



IMAGINATIONS:
JOURNAL OF CROSS-CULTURAL IMAGE STUDIES |
REVUE D'ÉTUDES INTERCULTURELLES DE
L'IMAGE

Publication details, including open access policy
and instructions for contributors:

<http://imaginations.glendon.yorku.ca>

**Critical and Creative
Engagements with Petro-Media**
**Guest Editors: Emily Roehl,
Rachel Webb Jekanowski**
2022-06-15

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To cite this article:

Karpinski, Max. "Isotopic Poetics: The Petrocultural Appropriations of Lesley Battler's Endangered Hydrocarbons." *Imaginations: Journal of Cross-Cultural Image Studies*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2022-06-15, pp. 107-128, doi: 10.17742/IMAGE.PM.13.1.7.

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17742/IMAGE.PM.13.1.7>



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ISOTOPIC POETICS: THE PETROCULTURAL APPROPRIATIONS OF LESLEY BATTLER'S ENDANGERED HYDROCARBONS

MAX KARPINSKI

Lesley Battler's Endangered Hydrocarbons (2015) broadens the scope of what might be considered a politicized ecopoetics. Battler's collection, which I suggest works through a poetics of appropriation, links experimental poetic form with Anthropocene criticism in the humanities and critical studies of settler colonialism, addressing the contiguities between ecological degradation and land expropriation, while also making the appropriation of language one of its central formal concerns. In the context of the Canadian nation-state and its extractive economies, I argue that Battler's "isotopic poetics" appears as a politically motivated formal praxis for working through the tangled exigencies of ongoing settler-colonial dispossession and the accelerating environmental crisis.

Endangered Hydrocarbons (2015) de Lesley Battler élargit le champ de ce que l'on pourrait considérer comme une écopoésie politisée. La collection de Battler, dont je suggère qu'elle fonctionne par le biais d'une poétique de l'appropriation, relie la forme poétique expérimentale à la critique de l'Anthropocène dans les sciences humaines et aux études critiques du colonialisme de peuplement, en abordant les contiguïtés entre la dégradation écologique et l'expropriation des terres, tout en faisant de l'appropriation du langage l'une de ses principales préoccupations formelles. Dans le contexte de l'État-nation canadien et de ses économies extractives, je soutiens que la "poétique isotopique" de Battler apparaît comme une praxis formelle à motivation politique permettant de travailler à travers les exigences enchevêtrées de la dépossession coloniale en cours et de l'accélération de la crise environnementale.

INTRODUCTION

In August 2019, the RCMP arrested Canadian poet, scholar, and activist Rita Wong for participating in a protest against the Trans Mountain pipeline project in Burnaby, British Columbia. In her public sentencing statement, she makes it clear that her actions—singing, praying, and sitting in ceremony with other land and water defenders—were a response to the climate crisis that must be seen in relation to the history and present-day manifestations of settler colonialism. Wong identifies the links between Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and the roving “man camps” along pipeline construction sites; the environmental cast-off of resource extraction and the increased pollution and incidences of disease overwhelmingly borne by Indigenous, racialized, and poor communities; and, crucially, the expansion of extractive projects such as Trans Mountain and the Athabasca oil sands and the settler-colonial drive to dispossess and appropriate land (Wong). I begin with Wong’s statement because it entangles a series of concerns that I identify as central for an emergent strand of ecopoetry in Canada. This mode of ecopoetry, which I suggest works through a *poetics of appropriation*, links experimental poetic form with Anthropocene criticism in the humanities and critical studies of settler colonialism, addressing the contiguities between ecological degradation and land expropriation, while also making the appropriation of language one of its central formal concerns.¹ One recent example is Lesley Battler’s *Endangered Hydrocarbons* (2015), which incorporates documents, data, and texts produced by multinational oil companies, as well as a wide variety of found material. In the context of the Canadian nation-state and its extractive economies, I argue that Battler’s poetics of appropriation—which I describe as “isotopic”—appears as a politically motivated formal praxis for working through the tangled exigencies of ongoing settler-colonial dispossession and the accelerating environmental crisis.

POETICS OF APPROPRIATION AND ENVIRONMENTAL LITERATURE

“Poetics of appropriation” is my chosen term for a particular form of poetry that reproduces or reframes found text and documents.² In recent years, this kind of textual appropriation has emerged as one of the predominant modes of production for contemporary experimental poetry across North America. While often aligned with the American school of conceptual poets and understood as a response to the Internet’s proliferation and circulation of content in the twenty-first century, recent scholarship has more critically engaged the political implications of this formal tactic.³ Sarah Dowling, for example, has read “poetics of appropriation” in the context of Indigenous studies, relating the “seizure” of text by Indigenous poets to “the framework of settler colonialism” (102). Dowling is concerned with the legal structures that underpin settler-colonial dispossession, defining “appropriation” in the context of “legislative acts” and “legal processes by which things can be taken or set aside” (104). In applying the term “poetics of appropriation” to a specific mode of ecopoetry, I am making a particular claim about the inextricability of environmental or ecological thought and analyses of settler colonialism. I follow Robert Nichols, who has shown how settler colonialism’s mode of “recursive dispossession” implicates environmental struggles, pointing to the “wide range of protracted legal and political battles” between Indigenous groups and settler states that “focus on the matter of use of and access to land, including control over natural resources development, extractive industries, and ecological protection” (11). Nichols, building with a range of Indigenous theorists and activists, constructs “dispossession and counterdispossession” as a category of critical theory (24). In the context of settler colonialism’s histories of expropriation and enclosure of land and knowledge for private gain, I argue that a poetics of appropriation constitutes one mode of cultural “counterdispossession,” a formal and tactical response that intertwines ecological concerns with the difficult and urgent attempts to think towards decolonization.

Battler's *Endangered Hydrocarbons* is exemplary of what I am theorizing as an ecologically-inflected poetics of appropriation in the way that it deploys appropriation as a poetic method to engage the language of the petrochemical industry—"production language"⁴—that underwrites extractive expansion and land expropriation. Battler, who wrote the book while working as a project information manager for Shell Oil, notes at the conclusion of her book that "All of the poems in this project are derived from texts generated in a multinational oil company," and describes how she "spliced items such as wellbooks, mudlogs, geological prognoses, and meeting notes with [...] basically anything that crossed [her] path" (173). Put this way, Battler's poetic approach recalls those early articulations of appropriative or conceptual poetics as a response to the almost overwhelming availability and easy reproduction of text in the digital age. If we emphasize Battler's poems as constructions that draw together text from "histories and critical theoretical works" alongside "travel, real estate, and home decor magazines" (173), we might be inclined to read her work as engaged in a mode of discursive flattening. Language is emptied out of meaning; text signifies as material. But Battler's appropriations are not simple re-presentations of found content. As she describes it, she "splices" her texts, transforming language through textual techniques that are designed to mimic the extractive processes of oil capitalism.

Battler's "splicing" informs the term that I attach to her poetics: *isotopic*. In layperson's terms, isotopes name multiple versions of the same element, differentiated by the number of neutrons in their nuclei. Crucially for my reading of Battler, isotopes are often associated with radioactivity and decay, that is, the destabilization of the nucleus. Battler's text engages with these concepts in its content. For example, "The Petrochemical Ball," which I offer an extended reading of below, describes the refinement and transformation of hydrocarbons. Elsewhere in the text, Battler names "isotopes" specifically, in the process flipping what appears to be an industry memo into a quip: "as an industry we must wrest / the media from its addiction to activist / sensationalism and present our own / isotopes" (128). These lines present the petrochemical industry as concerned with

representation, that is, flagging the need to flood the media landscape with presumably sanitized accounts of extraction that counter “activist / sensationalism.” In its oppositional and interventionist approach to the “production language” of the petrochemical industry, Battler’s text performs a kind of targeted undoing or minor destabilization of industry representations of petrochemical production. But “isotopic poetics” can also be understood conceptually as a gesture to the way Battler’s poems produce meaning. Radioactive decay is also the release of energy; Battler’s splices, in their capacity as subtle transformations of source documents, multiply signification. In this way, Battler’s discursive extractions are also about excess. In those moments when the text is “refined,” Battler asks us to pay attention to, and think with, the excess, cast-off, or “externalities” of the production of meaning. In other words, Battler’s poetic method teaches her readers to identify industry sleight of hand, asking them to think critically about the absences, gaps, or subtle linguistic shifts in the ways that the oil industry narrates extraction.

Endangered Hydrocarbons makes explicit that a poetics of appropriation is an ecological poetics. The claim that a particular mode of experimental poetics expresses avowedly ecological and political motivations can be situated in the context of the shift in ecocriticism from an emphasis on traditional modes of lyric nature and landscape writing towards an intensified engagement with theoretically complex forms. Leaving behind what Lawrence Buell describes as “first-wave ecocriticism’s naively pre-theoretical valorization of experiential contact with the natural world” (94), the environmental humanities have embraced a diverse range of theoretical approaches, moving towards complex analyses of environmental justice that implicate postcolonial, Indigenous, feminist, queer, and critical race studies.⁵ And yet, as detailed by Lynn Keller in her examination of North American ecopoetics since the turn of the twenty-first century, “ecocriticism concerning anglophone poetry [...] has continued to focus largely on nature poetry, just as the more popular poetry associated with environmental concern has continued to be work depicting solitary experiences in wild or rural settings” (15). Responding to Keller’s observation, I want to suggest that avant-garde, experi-

mental, or otherwise “difficult” modes of poetic writing—including Battler’s poetics of appropriation—represent valuable contributions to contemporary ecocriticism precisely because they *formalize* questions of ecological relations. By choosing to enact a mode of textual reproduction, Battler eschews a traditional, lyric subjectivity and opts instead for a poetic utterance confected of the strange, the other, and the unoriginal.

Against the traditional lyric subject’s stable boundaries and self-contained experiences, a poetics of appropriation makes apparent the entanglements—self/other, local/global, past/present—that define life in the petrocultural present of the Anthropocene epoch. Drawing on Keller’s description of the dominant paradigm of contemporary environmental poetry, I want to suggest that the very act of taking Battler’s linguistic experimentation seriously—to read the poems as always critical and incisive even at their most playful—broadens the scope of what might be considered a politicized ecopoetics. In her overview of recent Canadian “Petro-Poetics,” Judith Rauscher identifies the tendency of “oil poems” to position their speakers as “witnesses” (101) who remain, nonetheless, “spatially and temporally removed from the conditions and occurrences they report” (102). These lyric speakers are “observer[s],” often speaking from a “seemingly universalist, environmentalist perspective” (102). Departing from the more immediately recognizable poetics of witnessing that continues to define contemporary poetic and critical engagements with, or representations of, environmental degradation, I offer the poetics of appropriation as an alternative articulation of the political work of ecopoetry.

COMPLICITY AND CRITIQUE IN PETROCULTURES

Before turning to Battler’s poems themselves, I want to briefly gloss some of the dominant preoccupations of petrocultural analysis in order to demonstrate how a poetics of appropriation might constitute a suitable form for the Anthropocene and, in particular, petropoetics. Early in his recent examination of the problem of articulating a poetics in and for the Anthropocene, David Far-

rier addresses the concerns of some Earth system scientists about the “rhetorical promiscuity” of the term (3). Challenging the notion that “the humanities [...] have no meaningful role to play” in assembling critical methodologies for thinking the Anthropocene, he suggests “a more inclusive approach to defining” the concept (3). For Farrier, the Anthropocene signifies differently within and across disciplinary boundaries, producing distinct challenges and concerns that depend on the histories and genealogies of each specific field. The question that emerges, for Farrier, is: what does the Anthropocene mean to poetry and poetics? He writes:

“Poetry can compress vast acreages of meaning into a small compass or perform the kind of bold linkages that it would take reams of academic argument to plot; it can widen the aperture of our gaze or deposit us on the brink of transformation. In short, it can model an Anthropocenic perspective in which our sense of relationship and proximity (and from this, our ethics) is stretched and tested against the Anthropocene’s warping effects.” (5)

Farrier’s suggestions of some of the work that poetry can do in the contemporary moment resonate with how I want to position the petropoetics of *Endangered Hydrocarbons*. In the context of her role as an insider in the petrochemical industry, Battler asks us to consider our “proximity” or complicity with the ongoing violence of settler colonialism and the accumulations of global, neoliberal capital, often exercised through the acceleration of extractivist projects, precisely as a means through which to unsettle and recompose “our ethics.”

Beyond the question of complicity, Battler’s poetics of appropriation also respond to a particular discussion in petrocultural analysis, one that has significant overlap with recent debates in literary studies about the forms and roles of critique: the in/visibility, or hidden aspect, of oil. For Imre Szeman, this quality arises in part because oil’s “consumption is almost entirely disassociated from its extraction,” rendering oil a dissociative resource with “a tendency to vanish into the background, invisible to narrative” (283). Szeman is engaging what Graeme Macdonald describes as “A strongly developed strain

of petrocultural theory,” which argues that “the means and effects of oil are structurally occluded from its mass of consumers, making it less apparent as an *explicit* object in social life and thus a specific topic in and for cultural production” (6-7). Macdonald refers here to the early days of the energy humanities, in which scholars struggled to articulate the possible reasons for what they perceived as a lack of attention given by contemporary writers to the role and presence of oil in everyday life.⁶ This is still very much a feature of contemporary commentary on oil; Szeman, for example, positions oil “as an energy source that organizes life practice in a more fundamental way than we’ve ever allowed ourselves to grasp” (283).

I want to suggest that there is something structural in the social, cultural, and material experiences of oil that installs the dominant forms of critique—exposure, debunking, interrogation—as the preeminent contemporary critical pose. This is apparent in Ghosh’s explanation of his name for the contemporary era: “the Great Derangement” (*The Great* 11). Ghosh suggests that a number of interrelated “modes of concealment [have] prevented people from recognizing the realities of their plight” (*The Great* 11). In other words, he defines the contemporary as a moment in need of critique, or in which the truth of the situation—“realities”—is either obscured or incompletely available to the public. Ghosh’s construction, which echoes Szeman’s avowal of the “fundamental” organizational power of oil, positions the cultural or political critic as always skeptical or paranoid, always looking beneath the benign surface of the given for the hidden and nefarious. But as recent theorizations of postcritique put it, the ubiquity of this critical posture has evacuated it of any inherent radical capacity. Elizabeth S. Anker and Rita Felski describe this critique of critique as the “objection [...] that critique has been normalized, domesticated, or defanged through its own popularity” (13). To resituate this question, again, in the context of petrocultures, we might look to an impassioned defense of Canadian extractivism, Ezra Levant’s *Ethical Oil* (2010). Levant argues the Alberta oil sands constitute an ethical source of oil in comparison to the oil regimes of the Middle East, therefore rendering opposition to Albertan oil morally bankrupt. Mark Simpson describes Levant as “cast[ing] his project in

terms of exposure: correcting mistakes, dispelling myths, and puncturing lies on every page” (291). In other words, Levant performs the same critical disposition as that advocated by Ghosh and Szeman—he simply directs his critique towards a completely contradictory political and ethical horizon.

In the context of what we might call Levant’s appropriated (and de-spoiled?) critical model, petrocultural analysis appears as a flash-point that might productively illuminate the contemporary discussions around the limits of critique. Amanda Boetzkes offers one model of criticism that rejects the dominant critical disposition of “exposure,” arguing that “the ways the oil industry conceals its destructive impact cannot be exposed or remedied through the tactics of demystification of objective reportage” (222). For Boetzkes, in an inversion of Ghosh, critique is impossible in light of the “dogged insistence on the part of oil corporations that their practices and decisions are entirely *transparent*. [...] [G]iven the failure of transparency and objectivity, attempts to visualize petroculture, whether as industry, economic structure, or energy system, fall short” (222-223).⁷ Following Boetzkes, critique—understood here as the gesture of exposure or demystification—is at the same time made necessary by the very structure of petrocultures *and* rendered politically ineffective. Boetzkes’s wariness of critical moves of “demystification” suggests the viability of an alternative model, one that exceeds both the “objective reportage” of much politically-invested petrocultural analysis and the poetics of witnessing that remains prominent in petropoetry, or more generally, environmental literature. As I hope to show in the closing section, the poetics of appropriation offers just one such model that exceeds the work of critique to imagine energy futures otherwise.

THE TEXTUAL ENERGIES OF BATTLER’S ENDANGERED HYDROCARBONS

To begin to demonstrate how Battler’s poetics unsettles what circulates in environmental literature as the figure of the witness, we can turn to perhaps the most visually striking poem in the collection, “The Petrochemical Ball.” The poem proceeds in

three columns, with multiple typefaces seeming to mark out the different voices that mingle or mix in the space of the page. “The Petrochemical Ball” presents itself as a kind of witness poem. The first line stands on its own, addressing the reader: “look” (56). The poem appears to narrate a tour of a “Fractionater,” a kind of refinery that separates mixtures into their constitutive parts (56). At the same time, as the title suggests, this Fractionater is also in the midst of what appears to be a raucous party, with an “open bar” in the “antebellum / ballroom” and a “dance / floor” on which, we learn, “glycols like / a good / two-step” (59). The poem is marked by shrieks of seeming gibberish, bolded and capitalized, that seem to be the speech of the very hydrocarbons under refinement: “SHIRRRK-ka pk / SHIIIIIRK-SH-ka / pok-shh kapok-e’ / eee’ EEE” (57). The narrator or tour guide helpfully offers to “translate” some of these unintelligible lines for the reader. “*Pentane 1*” seems ready to party, shouting “TGIF! thank god / it’s Faraday,” ostensibly a reference to Michael Faraday, the first chemist to isolate benzene (57).

At first blush, and as my description above aims to communicate, “The Petrochemical Ball” appears as a jaunty send-up of the petrochemical industry and the process of refining hydrocarbons. Indeed, in the context of Battler’s stated approach to language as crude oil, it might be possible to read a kind of linguistic or textual *jouissance* in the play and proliferation of language. The poem is littered with jokes and colloquialisms, such as the Faraday line mentioned above, or the double entendre in the description of “pentanes” as “caustic,” that is, at once able to corrode and scathing (57). Beyond the linguistic humour, I would argue that the text’s visual layout itself contributes to the sense of readerly play. For specific examples of this kind of visual playfulness, we can look to the fourth and final page of the poem, reproduced below (see Figure 1). By now, on the final page, we have been conditioned to read for sense down each of the three columns, and then from left to right across the page. And yet, even here, the eye is drawn across columns, finding statements that feel appropriate for a party like “into the // open bar,” or noting the placement of the “dance / floor” in the middle column parallel to the right column’s invocation of “hip-hop” and “dub” music. Indeed, in

my reading, the poem invites these kinds of chance interactions between and across the three columns that structure it, allowing for a different kind of movement through the text. This is to take seriously what we might call the energetics of the poetic text, and to think about the ways poetry, broadly speaking, produces meaning beyond the semantic level through the movements, collisions, and spaces between units of language.

Put differently, “The Petrochemical Ball” addresses itself to readers as fun to read and silly to voice. Indeed, I argue this experience of readerly pleasure is a key element of Battler’s larger project to trouble a petropoetics of witnessing with the question of complicity. Very quickly, the poem begins to accrue sinister and potentially uncomfortable overtones in its invitation of echoes between the processes of oil refinement and Canada’s legacy of residential schools. In this line of analysis, I follow Melanie Dennis Unrau’s reading of “The Petrochemical Ball,” where she convincingly argues that Battler’s poem, for all its seeming frivolity, traces and critiques the coloniality of extraction.⁸ Early in the “tour,” the guide informs us that, in the Fractionater:

the chondrite
won't hurt

into the
antebellum
ballroom
of the
catalytic
converter

open bar

maleic anhydrate
for resins

explosives love
nitrobenzene

aniline-tinis
satisfy dyes
polyurethanes

toluene
always first
on the dance
floor

glycols like
a good
two-step

**BA-ba-de-y'awl
ZOOARCH-oo wee
QUEEEEE y'awl
SHIRKzee
AWNX**

these molecules
have completed
our program

their pitiful
shrieks and
squawks have
become carbon
rondelets

double
single bonds
cold sulphur
hip-hop
magnesium
dub

and we have
come to
the end of
the steam
chamber

namaste!

Figure 1: From "The Petrochemical Ball" excerpted from Endangered Hydrocarbons ©
2015 by Lesley Battler. Used with permission of Book*hug Press.

“our role
is to distill
volatiles

track their
vernacular

eliminate
rhyming
slang

re-
shape
their
alpha
bets” (56)

This passage again underlines the text’s structuring principle, that is, the association between petrochemical refining processes and textual production. The refinement of hydrocarbons is figured as an alphabetical reshaping, what appears at the poem’s conclusion as the transformation of “their pitiful / shrieks” into “carbon / rondelets” (59). We can begin to apprehend Battler’s isotopic poetics in the linguistic play of “alpha / bets,” a reference to alpha and beta decay that enacts a kind of energy release, or production of meaning, in the shift from “beta” to “bets,” and in the splitting of the word across the line break.

At the same time, however, “The Petrochemical Ball” links the process of hydrocarbon refining to settler-colonial violence in its resonances with the programmatic disappearance of Indigenous language, and in its description of the speech of hydrocarbons as a kind of “ozone / throat / music” (57). Crucially, Battler is not constructing some kind of equivalence between the experiences of Indigenous peoples in the residential school system and the experiences of hydrocarbons caught in the Fractionator. Instead, with Unrau, we might

better describe Battler's project in "The Petrochemical Ball" as calling attention to the continuities between these sites and spaces of extraction. The poem positions petrochemical refining as *related to*, that is, within that same genealogy and framework of settler colonialism. This is to understand the Canadian state as dependent on a double move: the attempted erasure of Indigenous ways of life followed by the appropriation of Indigenous lands, goods, and knowledges. This is also to recall Wong's statement, which opened this essay, about the uneven distribution of risk that overwhelmingly places petrochemical infrastructure such as pipelines and refineries in Indigenous, racialized, and poor communities. Indeed, this understanding of the contiguity between settler colonialism and the petrochemical industry returns us to the poetics of witnessing invoked in that first line, "look," and to the documentation of sites and instances of environmental racism. This is a witnessing with a difference, however, one that refuses the "remove" of the traditional oil poem speaker identified by Rauscher, and that asks the reader to feel uncomfortable in their own pleasure with the text and proximity to oil.

While "The Petrochemical Ball" reimagines the role of the complicit or compromised witness in petrocultures, the text also enacts a critique of petrochemical discourse by virtue of its relationship to the source material. I want to close with an extended engagement with one poem—"Radiant Diacel"—that, in my reading, begins in discursive critique, but arrives at an expansive articulation of the possibilities of poetic utterance. "Diacel" is precisely the kind of vacant corporate speech that Battler plays with throughout the text. It is a simulacrum of language, a meaningless approximation of a word, a lexical confection that registers as something close enough, or that might mean something.⁹ "Radiant Diacel" combines this kind of corporate, petrochemical speech with various source materials relating to Martin Luther, the Protestant reformer. The poem is written in two voices: a more objective, narratorial voice, and the appropriated first-person writings of Luther himself. A section subtitled "Marburg" opens with these four stanzas:

"Luther edits his viscosity
deposits the excess slurry
of his vocabulary

deviates from vertical wells
drilled by the Colloquy

dares test Ethyl Lead
declares it Unready

insists on the physical
wettability of the Holy Spirit" (69)

This passage exemplifies Battler's treatment of language as unrefined petroleum by collapsing the two into one another: both are "viscous" and capable of being "slurred." Throughout *Endangered Hydrocarbons*, Battler builds her poems through a careful attention to the repetition of sounds. In this passage we have "viscosity," "deposits," "slurry," "vocabulary," "Colloquy," "wettability," and "Unready." The effect, to my ear, is one of thickening—the language of the petrochemical industry is heavy in the mouth. The passage, however, also superimposes petrochemical concerns onto the historical events involving Luther. The Marburg Colloquy is no longer concerned with the interpretation of the Eucharist, but with "drilling" "vertical wells"; Luther is no longer concerned with the presence of the Lord in the bread and wine, but with "wettability," that is, the tendency of fluid to adhere to a solid presence, a key area of interest for bitumen extraction. The passage performs its own transubstantiation of the Holy Spirit: from immaterial presence to liquid oil.

In an earlier section of the poem that carries the subtitle "Martin Luther and the birth of / Individual Reservoir Pressure," Luther is described by the narratorial voice as

"haunted by hydraulic pumps
caught in faulty logic, he

promises to rid the world of
Catholic corruption.” (68)

Again, we can see the text’s insistence on piling up or accreting similar sounds, in this case in the assonance of “haunt,” “hydraulic,” “caught,” and “faulty.” If the “slurry” of sounds noted above reflected the text’s “viscosity,” we might read this passage’s invocation of “haunting” through a different metaphor: radioactivity and decay. Here, again, we can discern the ways in which appropriated text, for Battler, emerges as isotopic in its capacity for decay and transformation. This is what happens in the shift from “Catholic corruption” to “Catholic corruption”—the lower-case “l” reorganizes itself into a “d,” recalling the reshaped “alpha / bets” of “The Petrochemical Ball.” This slight shift transforms Luther’s project: from re-interpreting Catholic teachings to ridding the world of pipeline corrosion.

If “Catholic” is marked visibly in its transformation into “Catholic,” elsewhere in the poem Battler’s substitutions multiply signification across the petrochemical and reformist registers. For example, Luther’s infamous burning of the papal bull is rendered thus: “Luther burns the bull allowing nuncios / to sell Unleaded at Stations of the Cross” (68). The papal bull of 1520, which excommunicated Luther from the church, listed forty-one statements of Luther’s that were considered deviations from Church doctrine. One of these was the “sale of Indulgences”—essentially, a purchased pardon for specific sins. The injection of “Unleaded” into the space of the page inflects language that remains otherwise static: the “Stations of the Cross,” sites of prayer and reflection on Jesus’s sacrifice, become available as gas stations. In my reading, in this lone lexical substitution, there is an echo of Edward Burtynsky’s infamous “Breezewood” photograph from his 2009 series *Oil*. “Breezewood” is a low angle photograph of Pennsylvania’s “Gas Vegas,” a clotted stretch of road between I-70 and the Pennsylvania Turnpike, overstuffed with gas stations and fast-food restaurants. The space of the photograph features no less than six separate Exxon Mobil logos, at various depths, with one towering over the image, almost as a crucifix. And that Exxon logo itself: doesn’t the trademarked “interlocking X” design carry more

than a faint trace of resemblance to the cross, as it is traditionally represented in the Stations of the Cross, carried at an angle across Jesus's back?

The transformation of “Indulgences” into “Unleaded”—and, more generally, the coupling of Luther’s religious texts and petrochemical “production language”—might be understood as an implicit claim about the excesses of oil capitalism. Indeed, in much the same way that Battler’s linguistic play refracts and recombines meaning and sense through the reconstitution of individual words, the two terms might themselves be productively framed and reframed. We “indulge” in “unleaded” daily, embedded as we are in the totality of the petrocultural infrastructures that undergird the settler-colonial nation-state. At the same time, however, I want to close by suggesting that Battler’s playfulness throughout *Endangered Hydrocarbons* also opens onto the sincere belief in the transformative possibilities of poetic utterance. The pairing of “Indulgences” and “Unleaded,” in this reading, also draws the reader’s attention to the possibilities of “reform,” both at a formal level in Battler’s subtle manipulations of a range of source texts, and in a grander, conceptual register. It is here that I want to offer that “excess,” generated by the accretive and isotopic appropriative poetics of Battler, as a kind of supplementary utterance—an aspirational compositional mode adjacent to the absolutely necessary critiques of anti-capitalist and ecological organizers. In this model, the poetic embodies a “dissensual recalcitrance”¹⁰ that undermines the assumption of fossil fuel’s presence, or of things as they are.

CONCLUSION

How do we square Battler’s status as “insider” to the petrochemical industry with a poetry that, in my reading, argues at once for an understanding of extractive projects within a lineage of settler-colonial violence, while also imagining lines of flight out of petro-dependence? I have argued that Battler’s petropoetics marks a departure from the “witnessing” or objective reportage that characterizes much contemporary environmental literature, pre-

cisely in its refusal of a sanitized separation from the scenes of violence it documents. Whereas, in the Lutheran sense, the purchase of “Indulgences” is absolution, *Endangered Hydrocarbons* has no pretensions to purity in its engagement with the petrocultural discourse that it appropriates and “refines.” Battler reminds us that the poet, poems, speakers, and readers are all compromised, together in the muck of production language. Crucially, however, it is the poetic that cracks that corporate speech open to the possibility of an otherwise. This is to uncouple poetry from the surface/depth model associated with critique (and oil extraction) and recognize it as an enactive utterance capable of mobilizing affects. It is to recognize the poetic itself as an entrance into dissensual relation. And it is to understand Battler’s isotopic poetics—the energy release of “alpha” and “beta” decay that reorganizes our “alphabets,” the slight shifts that transform meaning—as mapping the route, through minor, sometimes imperceptible transitions, to alternative ways of being and relating to land, energy, and one another.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My deepest thanks to Emily Roehl, Rachel Jekanowski, and the anonymous readers whose thoughtful comments and suggestions helped shape the final essay. I gratefully acknowledge the support of the Killam Trusts.

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IMAGE NOTES

Figure 1: Page 57 from "The Petrochemical Ball," excerpted from *Endangered Hydrocarbons* © 2015 by Lesley Battler. Used with permission of Book*hug Press.

NOTES

1. A brief and non-exhaustive overview of recent poetry collections published in Canada that engage in what I am describing here as an ecologically inflected poetics of appropriation would include Stephen Collis and Jordan Scott's *Decomp* (2013), Cecily Nicholson's *From the Poplars* (2014), Jordan Abel's *Un/Inhabited* (2014), David Martin's *Tar Swan* (2018), and Kate Sutherland's *The Bones are There* (2020).↵
2. I have written previously about "poetics of appropriation" in Nisga'a poet Jordan Abel's *The Place of Scraps*. There, I argued that Abel's erasure poems, which incorporate and manipulate text from the salvage ethnographer Marius Barbeau's *Totem Poles*, "constitute[d] an appropriate return" for the erasures—literal and figurative—of Barbeau's anthropological practice (71).↵
3. Marjorie Perloff names the proliferation of appropriative poetics "unoriginal genius" and relates it to the ubiquity of the Internet in the twenty-first century, which "has made copyists, recyclers, transcribers, collators, and reframers of us all" (41); Kenneth Goldsmith's introductory essay to the 2011 anthology he co-edited with Craig Dworkin similarly positions the "rise of the Internet" as a catalyst for the explosion of "strategies of copying and appropriation" (xviii). For a more recent treatment of the politics of contemporary appropriative poetics, with a particular focus on erasure poems, see L'Abbé.↵
4. In an essay describing her poetic praxis, Battler uses this term to refer to the industrial discourse that she acts upon: "I am treating production language as crude oil, excavating, treating, mixing, injecting these

- texts to emulate extraction processes used by the industry” (“Quar-clet”).⁴
5. It is impossible to reduce to a footnote the range of vital and innovative scholarship that is expanding the scope of environmental humanities, broadly speaking, but some key theoretical interlocutors for my thinking about an increasingly interdisciplinary and intersectional ecocriticism and eco-poetics include: the critical-creative work of Alexis Pauline Gumbs, particularly *Dub: Finding Ceremony* (2020), and Tiffany Lethabo King’s *The Black Shoals: Offshore Formations in Black and Native Studies* (2019); Warren Cariou’s creative practice of “petrography” and scholarship on the politics of energy in Indigenous cultures (see Cariou and Gordon); and the plethora of critical contestations of Anthropocene discourse, from Heather Davis and Zoe Todd’s “On the Importance of a Date, or, Decolonizing the Anthropocene” (2017) to Kathryn Yusoff’s *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (2019), and many others (for an overview of critiques and reconsiderations of the term “Anthropocene,” see DeLoughrey).⁵
 6. Many critics position Amitav Ghosh’s 1992 review of Abdelrahman Munif’s *Cities of Salt* and *The Trench* as the ur-text of petrocultural criticism. Ghosh’s attempt to parse why and how “The Oil Encounter [...] has produced scarcely a single work of note” became a touchstone for critics (29), who continue to underline a gap between oil’s centrality in contemporary life and its ignorance in contemporary literature.⁶
 7. At the same time as Boetzkes emphasizes oil corporations’ invocations of transparency, Mark Simpson, in an essay included later in the same collection, points out specific corporate acts of occlusion, such as the misrepresentations of the Northern Gateway pipeline and transport routes included in an Enbridge-produced video (see Simpson 287-288).⁷
 8. Unrau’s broader reading of *Endangered Hydrocarbons* tracks the text’s parodic invocations of Andrew Nikiforuk’s concept of the energy slave, while also arguing that the text “takes seriously the animacy of our energy source” to suggest a mode of “*Attending to energy slaves*” that implicates “*caring for and listening to our hydrocarbon, human, and more-than-human relations*” (228).⁸
 9. There are a few hits for the term on Google. As far as I can tell, “Di-ace” refers to a series of filter products produced by a German com-

pany called CFF GmbH & Co. KG: they are “bio-degradable and offer high sustainability and outstanding environmental compatibility,” according to the company website (“DIACEL®”).¹

10. I borrow this phrase from Brent Ryan Bellamy, Michael O’Driscoll, and Mark Simpson’s introduction to a special issue of *Postmodern Culture* on “Resource Aesthetics.” “Dissensual recalcitrance” is a beautiful and deft turn of phrase for describing Battler’s poetics of appropriation, which merges the collection’s oppositional or critical pose with its difficulty or refusal to be contained.²