readers about Olver's last appearance in Alaska the year before. Then, he was fighting for BP's takeover of ARCO (Atlantic Richfield Company). The merger deal would have placed 70% of Alaska oil production under the control of one company.

### **My Way Is the Highway**

An events collective consists of the opportunities provided for people who meet face to face to declare their rights among whoever is "inside the tent." Consider for a moment the winners and losers in selecting a pipeline route. As detailed in the December 6 announcement, the project evaluation would consider a large diameter pipeline system to deliver gas from Prudhoe Bay to Canada and to the continental United States. The objective would be to develop a commercially viable project that could deliver natural gas at costs competitive with other suppliers in the United States and Canada. Key program activities would include conceptual design, permitting considerations, commercial structure, and overall viability. Evaluation would consider two possible routes: an Alaska Highway Route through central Alaska and an Over-the-Top (OTT) route through the Arctic Ocean, under the Beaufort Sea, then south into Canada.

Among interested parties, no one would deny that burying a pipeline under the Beaufort Sea floor would present formidable technical, environmental, and logistical challenges, including the scientific fact that heavy ice floes covering the area eight months out of the year result in ice scouring the ocean floor, a danger to any buried pipe. Yet by fall 2000, one fact well publicized in Alaska was that technological advances in the pipeline industry, including the invention of high-strength steels, would allow a thinner pipe wall to handle higher operating pressures (which would mean moving more gas at less capital cost), making an Alaska pipeline a much less costly proposition than in the past. Also, the previous twenty-five years had seen tremendous growth in the international natural

gas pipeline network, a fact that was included in the 1999 Cambridge Energy Research Associates report requested by BP dealing specifically with prospects for commercializing Alaska gas. The private report, titled *White Paper: Alaska Natural Gas*, was made available to lawmakers by BP and lay conspicuously in their offices, seen by anyone wandering the hallways of the legislature.

Nevertheless, the unprecedented nature of the OTT, as the Over-the-Top route was referred to, and the technical risks of an offshore pipeline “operating at untested high pressures for 400 miles” were seized on when, two weeks prior to the December 6 announcement, Governor Tony Knowles announced his own campaign to spur pipeline construction via the Alaska Highway, a route providing more miles in-state than the OTT. During a 7 a.m. speech before the Resource Development Council’s annual conference in Anchorage, Knowles stated, “Paraphrasing the old political adage, ‘It’s either my way or the highway,’ my response to the pipeline routing question is, ‘My way is the highway.’” The meeting of the Resource Council, a nonprofit group that advocates developing Alaska resources, was attended by nearly two hundred industry representatives and lawmakers. I remember the speech well, in part, because the ticket for attendance cost \$250.

I should add in passing that just prior to Governor Knowles’s “My Way Is the Highway” speech, I caught the only available seat at a table occupied by members of Alaska’s AFL-CIO labor federation. This group of men appeared ambivalent and out of place among lawmakers and executives, though they did sport dress shirts and ties for the occasion. They told me in rumbling tones that they were at the conference that morning specifically to hear Governor Knowles’s speech: “We’re just here to make sure the governor announces the Alaska Highway Route.” In the eyes of the labor union members, the Alaska Highway Route offered twice as many pipeline construction miles within the state as the OTT. In the next day’s news coverage of Knowles’s speech, the following statement appeared on the front page of the *Anchorage Daily News*: “‘My way is the highway—that’s great,’ said Mano Frey, local AFL-CIO head, as he shook Knowles’s hand after the speech. ‘If there is anything we can do to help, just let us know.’”

### The Disappointment

In fall 2001, natural gas prices collapsed and everything came to an end. The reasons experts enlisted for the crash were the recession, a high level of energy conservation by California consumers, a cool summer, the Enron scandal, and the September 11th attack. Forecasts of lower gas demand circulated on the front pages of the national news (“Oil and Gas Prices

Plunge on Fears of Worldwide Recession,” *New York Times*, September 25, 2001), while in Alaska, news of downward forecasts became headlines. By December, the trade weekly *Alaska Petroleum News* was publishing dour predictions on the order of once a week. To quote David Harbour—poet, photographer, Alaska oil lobbyist, and an avid blogger—the winter of 2000 was a “window on a train moving through the station gone in a flash as the invisible hand of supply and demand satisfied the market without us.” For Harbour, the organizing principle that bound these events into a collective might well be described as the so-called primitive’s ignorance of the modern world, a stupidity so drenched with yearning that nothing less than a multibillion dollar pipeline, a pipe dream, reared its head from the grave. Its unraveling was a threshold of maturity, where the potentials eroded so rapidly and completely that even the most ardent of believers had to acknowledge a change in the course of history, if only to avoid being labeled a fool. Between these two points an events collective on Alaska’s pipeline took form. The entry point corresponded with an unprecedented and dramatic rise in the price for natural gas fuel while its exit wound was its sudden and precipitous fall.

Some years later, in 2004, Dr. Pedro van Hellers, an energy consultant, flew to Juneau to discuss with state officials efforts to spur Alaska pipeline construction. State of Alaska officials, myself included at the time, considered Dr. van Hellers a “genius.” His expertise on pipeline construction economics is sought after from government and industry across the globe. In his meeting with us, van Hellers stated in a serious but cheerful manner that the pipeline was “by no means a solid project.” He stated, in fact, that an Alaska natural gas pipeline is “to a large degree a fantasy project.” As if to stress the point, he added, “we have to be realistic about this.” Like van Hellers, most financial and petroleum experts believe that extracting natural gas from Alaska for use as fuel in the continental United States is risky business.

Given the pipeline’s marginal prospects, I asked around about why there was so much excitement surrounding its potential during the winter of 2000 through 2001. The answer, according to Ed Hollander, was “pure and simple: to get re-elected.” Hollander is a respected authority on the natural gas industry. He assisted the State of Alaska during 2000 and 2001 as director of the Calgary office of Cambridge Energy, a global consulting firm based in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Hollander told me that Alaska lawmakers need “to do something that makes them look to the citizenry that they have done something for re-election. And that’s why you end up with things like [the twenty-second] legislative session.” This also was the answer given to me by several pipeline construction economists I interviewed and by politically appointed officials in the State of Alaska with whom I worked. The explanation is plausible. Among state

financial analysts with whom I spoke, the State of Alaska was “broke” and any revenue-enhancing project promoted by lawmakers would be looked on favorably by voters. Moreover, with memories of the 1970s Trans-Alaska oil pipeline boom prosperity still fresh in the minds of many constituents, generating public awareness over pipeline construction was, in the language of these analysts, “a political no-brainer.” Still, as I describe above, political leaders were not the only ones caught up in the excitement.

### Enclosure

As the shale gas revolution began altering the landscape of natural gas supply areas in continental North America, I returned to UC Berkeley from fieldwork in Washington, D.C., where I had been working with Congress on energy issues for the State of Alaska. At home, I happened to read about natural gas in its liquefied cryogenic form (LNG), which was making headline news in the *San Francisco Chronicle*. Glancing over a few paragraphs, my attention was captured by the way the topic of natural gas had been organized. First, evident were the same players, sources of knowledge, geographical areas of supply, economies of demand, and technologies of gas transmission I had become familiar with from my work on the Alaska pipeline. Second, the relations between statements and events on LNG captured the same variety of concerns that I became familiar with from my work in Alaska and Washington, D.C. Because of my experience, information in the news article appeared natural. That is, I found myself running through a mental checklist of information I expected to see as if by some regular practice. There was, naturally, a statement by an expert indicating what had become evident: “Michael Zenker, senior director for North America with the firm Cambridge Energy Research Associates” (and a personal acquaintance of mine) states, “it’s becoming increasingly clear that the domestic supply base is reaching a stage of maturity.” Zenker’s authority was linked to speculation by three of the “world’s largest” natural gas producers (the same companies who own 90% of Alaska’s Prudhoe Bay gas): “ExxonMobil, ConocoPhillips and BP are considering expanding their liquid natural gas businesses worldwide.”

Unpacking my notes, I was surprised by how much I had forgotten about what had transpired during my fieldwork. I found it disconcerting that my notes presented a different set of personal relations on the event (between institutions, processes, patterns, norms, modes). It was then that I came to realize that the lobbyists, secretaries, officials, executives, experts, and lawyers whom I had come to know had always appeared aware of what others represented to them as an interest.

In Arctic energy development, events collectives emerge through a variety of high-level persons in industry and government who are involved in making speeches about current events. They become publicly visible in ways that create greater proximity to a power holder. The star attraction of the persons involved in making pronouncements and the actual project for which all these persons call on themselves to make pronouncements is crucial—the actors want to distinguish themselves as heroically associated with what is at stake in such a promise, with the concentric circles, press releases, and morning meetings that all are geared toward creating and managing the experience. The Alaska pipeline, a mega project, as the particular promise around which persons are compelled to hold such events, is a project that has the capacity to galvanize the separate interests of many competing people. The necessity of money, structural position, and an outlet to stage an audience surrounding a project requires the mobilization of desire by a professional team who can assemble, mobilize, and perform events oriented toward knowledge, fame, and honor (versus a court of law that creates subjects of guilt and innocence).

Events, both discursive and carnivalistic, were something of a spectacle—a constant exaggeration. In fact, the whole Arctic pipeline idea is one of exaggeration, “unconventional,” in industry rhetoric. In a sense, one could say that time stands still during this period while ignorance and confidence are in tension, a period of tensions. It is the assemblage of events that represents the fully developed form of the collective meaning—as it gathers its own self-sufficiency occurring within a particularly self-enclosed period of time.