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The Anti-Fracking Movement and the Politics of Rural Marginalization in Lithuania: Intersectionality in Environmental Justice

Diana Mincyte and Aiste Bartkiene

ABSTRACT

While the environmental justice perspective focuses on the unequal distribution of environmental risks and benefits across different groups based on race, class, or gender, intersectionality approaches avoid the use of a priori categories to examine marginalization. We argue that intersectionality can broaden the scope of environmental justice studies by examining interactive, historically grounded processes through which categories of difference are produced. To support this argument, we present an illustrative case of the movement in Lithuania that challenged Chevron's plans to prospect shale resources for potential fracking. We conduct a narrative analysis of public discourses surrounding the formation of the movement and track the creation of a particular category of difference: the rural community, represented in opposition to the urban. We show how the public debate in Lithuania culminated in questioning the legitimacy of the anti-fracking movement and devaluing the rural population more broadly. We also show how both media accounts and anti-fracking movement leaders ignored social inequalities in rural villages. We conclude with a discussion of how the intersectionality approach provides an analytical lens to consider geopolitical tensions as part of the matrix of power relations that can be understood as expressions of ontological insecurity in global borderlands.

One of the key contributions of the environmental justice scholarship is the development of analytical tools for examining the unequal distribution of environmental risks and benefits across different social groups based on race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, and age (Buckingham and Kulcur 2010; Bullard 1996). Although some recent studies have moved beyond the distributive justice agenda to consider such issues as identity politics (Bell and York 2010; Sze 2009) or community participation in decision making (Malin 2015; Mohai, Pellow, and Roberts 2009), most continue to emphasize fixed social

categories and inequalities within and between groups (Pellow and Nyseth Brehm 2013, 235).

In contrast to the distributive justice agenda, the intersectionality perspective relies on a relational and comparative approach to conceptualize processes and institutions that shape identities, inequalities, and justice. At the center of this approach is a recognition of the mutual constitution of categories of difference; that is, ‘categories of difference like race and gender cannot meaningfully exist apart from each other’ (Hancock 2016, 21). Kathy Davis (2008) argues that the ambiguity and open-endedness of the intersectionality approach are what make it a highly impactful feminist theory.

In this paper, we make a case that the relational and open-ended approach to category-making pursued by intersectionality scholars helps illuminate new dimensions of domination, marginalization, and power inequalities that foreground environmental justice struggles. According to Ange-Marie Hancock (2007), intersectionality intervenes both methodologically and conceptually in the classical social science scholarship because it ‘changes the relationship between the categories of investigation from one that is determined a priori to one of empirical investigation’ (67). Whereas classical sociological analyses begin with questions about how race/ethnicity, class, and gender shape power relations, institutions, identities, and experiences, the intersectionality approach examines discursive, political, and material processes through which social categories are produced, for what purposes, under what conditions, and via which power mechanisms. From this perspective, only when we understand the interactive processes shaping these categories can we identify how power and injustices work.

In our analysis, we present an illustrative case of the rural anti-fracking movement in Lithuania that successfully challenged Chevron’s efforts to prospect and develop shale gas and oil resources in 2012–2013. We demonstrate how the intersectionality approach can deepen our understanding of this specific environmental justice issue by moving beyond traditional social categories such as race, class, and gender. Instead, we analyze the formulation of a different social category—that of the rural—as a political actor and a multiply marginalized group. The intersectionality perspective also provides an analytical lens to consider geopolitical tensions as part of the matrix of power relations that

exacerbates marginalization of rural communities and complicates environmental justice agendas.

While scholarly work on energy politics has provided helpful analytical strategies for understanding environmental justice issues in the Global North (Schafft et al. 2014; Willow and Wylie 2014) and increasingly in the Global South (Clark et al. 2018; Nygren and Wayessa 2018), the intersectionality approach is particularly useful for studying environmental justice concerns in liminal, borderland regions that tend to be overlooked in the literature (Gille 2016; Kama 2016). In her comparative analysis of organic agriculture movements in Costa Rica and Latvia, Guntra Aistara (2018, 8) argues that these ‘neither developing nor developed’ regional peripheries are fertile places for examining environmental politics because even minor policy changes in neighboring countries often have far-reaching ramifications for those inhabiting the borderlands. Located ‘on the margins of global powers...[their] in-between status makes them politically insignificant in their own right but strategically important areas for larger powers to assert influence on the world stage’ (8). This statement is equally true of Lithuania. Even though Lithuania joined NATO and the European Union in 2004, it remains within Russia’s zone of political and economic influence. For this reason the open-ended, interpretative approach of the intersectionality perspective is particularly well suited for considering the added complexities of power interplays in Lithuania as a borderland.

To advance these lines of inquiry, we begin with an outline of key tenets in the intersectionality literature and explain our methodological approach. Next we summarize the status of shale prospecting efforts and the anti-fracking movement against it in Lithuania. The following two sections delve into public narratives surrounding fracking and the anti-fracking movement in Lithuania by highlighting the ways through which the rural community emerged as a contentious political category. After reflecting on how the devaluation of rural communities is tied to geopolitical power interplays, we conclude with the implications of this study.

Intersectionality: Approaches and methodology

Intersectionality has become a widely used concept in social sciences, humanities, and beyond. As it is increasingly being embraced by different disciplines and appropriated for diverging purposes, scholars have expressed concern that with its spread, the concept is losing its core epistemological, political, and ethical commitments as articulated in the original work of Black feminists (Alexander-Floyd 2012; Bilge 2013; May 2015).

Responding to these critiques, Hancock (2016) has developed a stewardship approach that, while respecting the efforts to keep the intellectual ownership of intersectionality in the hands of feminist women of color, seeks to strengthen its theoretical foundations. Her approach is based on an important analytical distinction between two intellectual projects within intersectionality: the visibility agenda and the focus on ontological relationships between categories of difference. Echoing Charles Taylor's (1992) politics of recognition, the first project continues to focus on intersecting forms of injustice committed on a specific demographic group, an agenda that Hancock believes most scholars of intersectionality are pursuing.

The second, somewhat less developed, project seeks to advance theoretical and methodological tools for grappling with the production of differences and categories rooted in 'identity, inequality, and justice attributable to intersectionality' (Hancock 2016, 21). As an analytic approach, it explores how categories are produced by interrogating overlapping mechanisms of injustice and oppression without presenting reductionist 'single-axis' accounts such as gender-first or race-first explanations of particular social phenomena. The second agenda resonates with poststructuralism in that it approaches public discourses as key sites of production of power relations through the construction of categories of difference. Like poststructuralists, intersectionality scholars advocate for a critical interrogation and deconstruction of normative assumptions embedded in categories as a way to deepen our understanding of power relations and to generate social change (McCall 2005; cf. Mann 2013).

Moreover, one of the earliest insights developed in the intersectionality literature is an emphasis on the continued role of colonialism, forced migrations, and imperialism in shaping social hierarchies that undergird category-making processes (Hancock 2016; cf. Patil 2013). Gloria Anzaldúa's (1987) exposition of the experiences of Latina women living in the United States and Mexico's borderlands drew attention to how 'Latinas'

became a category and came to be placed at the bottom of the local social ladder. Her work demonstrates how marginalization is embedded in a particular geopolitical location and colonial history.

This paper builds on the insights from this second intellectual project to analyze a particular case of production of difference and interactive forms of marginalization: the emergence of the rural community as a fixed social and political category in the arena of Lithuanian national energy policy-making. Our analysis shows how negative representations of the anti-fracking movement in public debates drew on political imaginaries of backwardness and isolation associated with rurality. Similarly to Patricia Hill Collins's (2000) study of the family as a site where gender- and race-based inequalities become rooted in nation-building processes, we focus on the rural as a category to reveal intersecting forms of injustice within specific material, historical, and political conditions. Our subsequent analysis shows that seemingly local struggles for environmental justice in Lithuania's rural communities cannot be understood without considering the country's colonial history and current context of competing neo-imperialist powers. Using the intersectionality approach yields a deep understanding of multilayered forms of marginalization and injustice, revealing how environmental justice concerns over fracking are pitted against historical justice claims rooted in colonial history and national sovereignty. By following the intersectionality approach, we link struggles for environmental justice to what Vincent Della Sala (2018, 2017) calls ontological insecurity; that is, a state of overwhelming instability and vulnerability that defines the political subjectivities of residents of small states located in borderland regions. Ultimately, the intersectionality approach yields a deeper understanding of how geopolitical power interplays become interwoven with everyday experiences and life trajectories of local groups and how it works to reinforce their marginalization.

Before we turn to the Lithuanian case, we will briefly outline our data and methods. Empirically, this research is based on a collaborative project involving content analysis of public discourses surrounding prospecting shale gas and oil deposits in western Lithuania in 2012–2013. To understand various claims to justice, we focused on the popular media, an arena where ideas, reactions, and meanings surrounding these efforts were publicly rehearsed and negotiated. We chose to study online and print

resources that capture not only the most widely read national and regional publications, but also community newsletter articles, transcripts of popular television programs, specialized websites and discussion forums, online reader comments and expert opinions.

Our analysis covers June 2013 to April 2014, a period marked by the most intense debates about hydraulic fracturing in Lithuania. It is a rather short period because public debates did not start until communities mobilized in the early summer of 2013 and dwindled following Chevron's departure in October 2013. In the course of our research, we identified and studied 442 documents. Using a recursive method to examine these sources, we distilled the most common thematic threads. Among these threads, the most prominent centered on the rural communities and their motivations to protest against Chevron; Russia's continued influence in regional energy politics; and Lithuania's place in global energy infrastructures.

Methodologically, this study follows the interpretative tradition of intersectionality scholarship. Rooted in qualitative and interpretative approaches, particularly in literary, legal, and gender studies, intersectionality relies on close reading, thick descriptions, and narrative analysis (Alexander-Floyd 2012; Davis 2008) as methodological strategies that yield insightful and nuanced analyses of intersecting vectors of marginalization. Building on this methodological tradition, we conducted an interpretative analysis that situates the events into a broader historical, political, and economic context, to illustrate how an intersectional approach deepens our understanding of power dynamics in the particular environmental justice issue of oil extraction in Lithuania.

Energy, community, and power in globalizing Lithuania

In 2013, Žygičiai, a small town in western Lithuania, became an unlikely site of contestations over energy politics. Encouraged by the results of geological surveys in neighboring Poland, Lithuania's government had recruited investments by Chevron, a global leader in shale gas extraction through hydraulic fracturing. But residents of Žygičiai and three neighboring communities whose lands became sites of geological prospecting mobilized against Chevron, citing social, economic, and environmental concerns. The proverbial David prevailed over Goliath when Chevron shelved the project.

This was not the first attempt to develop energy resources in the region. The area surrounding Žygaičiai is dotted with concrete wells encircled with barbed wire and marked with rusty signs, attesting to decades of oil and gas exploration.ⁱ Despite efforts to extract oil in southwestern Lithuania during and after socialism, actual levels of oil production today remain relatively low due to technical difficulties in accessing the deeply seated deposits. Because of this, Lithuania is heavily dependent on imported fossil fuels. For example, in 2011, Lithuania's energy companies produced 2,000 barrels of crude oil per day, but the country consumed 60,000 barrels per day (Energy Agency 2013).

Even though Lithuania has actively sought to diversify its energy sources since gaining independence from the Soviet Union in 1990, and especially after joining the European Union in 2004, it is still considered an 'energy island' because almost all of its energy, including natural gas, crude oil, liquid fuels, and coal, continues to originate in Russia.ⁱⁱ This is mainly due to the historical organization of oil and gas infrastructures that tethered Lithuania to Russian resources. Two major gas terminals, built in the 1960s and 1970s, connect Lithuania with Latvia, Ukraine, Belarus, and Russia as part of the former Soviet Union's energy system.

Not only does Lithuania rely on Russian energy supplies, but until the spring of 2014 the Russian energy powerhouse Gazprom was directly involved in managing national utility providers, such as Lithuanian Gas and Amber Grid. Given that Gazprom directly appointed a number of members to the boards of these utilities, it is no surprise that the company was granted lucrative contracts, leaving the Lithuanian government with almost no leverage to impose regulations.

Apart from concerns about the economic consequences of Russia's energy monopoly, there is also a prevailing understanding in Lithuanian and European political circles that Russia wields its energy supply as a potential weapon to punish Lithuania for its staunchly pro-western political orientation, particularly its joining NATO in 2004 and its unwavering support for Ukrainian, Georgian, and other ethnic/national independence movements near and within Russia. In the midst of these geopolitical tensions, Gazprom has increased the price of Lithuanian gas purchases by 450 percent in less than a decade. This means that Lithuanian consumers, whose incomes are already low in comparison to

their western European counterparts, are paying one of the highest rates for gas on the continent; for example, in 2011 Lithuanians paid 35.5 percent more for Russian gas than Germans and 22 percent more than their neighbors in Poland, despite lower transportation costs (Ministry of Energy 2013).

In its efforts to diversify its energy portfolio, the Lithuanian government has been forcefully lobbying the European Commission to adopt various policies such as the Third Energy Package that would reduce Gazprom's control over pipelines in the region. On the national level, the Lithuanian government also developed the National Energy Independence Strategy, which has been through several iterations outlining ways to meet energy security needs and produce growth and investment (Ministry of Energy 2012).

Included in this energy strategy is a commitment to develop domestic energy sources. Current projections are that shale gas and oil resources could fuel Lithuania for about 45 years at current levels of consumption. Hence, from the perspective of the Lithuanian government and urban consumers, the development of fracking technologies has the potential to fundamentally reshape Lithuania's energy future and enable economic and political sovereignty (Ministry of Energy 2012, 45). It was in this political climate that the Lithuanian government opened bids for shale gas and oil prospecting in July 2011.

Emerging rural mobilizations

Chevron won the contract, and its 2012 arrival in Samogitia, a region of western Lithuania inhabited by a distinct linguistic and ethnographic group, was highly anticipated. However, the construction of exploratory wells did not go smoothly. The first signs of tension emerged in the fall of 2012, when LL Investments, a Lithuanian company representing Chevron, hastily requested that all landowners in the area grant signed permission to conduct seismic research on their properties. The owners grew anxious as many of their questions went unanswered, and even more so after representatives of LL Investments announced in community meetings that they would 'drag every non-compliant farmer to court' (Bogdanas 2013a). These concerns quickly snowballed into a larger movement that mobilized around citizen and property rights in four local communities: Kėčiai, Aukštupiai, Sartinikai, and most prominently, Žygaičiai.

To advance their anti-fracking agenda, the communities reached out to politicians in their municipal center of Taurage, lobbied representatives of the Parliament, organized public protests, and voiced their position in popular media. At the same time, billboards funded by an anonymous group mushroomed along main highways, depicting the ills of fracking and calling on politicians to resist Chevron. By June 2013 other rural Samogitia communities had mobilized in the battle against Chevron, and a total of 275 rural communities signed a petition to the Lithuanian president and government seeking to end shale gas and oil exploration on their lands.

Early in the movement, the agenda focused on local concerns about violation of property rights, but it also drew on a wider range of stories and imaginaries circulating in the global media. As the younger generation turned to the Internet for more information about fracking, and especially after the public airing of Josh Fox's popular documentary film *Gasland* (2010) at the Žygaičiai parish center, the concerns shifted to emphasize environmental topics, particularly the risks of polluting water, land, and soil. The scene in *Gasland* where water from a faucet is ignited with a cigarette lighter left an indelible image in the minds of the landowners and became the focal point of their calls to protect their land and communities (Bogdanas 2013b). Notably, this episode also became a source of ridicule in the media, portrayed as a sign of villagers' naiveté, ignorance, and disregard for science (Petkutė 2012).

Fearing that their voices might be drowned out by the strategic messaging of industry lobbyists, movement leaders also announced that if explorations continued against their will, they would approach Greenpeace, one of the best-known global nongovernmental environmental organizations. Their choice of Greenpeace as a bargaining chip in their campaign was not accidental, as it was widely known that the organization had already helped protesters against shale drilling in Romania.ⁱⁱⁱ

Amid growing resistance, a debate ensued in the government that led to the approval of new requirements for companies conducting hydrocarbon explorations in Lithuania. Among the new provisions, one included local communities as partners in profit-sharing schedules and another required energy companies to conduct more rigorous environmental risk assessments. Following these events, in October 2013, Chevron announced its retreat from Lithuania, citing an unstable political and economic climate,

although international experts suggest that Chevron's move might have also been precipitated by a downgrading of profit projections due to the technological challenges of extracting gas and oil from considerably softer shale structures than those in the United States. Chevron's withdrawal marked the end of the anti-fracking movement. Yet concerns over fracking did not fully subside for two more years: up until 2016 locals continued to worry that LL Investments might push again for hydrocarbon prospecting in the surrounding regions of Rietavas and Raseiniai.

Given Lithuania's dependence on Russia, it is not surprising that one of the most common discursive tropes threading through the media and daily conversations surrounding energy politics in the mid-2010s was the idea that hydraulic fracturing would enable Lithuania to escape Russia's orbit of economic and political influence. Lithuanian prime minister Andrius Kubilius (1999–2000, 2008–2012) boldly stated that the development of shale gas and oil resources would transform the country into the 'Dubai or Qatar' of the North (Baltic News Service 2012), referring to the enormous wealth and political influence that these Middle Eastern countries have accrued through the exploitation of their natural resources.

Gaining access to the subsoil deposits would open a new chapter in Lithuania's struggles against centuries of Russian colonialism: 'For Lithuania, shale gas may prove to be the historical chance to escape [*pabėgti*] its dependency on Russia,' stated Rokas Kasperavicius (2013) on a widely read news portal, delfi.lt. Kasperavicius's claim to historical justice—a breaking free from centuries-long dependency on and exploitation by Russia—is significant here because it counters environmental justice agendas pursued by Žygičiai and neighboring rural communities. In this view, environmental justice concerns of the anti-fracking movement are of secondary importance to the pursuit of historical justice arguments by the nation.

As this overview of energy politics in Lithuania suggests, environmental justice concerns in rural Samogitia constitute only one piece in the larger political and economic puzzle. At every turn in Lithuania's modern history, energy politics has never been a local matter: from building the Soviet pipelines in the 1960s to joining the global anti-fracking movement in the fight against Chevron, energy politics has been anchored in colonial history, national sovereignty concerns, geopolitical power struggles, and global

energy markets. The intersectionality approach enables us to capture the complicated historical and economic realities in which this particular environmental justice movement was embedded and its relation to larger justice issues. More specifically, it highlights how the ongoing struggles for Lithuanian national sovereignty vis-à-vis Russia's neo-imperialist domination and Chevron's economic interests set the stage for the anti-fracking movement and shaped its evolution in the broader political landscape. The following narratives surrounding the anti-fracking movement document how these intersecting power plays became imbricated in the formation of the rural as an intersectional category.

Rural sovereignty: Geopolitical forces, local struggles

While urbanites, public commentators, industry representatives, and experts touted the potential value of subterranean hydrocarbons, leaders of rural communities across southwestern Lithuania pushed back by making a different set of claims. As in other similar anti-fracking movements inside and outside of Europe, communities promoted the continued importance of rural livelihoods in Lithuania in terms of economic survival and the intrinsic value of rural landscapes.

At their core, these arguments resonated with the underlying agendas of environmental justice and food sovereignty movements (Edelman 2014). Lithuanian farmers participating in anti-fracking campaigns reasserted their ownership rights to their farms, animals, food, and labor, and made territorial claims to their land, in what geographers define as the 'spatial tactics of re-territorialization' (Trauger 2014, 1145).

In public pronouncements, re-territorialization was often framed in the language of economic survival. Residing in a region that has a number of organic farms and is renowned for its dairy production, local farmers often expressed anxiety about losing organic production certifications, forfeiting higher direct payments from the European Union, and losing the price premiums paid for their products (Bogdanas 2013b). Movement spokespeople portrayed villagers as hardworking, honest farmers who embraced the European agricultural reforms, rebuilt their farms to meet strict quality and sustainability requirements, and risked losing all their investment due to the arrival of an American oil corporation.

In addition, movement leaders emphasized family histories, community life, and collective memory in the villages to affirm their claims to rural livelihoods. One of their central tenets was the continued symbolic significance of the land. Instead of viewing Lithuania as grounded in the Earth's planetary time, leaders spoke about social time, cross-generational connections, kinship relations, and particular qualities of their land. In one example, a member of the movement expressed abhorrence at the idea of fracking: 'I have 12 hectares of sacred land [near Žygeičiai] and want to keep it sacred when I leave it behind to my children' (Žukovskis 2013, all translations by authors).

Advocates of fracking did not challenge either the economic logic of smallholders or symbolic value of their land. Rather, they questioned the authenticity of the movement, debating whether the rural community was truly an autonomous grassroots political unit or was but Russia's pawn in the larger geopolitical game. In light of media revelations by the *New York Times* and the British newspaper *Guardian* about the support that Polish and Romanian anti-fracking movements received from Russia, these fears might not be far-fetched (Harvey 2014; Higgins 2014).

In articulating prevalent anxieties about Russian meddling in Lithuania's backcountry, public commentators often pointed to the weaknesses, malleability, and shortsightedness of villagers who placed their interests above those of the nation, as is evident in following excerpt from a popular newspaper article:

As usual in Lithuania, strategies to develop [an independent] energy market are based on the same scenario: at first, a bogeyman [*baubas*] is created in the minds of those who might not even know what shale gas is, nor how it is extracted. Then such propaganda snowballs [into a powerful political movement that opposes Lithuanian efforts to build energy sovereignty]. (Petkutė 2012)

In a later article, journalist Egle Petkutė detects a conspiracy behind the mobilization of local communities against fracking: 'Lithuania has a perfect opportunity to make an unbelievable amount of money [by exploiting shale resources]. However, there is a group of people who are hired and paid by foreign agencies and who are drowning Lithuania's future' (Petkutė 2014). As this quotation suggests, the anti-fracking movement was also vilified for stripping the nation-state of its prerogative to govern over internal regions. Such a reversal of power was seen as particularly troubling because it threatened to

amplify ethnic and cultural divisions in the multiethnic Baltic states. In an article with the impassioned title ‘One Hopes There Will Not Be Bloodshed over Shale Gas,’ journalist Gene Drungiliene referred to the cultural schisms emanating from conflicts over energy:

The Samogitians are sitting on shale gas and refuse to share it with the rest of Lithuania. . . . One can imagine how this might create tensions based on dialect differences, as the Samogitians might make claims to territorial autonomy on the grounds of ethnic difference, taking the dowry of shale gas resources with them. In this scenario, all concerns over shale gas would be set aside, as Lithuania would continue relying on Russian gas. It would be much more important to deal with internal divisions than seek energy independence. (Drungiliene 2013)

This journalist shifts the focus from the rural community to the dialect-based region, pitting Lithuania’s linguistic and cultural groups against each other. Such a discursive rescaling reveals deep-seated anxieties about the territorial and cultural integrity of the nation as well as growing concerns with regional autonomy.

In their explanations for why and how residents of Žygaičiai and surrounding communities came to challenge national energy strategies, online media sources often cited the limited information available in Lithuania’s backcountry, suggesting that residents of the remote villages neither knew nor understood science or hard economic facts. Implied in these arguments is the idea that it was not the farmers who succumbed to external pressures, but industry and government representatives who failed to communicate: ‘nobody told the people about shale resources and how they are extracted. . . . One has to treat people respectfully’ (Daukšys 2013). At the center of this rhetoric is an oxymoronic argument that a rural community is both capable of derailing the national project of energy sovereignty by chasing away foreign investors and easily manipulated by powerful actors from outside. Either way, rural residents are constructed as unreliable citizens unwilling to place national interests above their own.

To understand the sources of the anxieties surrounding rural movements, it is helpful to return to the literature on agrarian citizenship (Wittman 2009; Trauger 2014). Writing on the broader contexts of the political organization of rural communities, Hannah Wittman points to the prevailing urban bias that undergirds modern citizenship and state-making projects. She suggests that citizenship is an inherently urban endeavor

that has often failed to integrate rural inhabitants: ‘The roots of citizenship practice in urban spaces, coupled with the maintenance of urban political and economic centers of power, have historically marginalized rural actors and spaces to the periphery of political articulation’ (Wittman 2009, 120).

A closer look at the narratives surrounding rural sovereignty in Lithuania similarly reveals how the popular urban imaginaries of rural inhabitants as self-interested subjects cast them as lesser citizens who do not easily fit into the parameters of the nation-state. The preceding quotations suggest that Lithuania’s mostly urban public has been grappling with the emergence of the rural community as a new political force capable of challenging the primacy of the nation-state on both international and local levels.

Taking a long view on these developments, in this section we have shown how political imaginaries surrounding the anti-fracking movement focused on rural activists and depicted them as unreliable partners in the nation-building project. Our intersectional analysis shows how rural communities were doubly marginalized. First, they became subjects of Chevron’s energy development project that threatened to undermine their livelihoods and devalue their land. Second, public debates over the project constructed them as uninformed and shortsighted pawns of Russian interests, turning the predominantly urban public against them and driving a wedge between the rural and urban political spheres. The intersectionality lens again makes it possible to track how geopolitical tensions taking place on the international stage translated into marginalization of a particular group in national and local politics. In the following section we delve deeper into how the rural became the marginalized category and a marker of struggles for sovereignty.

The making and unmaking of the rural category

Notably, it was the rural community, not some other social category, that became the container of anxieties about sovereignty and the source of marginalization of local anti-fracking groups. Although it is true that the movement originated in a rural setting, other categorizations were also possible: its leadership was predominantly male; the movement represented interests of relatively well-to-do farmers; and the concern with stewardship

of the environment found resonance in cities where urbanites gathered to support the activists in public protests. Moreover, even though claims to rural livelihoods, land, and agricultural labor did feature in the movement's agenda, there were also other critiques of Chevron's project that did not relate to rural issues. For example, to counter the historical justice narrative that emphasized Lithuania's colonial past, posters, billboards, and speeches criticized the arrival of an American company as another colonial project. In one instance, a poster held at a public event equated Chevron to Russia's Gazprom (*Chevronas = Gazpromas*), suggesting that the American company would be as destructive for Lithuania as its Russian counterpart. Another hand-lettered banner read 'Lithuania is not America's prairies' (*Lietuva ne Amerikos prerijos*), presenting Chevron's aspirations to expand into Lithuania as an extension of the early US colonial history marked by violence. Yet, these alternative narratives rarely found resonance in the mainstream media, becoming overshadowed by political imaginaries of rural communities as disengaged from the nation-building project.

Part of the reason rurality emerged as the predominant rhetoric was that 'rural' was an existing category already filled with negative connotations. Writing about popular imaginaries of rural inhabitants in the Russian Empire of which Lithuania was a part for more than a century, Theodor Shanin (1990) documented deep-seated anti-rural biases reflected in governmental and literary representations of peasants as backward, unenlightened, and ignorant. Continuing this tradition, the socialist state viewed its rural inhabitants with distrust and deprived them of citizenship rights well into the 1970s. Even though agricultural work was publicly celebrated in the workers' state, the farmers' self-provisioning skills made them too independent and thus unreliable in the eyes of the socialist leadership and its controlled media (Viola et al. 2005).

In addition to the historically grounded derogatory representations of the rural, European agricultural reforms further marginalized and reinforced negative views of rural populations, particularly smallholder semi-subsistence farmers in Eastern Europe. Even before Lithuania's entrance into the EU, European experts criticized the country for its agrarian economy based on small-scale farming as inefficient and backward (Juska 2007). Yet, the EU funding schemes supported only those farmers who had access to matching financial capital and institutional knowledge required for filing appropriate paperwork,

effectively barring semi-subsistence farmers from taking advantage of them. Consequently, European agricultural policies permanently pushed semi-subsistence farmers to the margins of the agricultural economy (Pine 2014). In this context, smallholder farmers were cast as closed-minded, unambitious villagers and unenthused Europeans (Dzenovska and Aistara 2014), in contrast to their wealthy neighbors who invested in new technologies to produce ‘European-quality’ food (Harboe Knudsen 2015).

A closer look at the Žygičiai community where smallholder agriculture remains dominant exemplifies this dynamic. Out of 593 farms registered in the Žygičiai district, 400 farms are smaller than 5 ha (or 12.4 acres). Only 20 farms in the region cover from 200 to 300 ha of land, including a dairy farm with fully automated milking facilities (Noreikienė n.d.). Unlike commodity farming, these semi-subsistence operations depend on manual labor and produce diverse crops: farmers grow grains, potatoes, and vegetables (in greenhouses and outdoors) and keep up to five dairy cows, which they milk by hand. There is also a notable gender dimension in the ownership structures of these farms, in that 45 percent of all small landowners are women but none of the large farms is owned by a woman. The unusually high percentage of women landowners in Žygičiai and in Lithuania more generally is not so much a sign of gender equality as an expression of added work responsibilities for women who in addition to engaging in housework and various short-term, part-time employment arrangements also run farms. Many women do not hold formal employment, but work as seasonal helpers or child- and elder-care workers for their wealthier neighbors, positions that leave them without social security protection.

Such inequalities in rural communities—overlooked in public debates and the anti-fracking movement agendas—reveal intersecting vectors of marginalization that a classic environmental justice framework would overlook. When leaders of the anti-fracking movement argued that shale resource development would jeopardize their hard-earned organic certifications and undermine their compliance with European regulations, their claims were based on their relatively privileged socioeconomic position rather than representing voices of all villagers, including semi-subsistence women farmers. In this sense, the environmental justice agenda of the Žygičiai movement itself struggled to address social justice issues emanating from the economic divide separating well-to-do

farmers from their smallholder counterparts who rely on the precarious and often gendered rural livelihood strategies.

Moreover, when public commentators lump together activists and others with different perspectives into one category of ‘rural,’ they imagine this group as backward semi-subsistence farmers who are unconcerned with Lithuania’s best interests. Such a categorization recycles colonial stereotypes that have little to do with the lived experiences and internal social stratification in rural villages. More specifically, this narrative ignores the fact that the anti-fracking movement was spearheaded not by the semi-subsistence farmers, but by the better-off rural residents whose socioeconomic background and status were comparable to those of urbanites and national elites. It also misconstrues the political agenda of the movement, which was never critical of Europe. In fact, its members have been fully invested in and dependent on the success of the European agricultural policies and have embraced the European project as strongly as their urban counterparts. Ironically, the public debate used negative political imaginaries of the rural community rooted in Russia’s colonial and socialist past to criticize the movement for its alleged alliances with Russia and failure to pursue the European dream.

There are multiple ways to conceptualize the complicated choreography of power relations reflected in the heated public debates that surrounded Chevron’s fracking project, but the construction of the rural community as a vehicle for expressing anxieties about national sovereignty and geopolitical tensions is central to understanding the stakes of this environmental justice movement. The arrival of an American energy conglomerate may have been an unprecedented event in Lithuania, but it fed into historically grounded colonial imaginaries and European developmental visions of the rural. Despite organizing a successful movement, the activists were portrayed as poor, non-enterprising villagers whose claims to land and labor could not be considered as legitimate. At the same time, the movement leaders obscured local inequalities, complicating their self-portrayal as agents of justice for all villagers. As the intersectionality perspective suggests, the blind spots in the movement agenda not only signal inequalities in rural communities, but also paradoxically reproduce Russia’s colonial imaginaries and European developmental visions to exclude and dominate the poorest groups.

Conclusions: Power and environmental justice in the borderlands

Focusing on the Žygičiai anti-fracking movement in Lithuania, this paper has highlighted intersecting forms of marginalization influencing the struggles surrounding the development of subterranean resources. Local community members claimed rights to their farms, animals, and agricultural labor that superseded the economic and political value of domestic energy production. Arguing for their unalienable rights to rural livelihoods, they mobilized not only against a transnational corporation, but also against Lithuania's urban elites, who envisioned fracking as a way of securing national energy sovereignty.

The fracking debate in Lithuania reveals the complicated and often contradictory workings of power relations embodied in the construction of the rural as a group of people who lacked an understanding or commitment to the nation-state. Simultaneously, it shows how Lithuania's colonial history has rendered all of its inhabitants—rural and urban—as subjects of Russia's geopolitical interests, which manifests in high energy prices and overall political instability. The influx of capital from Chevron exacerbated the pre-existing marginalization of rural populations by pitting urbanites against rural community organizers who, unexpectedly, found themselves aligned with Russian interests. Stakeholders on both sides of the fracking debate muted the voices of the rural poor in the processes of political deliberation.

Building on these findings, we sought to show that the intersectionality approach yields a number of insights when studying environmental justice. First, by focusing on the discursive practices through which social categories of marginalization are produced, the intersectionality approach has provided us with the lens for capturing the complexity of power inequalities. It shows how the environmental justice movement was embedded in a hierarchy of power relations: Russia over Lithuania, urban over rural, well-off over poor. Indeed, one of the most surprising findings of this analysis is inequalities within the anti-fracking movement. Even though the movement leaders overlooked the rural poor in their campaign, they succeeded in drawing public's attention to their environmental injustice concerns and securing policy changes for future shale resource development in Lithuania. It is hard to know how differently the events would have unfolded had the movement incorporated local social justice concerns into their agendas, but it is clear that

environmental justice movements should be more inclusive and open, not because this may (or may not) help them to achieve their goals, but because this makes it possible to address intersectional marginalization.

The second contribution of the intersectionality approach in this analysis is its ability to capture the translation of the colonial history and contemporary geopolitical power interplays on the international stage into category-making and identity politics that undergirded the environmental justice movement. Attending to the complexity of interlocking and contradictory power relations, this case reveals how systems of oppression and contradictory dynamics of marginalization have been shaped by geopolitical tensions playing out in borderland regions. Writing about the shifting economic and geopolitical climate in Russia's borderland's the 2010s, Elizabeth Dunn and Michael Bobick (2014) argue that Russia's overt and covert demonstrations of force operate as a form of 'occupation without occupation' (406) sowing fear and uncertainty among the locals (408). This concept resonates also with Della Sala's (2018) notion of ontological insecurity that denotes an overwhelming sense of dependency, powerlessness, and vulnerability in countries bordering powerful states. In his analysis of popular narratives that define state-building processes in the EU, Della Sala (2018) argues that by establishing 'biographic continuity of the E.U.... [popular narratives] often challenge the ontological security of third parties,... [including that of the] member states' (9). In Della Sala's assessment, both the EU and Russia are pursuing their goals to create coherent political narratives that reinforce their own legitimacy and state power at the expense of their neighbors or those living in the borderlands.

In our case, ontological insecurity underpins both the environmental justice claims of the anti-fracking movement and the public rhetoric of the pro-fracking opponents. For both sides, a sense of dependency on Russia undergirds their claims to justice and their legitimacy. In his public commentary, Jonas Gylys, a professor of energy at Kaunas Technological University, captures the prevailing concern with Lithuania's dependency using an evocative metaphor that compares the country to a fly trapped in honey: 'Geopolitical games are taking place both in and outside of the country... we are now stuck like a fly in the honey and are unable to move' (Gylys 2013). Gylys's characterization is illuminating in that it captures the subjective experiences of

Lithuania's residents as being suspended in the multitude of geopolitical and economic relationships and tensions, trapped between Russia and Europe. Given political implications of experiences of insecurity, perhaps the most challenging task for environmental justice scholars and advocates is how to understand, address and engage with these larger geopolitical orders that shape justice claims in profound ways. Another more challenging task is to come up with new categories of seeing society and its groups through new epistemologies that deconstruct familiar modes of marginalization and challenge current power matrixes more broadly.

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Notes

ⁱ Geological surveys estimate that Lithuania may be sitting on about 12 million barrels of oil reserves, not including the resources under the Baltic Sea (Ministry of Energy 2013). This places Lithuania nearly at the bottom of the list of countries with confirmed conventional oil reserves.

ⁱⁱ Until 2016, Lithuania was considered as one of the most isolated energy islands in Europe with about 75 percent of its domestic energy consumption coming from Russia. Other sources include biomass or wood (15 percent), hydropower (6 percent), and coal (3 percent). In 2009, following the EU accession agreements, Lithuania decommissioned its Chernobyl-style Ignalina nuclear power station, leaving it fully reliant on its neighbors for electricity. This situation has recently changed in 2016 when a floating regasification unit leased from a Norwegian company started processing liquefied gas delivered from Texas. Called Independence, the terminal has the capacity to process 30 billion square meters of natural gas, enough to meet current demand in Lithuania.

ⁱⁱⁱ In June 2014, public comments by NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen sparked another round of heated debates that reverberated across Lithuania. Rasmussen claimed to have evidence that anti-fracking movements in the region were supported by Gazprom, and accused environmental groups of promoting Russia's political and economic interests (Harvey 2014; Higgins 2014). To Lithuanian audiences, Rasmussen's pronouncement served as a powerful manifestation of Russia's unwillingness to lose its economic and political influence in the region.