

Extract from an interview of Stephen Collis by Paul E Nelson

discussing Collis' *Once in Blockadia*

Paul E Nelson: In the new book, *Once in Blockadia*, Collis turns from the appropriation of the poet's dissonant voice to the complexity of collective struggle during the unfolding crises of the Anthro-po-scene.

When you look at indigenous people standing up and fighting and winning in this country, and indigenous people at the Dakota Access Pipeline not winning and now with Trump getting in, even a less chance. Is that one of the differences between the US and Canada?

Stephen Collis: Maybe. But I think it's a pretty minimal difference. What's tilting the tables here right now is that large parts of British Columbia, most of British Columbia, this province, there were never any treaties signed. So the supreme court of Canada actually recognizes that aboriginal title still holds over this land.

Paul E Nelson: Unceded territory.

Stephen Collis: Unceded territory. So this is a huge thing. If the Supreme Court of Canada, when they articulate what they mean by aboriginal title, and the fact that the aboriginal people have this, it literally means that they own this land. This is not Canada. As far as the Supreme Court of Canada's concerned, most of British Columbia is not Canada. Legally.

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Paul E Nelson: Yeah. You know when I think of the title *Once in Blockadia*, I gotta think there's a little bit of a nod to Cascadia in there.

Stephen Collis: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. Yeah, for sure, for sure.

Paul E Nelson: Tell us why.

Stephen Collis: I had a couple things there. Well, two things. The first time I thought of the title was actually looking at some of my old John Berger books. So he had a book called *Once in Europa*. It's this kind of a wistful book, as a lot of his writing at that time was, about peasant life and the kind of politics, the kind of almost inherent, organic socialism of people who had lived on the land for millennia in Europe. So I like that title. So I said, "Oh, okay." That's where I come up with *Once in Blockadia*. But then right away, I thought, "Oh, yeah. Cascadia, it makes sense." So why did that matter to me? Well, this is all about place. So I feel incredibly located, I feel related to this place, this land. And then by saying this place is land, but what is that if you look at it in kind of environmental, ecological terms. Bioregional terms. That's what it is. It's something about the climate, the kinds of trees that grow here, the mountains, the ocean, the rivers running down in them. That's where I grew up and my parents grew up. As I move up and down through Cascadia, this all feels like, yeah. That's what the world is to me.

Paul E Nelson: My country.

Stephen Collis: Yeah, exactly. Exactly.

Paul E Nelson: And the same feeling in Oregon.

Stephen Collis: Totally.

Paul E Nelson: We're going through a Doug Fir forest down there.

Stephen Collis: Yeah, absolutely. So all up and down the coast, I definitely mean northern California to northern BC, just feels like, "Okay, that's what I inhabit." That's what makes sense to me as a place in the world. So yeah, the *Once in Blockadia* book, the *blockade* there is about stopping these projects they're trying to pierce into that, into Cascadia and through Cascadia to the ocean.

Paul E Nelson: As we learned at one of the festivals, all the dirty oil or dirty fossil fuel is in the middle of this continent and all the buyers are on another continent west of here. So we're in the middle of it.

Stephen Collis: Exactly, it wants to get across Cascadia all the time.

Paul E Nelson: Right.

Stephen Collis: So that means one thing. The other thing I'm always totally aware of when I'm thinking, both in terms of my own personal relationship to the, "Oh, this is the space that I grew up in, I live in, and that I love." I love it as a biome. And Cascadia makes sense in terms of a term I like. So prefer it to the national terms. But it seems I'm always very much aware that that's another way of thinking about land that is a layer on top of how indigenous people relate to and think of the same area that we share with them. I think it's important never to lose sight of the fact that I'm a lifelong visitor... It increases this care with which you inhabit and walk upon that land, right? If we always thought of ourselves as visitors and behaved as good guests, we'd be a lot better off.

Paul E Nelson: Let's hear you read some of this. Page 17.

Stephen Collis: I

Blockadia

Beneath the poetry the barricade beneath sandstorms digital trading beneath ourselves the ones we have been waiting for beneath our allies manufactured enemies beneath casual parks formal profits beneath the review process other possible futures beneath resignation new uplift beneath deals betrayal beneath the singularity of owning the multitude of needing beneath the human voice the systemic response beneath government real abstractions beneath a trial an error beneath graphed assessments the particularity of soils beneath media, the feel of our hands beneath the outflow of resources the influx of commodities beneath the right to exclude the right not to be excluded beneath the drill

platform the mountain beneath litigants lovers beneath bees
little rockets.

Paul E Nelson: Wow. I can't help but think of Michael McClure's use of the word substrate, when thinking about that.

Stephen Collis: Yeah, wow. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Paul E Nelson: What's in the substrate?

Stephen Collis: Absolutely, I mean because it's so rich, isn't it? Because in some ways, everything's that substrate. We're headed to the substrate. We came from it and we go back to it. Probably psychically as much as physically, materially.

Paul E Nelson: Yeah. You're talking about being a visitor here and there's a long quote from Allison Hargreaves and David Jefferess and one of the phrases they use is the, "tenuous fantasy of settler belonging." And they're referring to the actual blockade. But when I read that, it illuminates or is in sync with the quote of "you're a visitor here." So this notion of belonging as a settler, Gary Snyder said it's going to take us 1,000 years to be natives of this place. So you're not even smiling when you hear that.

Stephen Collis: Totally. Oh, yeah, yeah. Absolutely. I think it's true. But it's such a strange thing, is that ... So I fairly regularly travel to England now, and I'm increasing aware of that's where my ancestors are from in relatively recent history. My grandparents on one side of my family came from [England] they were born there. And I've often worked with indigenous people here on some of the environmental projects, and I hear them talk about ancestors and numbers of generations they keep in their consciousness and things like that. And I go back there and go, "Okay, so here's my ancestors, going back millennia. They're buried in that soil." I never feel like that's home. You try to imagine it and think back into your ancestry. But it's not the same thing as the place you're born into. And it's not the same thing as being there for a thousand of years to really feel like, "Ah, now

I really am a part of this." So you're always in that, what do they say? Tenuous.

Paul E Nelson: Yeah, the quote was, "Tenuous fantasy of settler belonging."

Stephen Collis: Yeah, yeah. There's two ways of reading that. To me, on a more positive side is trying to carefully, and through the imagination, find your connection to the place without perpetuating problems that have happened in the past. Because the negative side of that fantasy, is the fantasy that, "Well, what's past is past. And let bygones be bygones. And let's get down to business, guys."

Paul E Nelson: Yeah, really.

Stephen Collis: "We're here. Your day is done. Now it's-"

Paul E Nelson: I give you \$400 for a cloud. And those people are folks involved in the blockade, I'm guessing. Allison and David.

Stephen Collis: They're not, but they're thinkers writing about settler colonialism, essentially. But in particular, they're interested in the indigenous blockade. The practice of indigenous people blocking entrance to their lands, usually what they're blocking is a resource project or development. Property development of some kind.

Paul E Nelson: Some kind of rape of the land.

Stephen Collis: Exactly.

Paul E Nelson: Is what we're talking about.

Stephen Collis: Exactly. They're quite innocent in, almost the genre, in a sense. Of the indigenous blockade, which has a real potent history in Canada.

Paul E Nelson: Yeah. You know, the interesting thing is when I think of those blockades, and I think of Jewell James and the totem pole resistance, which has been successful as well, there is something very, and maybe this is my own bias, but there seems to be a component of an indigenous

blockade that very much is about prayer and very much is about, an inner life that is ... So the energetics are used as well as the physical blocking.

Stephen Collis: Totally, yeah.

Walking the route of the pipeline through suburban Burnaby we observed streams filled with spring runoff and yellow high-pressure pipeline warning signs standing midstream yellow reflectors cautioning raccoons. The view down Shellmont past the tank farm, towards Burnaby Lake. Suburban street march strangeness though only one passing driver gave us the finger. Kinder Morgan's Trans Mountain pipeline carries product for Shell and other companies from Alberta to the coast. "Kinder Morgan" might be translated from approximate German as "tomorrow's children". ET IN BLOCKADIA EGO. *Sous les pavés, la plage*. It was always what was under the poetry that mattered. Who said I said this wasn't a court it was a forest they wanted to drill a pipeline through mountain replacing a pipeline near mountain we said no now who knows what will result. We had our own blueprints had to scramble to avoid traffic at Duthie and Hastings just beneath the university above the pipeline beneath our feet territory beneath map the barricades still an imagined possibility in the path of imagined new pipelines a radium wolf in the mind and raccoons carrying red flags we sang we homed a long line making a circle to begin.

Paul E Nelson: There's the radioactive wolf coming into it.

Stephen Collis: I know, I know.

Paul E Nelson: Nope, no pun intended. But he's a running character.

Stephen Collis: He's a running thing here, too, I know. Which, I mean, it literally says in one poem how, I'd watched this video about the pipeline and literally the next video it suggested I watch was this video about radioactive wolves of Chernobyl. And how could you not click on and watch a video that was called "Radioactive Wolves of Chernobyl?"

Paul E Nelson: You have a potential hockey team name.

Stephen Collis: You do, don't you. I wonder if that's what the team name is there. That's a good question.

Paul E Nelson: And a prophesy? Is that our future?

Stephen Collis: Well, you know, if it is, it's a very interesting one. So you watch that film, and I've read other things, too, about what's going on in the exclusion zone around Chernobyl 30 years after it. And wildlife is flourishing like crazy. There's wolves, there's herds of bison, there's beavers.

Paul E Nelson: Three eyed fish.

Stephen Collis: There's three eyed fish, probably, too, though. But so they're flourishing. Are they dying of cancer? Some of them, for sure, there's a higher incidence of cancer. They checked those animals. They've got radioactivity in their bodies, for sure. And some of them are getting cancers and dying. But whatever the percentage in your normal population for getting cancer would be, you up it by a few percent. Most human beings are going, "Well, that's dangerous. Let's not go there and do that." But, you know, beavers and wolves are not going to go, "Ah, damn. I've got a five percent chance more of getting cancer."

Paul E Nelson: They're not checking their Facebook feeds.

Stephen Collis: No, they're not. They're not. So they're actually flourishing. They're actually having a whale of a time there. So that's fascinating.

Paul E Nelson: There's no human predators.

Stephen Collis: No humans in their ways. So the beavers come back and dam up all the waterways that human beings had controlled for farming for agriculture purposes. Beavers take over and flood everything again. The beavers proliferate, that brings the wolves in because they like beaver. So they hunt the beavers. And on and on it goes. So, partially why I've always believed ... I think it's Duncan or someone that probably said this first in a meaningful way that I picked up on it was, follow the

mistakes. They're meaningful. Follow the accidents. So hitting that radioactive wolves was an accident, but then I started thinking, you know what? Living right now under the threat of climate change is a lot like, when you and I were growing up in the threat of the bomb. As a kid, I thought a lot about the bomb, and you know, you watch movies like Dr. Strangelove that often comes up in here, too. And I thought, okay, so these are all parts of what we've been doing to this planet for a long time. Whether we're dosing it with radiation or whether we're changing its climate through the building of fossil fuels. They're all part in parcel of what we've done. And they're markers of how we experience the fear of what we've done to the world around us. So it seemed to make sense why I tried to weave it in.

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For the full interview, see

<https://paulenelson.com/2017/03/07/once-in-blockadia-stephen-collis-interview/>