

IMAGINATIONS
REVUE D'ETUDES INTERCULTURELLES DE L'IMAGE ▪ JOURNAL OF CROSS-CULTURAL IMAGE STUDIES

CRITICAL AND CREATIVE ENGAGEMENTS WITH PETRO-MEDIA

Guest Editors: Emily Roehl, Rachel Webb Jekanowski *Issue 13-1, 2022*

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HTTP://DX.DOI.ORG/10.17742/IMAGE.PM.13.1

Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada
Conseil de recherches en sciences humaines du Canada
Canada

Imaginations is supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, the Faculty of Liberal Arts and Professional Studies at York University, and the Department of Humanities at York University

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Image credit: Ruth Beer, 2022

EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION

BRENT BELLAMY

Ten years ago, Sheena Wilson and Andrew Pendakis edited volume 3 number 2 "Sighting Oil," the fourth full issue of *Imaginations*. Andriko Lozowy's cover image of a massive digger wheel still arrests me. The issue includes stand out pieces by Ursula Biemann, Warren Cariou, Tracy Lassiter, the late Jonathan Gordon, and many others. This was the issue led me to the journal.

I joined the team at *Imaginations* in Fall 2014. I began working with Sheena Wilson as the Editor-in-Chief. That Fall, the journal won an Aid to Scholarly Journals Grant and began the ongoing work of making *Imaginations* accessible, digitally up to date, and properly catalogued. At the same time, we published "http://imaginations.glendon.yorku.ca/?p=9947," "North by West," and "Critical Relationality: Beyond Settler Sex & Nature" among others.

Since 2017, the journal has moved from Edmonton to Toronto. We now operate under the direction of Markus Reisenleitner and have welcomed some fantastic colleagues to our team. Sheena Wilson, Carrie Smith, and Tara Milbrandt have since stepped away from the editorial team, and we at the journal want to thank them wholeheartedly for making *Imaginations* what is it today: a leader in gold standard open-access publishing and staunch supporter of critical voices, emerging and global, on visual cultural studies.

During the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, we published two health related issues: one edited by Mary Elizabeth Luka, Annette M. Markham, and Dan Harris titled, Massive Micro Sensemaking and

the other by Natalie Loveless titled, Immune Nations: Research Creation at the Intersection of Vaccine Science and Global Health Policy.

We have several exciting issues in process: we'll soon be reading three upcoming issues:

- Photographs of Migration and Migration of Photographs
- Vibrant Matters: Materiality across Media, Literature, and Theory
- Contemporary Critical Theory and Decolonial Visual Praxis: Exploring Resistance Narratives and Colonial Hegemonies in the Pandemic

But, now to the matter at hand! We now proudly present volume 13 number 1, "Critical and Creative Engagements with Petromedia" edited by Rachel Webb Jekanowski and Emily Roehl. It marks a milestone for the journal as we now have an archive of 25 issues and the ten-year anniversary of "Sighting Oil." With the latest Intragovernmental Panel on Climate Change recently concluding and the remarkable call for policy change by the 278 authors in the Sixth Assessment report, we believe this issue is neither early nor late. We hope it serve to develop your understanding of the fossil regime in a moment when that knowledge might serve us best. Read on, dear readers, read on!

INTRODUCTION TO CRITICAL AND CREATIVE ENGAGEMENTS WITH PETRO-MEDIA

EMILY ROEHL
RACHEL WEBB JEKANOWSKI

The production of oil is imbricated in financial and socio-political systems as well as ways of mediating the worlds in which we live. Like infrastructures used to transport fuel, audio-visual media and other forms of cultural production (museums, poetry, film, visual art) can serve as conduits for ideas about energy, identity, relationships to the nonhuman world, and history. This special issue of Imaginations on "Critical and Creative Engagements with Petro-Media" explores how media has been used to examine petroleum's place within Canadian and American cultural landscapes as well as oil's attendant socio-political and economic structures. Given our location on occupied Indigenous territories where we work as researchers and educators, we assert that energy developments are always already implicated within histories of white

La production de pétrole est imbriquée dans les systèmes financiers et sociopolitiques ainsi que dans les modes de médiation des milieux dans lesquels nous vivons. À l'instar des infrastructures utilisées pour transporter le carburant, les médias audiovisuels et d'autres formes de production culturelle (musées, poésie, films, arts visuels) peuvent servir de vecteurs d'idées sur l'énergie, l'identité, les relations avec le monde non humain et l'histoire. Ce numéro spécial d'Imaginations sur "Les engagements critiques et créatifs avec les pétro-média" explore certaines des façons dont les médias ont été utilisés pour examiner la place du pétrole dans les paysages culturels canadiens et américains, ainsi que les structures socio-politiques et économiques qui y sont associées. Étant donné que nous nous trouvons sur des territoires autochtones occupés où nous travaillons comme chercheurs et éducateurs, nous affirmons que les développements énergétiques sont toujours déjà impliqués dans l'histoire de la colonisation blanche en Amérique du

settlement in North America. Drawing on literary and film studies, energy humanities scholarship, critical museum studies, and a variety of creative and analytical research methods, the contributors to this issue theorize contemporary and historical practices of corporate petro-media alongside creative interventions to trace the interlacing of oil, media, and settler colonialism.

Nord. En s'appuyant sur des études littéraires et cinématographiques, sur les sciences humaines de l'énergie, sur des études muséales critiques et sur une variété de méthodes de recherche créatives et analytiques, les contributeurs de ce numéro théorisent les pratiques contemporaines et historiques des entreprises pétro-médiatiques et les interventions créatives afin de retracer l'entrelacement du pétrole, des médias et du colonialisme de peuplement.

Oil and its infrastructures extend throughout the cultural and socio-political worlds in which we live. From the sacrifice zones of fossil fuel production to the toxic sheen of industrial spills, fossil fuels are at once world-creating and world-destroying. Oil mediates the worlds around us. Like infrastructures used to transport fuel, audio-visual media and other forms of cultural production (galleries, museums, poetry, film, visual art) can serve as conduits for ideas about energy, identity, relationships to the nonhuman world, and history. This special issue of *Imaginations* on "Critical and Creative Engagements with Petro-Media" explores how textual and audio-visual media have been used to examine petroleum's place within Canadian and American cultural landscapes and oil's attendant socio-political and economic structures. Contributors in this issue employ conventional humanities scholarship and creative approaches to the materiality and histories of oil both to trace energy histories and to explore the visual and literary arts as tools of scholarly inquiry.

Building on *Imaginations'* long-standing engagement with petrocultures scholarship, including Sheena Wilson and Andrew Pendakis's 2012 special issue "Sighting Oil," the authors included herein approach petroleum as a form of mediation as well as a resource mediated across cultural forms. Writing from within North America—where we live and work across diverse Indigenous traditional territories—many of the contributors foreground how settler colo-

nialism frames petro-cultural production and social imaginaries as one such manifestation of "extractivism" (Gomez-Barris 2017; Szeman and Wenzel 2021). The seed for this issue sprouted from a panel at the 2019 Biannual Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE) Conference called "Mediating Power: Indigenous, Settler, and Corporate Petro-Media," held at UC Davis. Like the participants in the panel, the artists and scholars in this issue of *Imaginations* take up different facets of petromedia to examine the complex entanglements of cultural production, settler colonialism, and petroleum extraction. Critically, these contributions foreground visual media in their analyses, featuring original videos, photographs, film stills, and documentation of exhibitions. However, not all institutions and practices are equally implicated in oil. Part of our aim with this issue is to think through how artists, writers, and practitioners address fossil fuels on different scales and with differing impacts on culture and society. In holding these tensions, we acknowledge that scholarly analyses of settler cultural institutions like those herein nevertheless benefit from the colonial extractive systems they seek to critique.

In the elapsing years between the ASLE panel and the issue's publication, the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic radically destabilized the ways researchers and artists can undertake their work. Yet in the early months of the pandemic, personal and professional losses gave rise to calls to radically reimagine how we work, imagine the global economy, and structure societies. It is within this context that we, as guest editors, sought to reframe our expectations of academic scholarship by asking contributors to produce shorter pieces and encouraging formal and conceptual experimentation. This resulting issue has also been undertaken almost entirely during the pandemic, an event that continues to lay bare the structural inequalities inherent to Canadian and American energy systems and society. Moreover, most of the contributors are themselves in the early stages of their careers as scholars and creative practitioners. We would like to acknowledge their hard work, undertaken between heavy teaching loads, Ph.D. defenses, and job applications. We are also grateful to Gwladys Bertin for her scrupulous translations.

We are particularly excited to share this work digitally with *Imaginations* readers as part of our shared commitment to imagining (no pun intended) more equitable and less carbon-intensive forms of scholarly publishing (Pasek 2020). As energy humanities scholars, we are critically aware of how our research practices—from flying to archives and field sites to the resource-intensive production process for print publications—are entangled in high-carbon forms of transportation and labour. While contributing a small percentage of global carbon emissions, the carbon-intensive nature of academic work nevertheless contributes to conditions creating the climate crisis. Our decision to publish with an open-access, digital journal is part of the praxis this issue seeks to explore: how the methods and forms of petrocultural research inform the histories, infrastructures, and aesthetics of oil we seek to trace. Digital publications have their own material and energy requirements, of course—the work of this special issue has relied on dispersed servers, devices, grids, and the resources required to run them. Despite these trade-offs, there remain significant material, ethical, and political considerations at play in doing lower-carbon publishing and publishing without paywalls.

INTERWEAVING THE CREATIVE AND THE CRITICAL

The organization of this issue is a practice in playfulness. We invite readers to tack between the academic essays and creative submissions, which adhere to their own rhymes of analysis, speculation, and introspection. The issue shifts from literary analysis (Karpinski, Unrau), poetry zines (George Bagdanov), and speculative histories (Vargas) to investigations of archival suppression (McCurdy) and critiques of museum practice (Sharp). Artistic interventions (Borsa and Beer, Roehl) bookend the issue. By ordering the pieces in this way, interweaving distinct approaches to oil, art, and knowledge, we demonstrate the expansiveness of petromedia scholarship and art-making while highlighting the importance of local interventions.

The authors and creators in this special issue locate oil that is both present and absent, hyper-visible and invisibilized. Some contribu-

tors consider how the modern oil industry influences which cultural products are and are not produced. Camille-Mary Sharp analyses the Canadian Museum of History's newest permanent exhibition, the oil-sponsored The Canadian History Hall (2017), while Patrick McCurdy excavates the CBC docudrama *The Tar Sands* (1977), a film banned after a legal dispute for its portrayal of Alberta Premier Peter Lougheed's dealings with Syncrude. Many of the contributors use speculative approaches to this slippery substance, as in Elia Vargas' "Excerpts of the Tome of Light," which imagines scenes from the site of the first oil discovery in Western Pennsylvania, or Melanie Unrau's imaginary comic strip encounter between S.C. Ells, a tar sands "founding father," and his legacy, a "petromodern dystopia" of doomed waterfowl in Alberta's tailings ponds.

Other contributors experiment at the boundaries of poetic analysis and form, as in Max Karpinski's reading of Lesley Battler's *Endangered Hydrocarbons* (2015) and Kristin George Bagdanov's petrozines "Crude Futures" and "After the Amplify Energy Oil Spill." Written "while physically shaping their forms," George Bagdanov explores the meanings held in the "constraints of paper, folds, reproducibility" of the zines as materialized poetic devices. We are also pleased to feature the work of two artists, Ruth Beer and Steve Rowell, both of whom have engaged with one of the most common visual tropes of oil representation—the aerial photograph of extractive landscapes—in markedly different ways. Tomas Borsa and Ruth Beer explore ways of viewing and locating (siting and sighting) oil through the materiality of weaving in their reflection on Beer's hand-woven jacquard tapestry *Oil Topography* (2014), also featured as the cover image of this issue. Emily Roehl concludes our issue by interviewing Steve Rowell about his experimental documentary *Midstream at Twilight* (2016). They discuss how oil's landscapes become sites of "political imagination" as well as deep time.

Across this special issue, the contributors take what Rowell identifies as the "long view": a dual practice of "reverse-looking into the depths of history as well as the unknown speculative futures we face." This multi-angle perspective, we propose, may help to better locate our-

selves in a world mediated by and through oil, while imagining times-to-come beyond it.

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IMAGE NOTES

Ruth Beer, *Oil Topography* (2014). Hand-woven jacquard tapestry: copper wire, polyester, cotton, 218 x 305 x 1.5 cm. Photo courtesy of the artist.

OIL-SPONSORED EXHIBITIONS AND CANADA'S EXTRACTIVE POLITICS OF CULTURAL PRODUCTION

CAMILLE-MARY SHARP

Focusing on the Canadian Museum of History's newest permanent exhibition, The Canadian History Hall (2017), and its sponsorship by the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers (CAPP), this article discusses oil-sponsored museum exhibitions and the extractive politics within which Canadian culture is produced. This article begins with an overview of The Canadian History Hall and the activist response to its sponsorship by Big Oil. It then situates the exhibition within a larger history of oil and museums in Canada, reflecting on the controversial, Shell-sponsored The Spirit Sings (1988) exhibition at the Glenbow Museum. The article argues that, as it reproduces the longstanding relationship between Canadian museums and the oil industry, the Canadian Museum of History's recent partnership exemplifies the ongoing role of extractive politics in cultural production. While European museums increasingly face pressures to divest from fossil fuels, the entanglement of culture and extractive in-

Examinant l'exposition permanente la plus récente du Musée canadien de l'histoire, la Salle de l'histoire canadienne (2017), sponsorisée par CAPP, le plus grand lobby pétrolier du Canada, cet article traite des expositions muséales parrainées par les compagnies pétrolières et des politiques extractives au sein de la culture produite au Canada. L'article commence par un aperçu de la Salle canadienne de l'histoire et de la réponse activiste à son parrainage par les grandes sociétés pétrolières. L'article situe également l'exposition dans un cadre historique plus large des musées et du pétrole au Canada, soulignant la continuité de l'exposition controversée The Spirit Sings (1988) parrainée par Shell au Musée Glenbow. L'article démontre ensuite comment le Musée canadien de l'histoire ainsi que les liens de longue date entre les musées canadiens et le pétrole illustrent le rôle continu des politiques extractives au sein de la production

terests in Canada suggests the need for a unique and critical approach to sponsorship in Canadian cultural institutions.

culturelle, et se termine par une réflexion sur les limites des modèles actuels de désinvestissement des musées canadiens.

INTRODUCTION

In April of 2017, over a dozen activists stood in the entry hall of the Canadian Museum of History (CMH) in Gatineau, Quebec, forming an unauthorized pop-up exhibition. In line as human easels, each held up a depiction of a climate disaster in a gold-plated frame. From photos of oil spills to forest fires, some frames read: "CAPP blocks action on climate and lobbies for tar sands expansion." Outside, other participants extended a banner with the phrase "Big oil has no place in our trusted museum" and the hashtag #CutCAPP. Indeed, CAPP—the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers—had donated $1 million to the national museum for its celebration of Canada 150, which included a new, 40,000 square-foot exhibition on Canadian history titled *The Canadian History Hall*. This partnership between the CMH and Canada's largest oil lobby represented the latest public controversy to accompany the Hall since its planning began in 2012. As the flagship project for the museum's multi-year transformation, which also included a name and mandate change led by the then-Conservative federal government, the Hall had raised anxieties among early critics who feared it might become an ahistorical celebration of Canadian militarism and settler-colonialism (Aronczyk and Brady). At the time of the April protest, however, the Hall had not yet opened, and this group of activists—organized by the environmental collective 350.org—mainly sought to make visible the financial connection between Big Oil and Canada's cherished museum and to demand an end to the partnership.

This action at the museum, part of 350.org's "Right Side of History" campaign, reflected a critical moment for museums both in Canada and abroad. First, while perhaps unexpected for a Canadian museum, the protest followed a surge in anti-oil actions in European institu-

tions since the early 2000s, most notably at the Tate and the British Museum by activist groups like Liberate Tate and BP or Not BP. Second, protestors at the CMH highlighted the powerful role CAPP played in Harper-led assaults on environmental protections and the ongoing displacement and disenfranchisement of Indigenous peoples (Perfitt), which echoed similar conversations around Indigenous sovereignty and decolonization that had been brewing in museums and the field of museum studies for years.[1] Lastly, such a protest may have been unusual for a Canadian museum, but it was certainly not new, as Kirsty Robertson demonstrates in *Tear Gas Epiphanies: Protest, Culture, Museums*. In fact, the action by 350.org was reminiscent of the first anti-oil protest to occur at a Canadian museum, several decades prior: the Lubicon Cree's boycott of the Shell-sponsored exhibition *The Spirit Sings* (1988) at the Glenbow Museum—a controversy which spotlighted the colonial practices of museums across the country and led to the 1992 *Task Force on Museums and First Peoples*. Nearly thirty years later, this moment of resistance to the CMH's partnership with Canada's national oil lobby raises the question: have Canadian museums changed at all?

Using as an entry point *The Canadian History Hall* (henceforth the Hall) and its sponsorship by CAPP, this article seeks to open a discussion about oil-sponsored museum exhibitions and the extractive politics within which culture is produced in Canada. Theorizing culture's extractive politics points to ways that cultural production is complicit in the reproduction of resource extraction as a dominant economic and political model. My understanding of extractive politics is informed by Henrietta Lidchi's "politics of exhibiting," referring to the ways that institutional power in museums promotes the reproduction of specific forms of social knowledge (185). Lidchi notes that such politics are in constant negotiation with the "poetics of exhibiting," or the museological practice of producing meaning (168). I also employ the concept of extractive politics synonymously with the "politics of extraction" explored by Imre Szeman (443), where politics—a set of representations and practices—promote and sustain resource extraction as a primary economic model. Together, both notions can be used to interrogate the ways that oil-sponsored muse-

ums and exhibitions uphold the reproduction of extractivism, or the paradigmatic economic, political, and social model in which raw materials, land, data, and labour are continuously extracted for profit (Szeman 443-5).

This article explores several distinct research questions. Given increased calls for divestment and climate justice in the museum field, how might we understand the ongoing sponsorship of Canadian museums by oil companies? Why have issues of funding and governance been mostly ignored in critical museology and siloed from decolonial museum frameworks? And what is the significance of divestment from oil for Canadian museums, particularly if funding and governance structures remain unchanged? To address these questions, the article begins with an overview of the Hall, highlighting its importance for the exploration of extractive politics in museums. Next, I situate the exhibition and its contested sponsorship within a larger history of oil and museums in Canada and reflect on the *Spirit Sings* controversy to show the continuity of the Canadian museological landscape between 1988 and 2017. The article then suggests that both the Hall and Canadian museums' long-standing relationship with oil exemplify the ongoing role of extractive politics in cultural production. Finally, I consider recent splits in corporate-museum partnerships beyond Canada and question the efficacy of museum divestment in the absence of radical structural change.

"WELCOME TO YOUR HISTORY": THE CANADIAN HISTORY HALL

Located on the top two floors of the CMH, the Hall occupies a space of over 40,000 square feet, divided into a main Hub and three chronologically curated galleries. To access the Hall, visitors move through a bright, winding hallway in which various Canadian landmarks, people, and symbols are lit and displayed on the walls. Upon exiting the hallway into the exhibition's main Hub, visitors can advance onto a floor map of Canada. Looking up and around the Hub, the design of CMH architect Douglas Cardinal is instantly noticeable, the inner curves of the Hall mirroring the curvilinear structure of the museum. From this central starting point, vis-

itors can access the exhibition's three galleries: Gallery 1, which covers earliest times until 1763; Gallery 2, covering colonial Canada from 1763 to 1914; and finally, Gallery 3, which looks at modern Canada from 1914 to the present day. Much of Gallery 3, accessible from a circular ramp, is visible from the Hub, across the curved mezzanine that Cardinal designed to symbolize the Ottawa river (Amyot, Leblanc, and Morrisson). Despite activist and media attention to the Hall's sponsorship by CAPP, the partnership is de-emphasized in the Hall itself, losing the spotlight to the three Canadian families who also donated to the museum: the Eatons, the Rossys, and the Westons. Like in many museums, these donors lend their names to particular galleries; however, the affiliation of each family with a particular time period in the Hall (Rossy: Early Canada; Eaton: Colonial Canada; and Weston: Modern Canada) is unique and raises questions that extend beyond the scope of this article.[2]

A close examination of the exhibition's development was necessary to understand the dynamics of CAPP's sponsorship. Foundational museum scholarship has previously described museums as cultural instruments of the state (Bennett), serving a hegemonic function and upholding colonial systems of knowledge. But how exactly did the museum's partnership with this sponsor reflect such asymmetrical relations? A deep dive into the museum was therefore needed, and I began to undertake archival research and interviews in Gatineau and examine internal documents about the Hall released through the Access to Information and Privacy Act. What emerged from my research was a complex story of a momentous cultural product with national, corporate, museological, and personal implications, one that brought together hundreds of professionals, multiple teams, and various domains of expertise into a multi-year, multi-million-dollar project.

The development of the Hall was indeed a significant undertaking. Developed internally by the Canadian History Hall Working Group, it was led by a Project Director, a Director of Research, and a Director of Creative Development and Learning (Amyot, Leblanc, and Morrison), and was eventually supported by the contracted work of Mon-

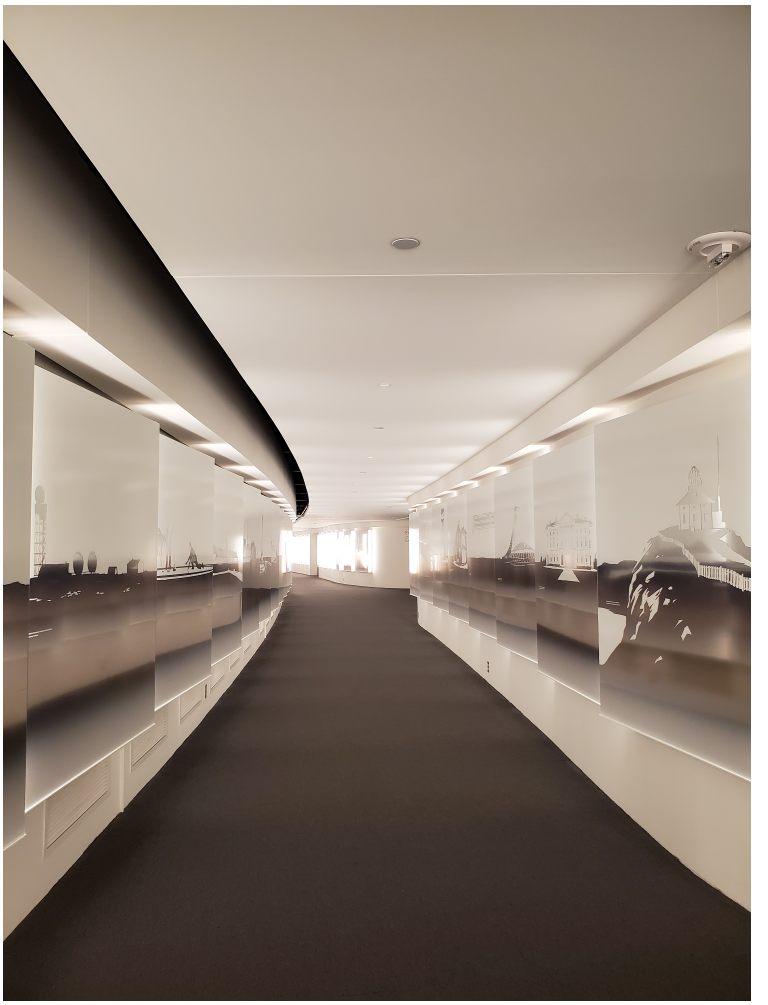


Figure 1: Entry corridor to the Canadian History Hall. (Photo by the author, 2019).

treal-based design firm GSM Project. The development of the Hall also reflected the museological standards of its time. For example, in 2013 the Hall Working Group began forming Advisory Committees to consult on three main elements: Indigenous content, women's

content, and the three historical periods of each gallery. The Committees' main tasks were to advise on content drafts already produced by the main exhibition team (Canadian Museum of History, Access to Information Act request # A-2017-01). Additionally, the Working Group sought to consult the Canadian public around what topics should be included in the Hall through an extensive online campaign. Even after the first few days of research, it became clear that the Working Group had embarked on an impossible task: to produce a comprehensive, museologically-informed history of Canada, spanning from earliest times to the present day, and which would satisfy museum visitors, staff, donors, academics, represented communities, government officials, and the media.

When visiting the Hall for the first time, activists and journalists alike may have been pleasantly surprised. In the first gallery, visitors are immediately immersed in a visual and audio telling of the Anishinaabe Creation story projected onto a curved wall, alluding to the museum's presence on unceded Algonquin territory. There is also a section in the third gallery which displays key social movements in Canadian history, from Idle No More and the LGBTQ rights movement to environmental activism. While I found no evidence of direct influence from donors on the exhibition in my research, a close reading of its contents reveals a few interesting omissions. For example, in the third gallery's section on "environmental concerns," the following environmental threats are listed: "acid rain, ozone depletion, clear-cut logging, nuclear energy safety concerns and climate change," with a notable absence of oil or pipeline spills (Amyot, Leblanc, and Morrison 176). Similarly, in the exhibition's catalog, a section on "First Peoples: 1876 to the Present Day" describes Arctic colonialism without including the story of forced relocations of Inuit communities and the extractive motivations of Canadian expansion in the region (Amyot, Leblanc, and Morrison 182). Beyond such absences, the Hall itself minimally engages with the history of resource extraction or any content the oil industry might have had a stake in. Further, my interviews with CMH and design professionals who worked on the Hall revealed little overlap between their work and the exhibition's funders: while the exhibition certainly was motivat-

ed and informed by various institutional, political, and museological interests, the CAPP controversy seemed to remain an afterthought throughout the project. Where, then, would the extractive moment in which this important exhibition emerged manifest? The question required turning back the clock to explore the longstanding relationship between Canadian museums and the oil industry.

SITUATING OIL-SPONSORED EXHIBITIONS WITHIN CANADIAN MUSEOLOGY

While anti-sponsor actions in Canadian institutions are fewer than in Europe or the U.S., 350.org's protest against CAPP was not the first moment of resistance to oil at the doorsteps of a museum in Canada. The troubling contradiction of Canadian museums' reckoning with their colonial infrastructures and their intrinsic ties to oil wealth were first made visible in 1988, when Calgary's Glenbow Museum partnered with the oil company Shell to develop an exhibition on Indigenous material culture. *The Spirit Sings: Artistic Traditions of Canada's First Peoples* was an ambitious display of cultural artifacts from Indigenous peoples (primarily First Nations and Inuit) across Canada, most of which had been collected by settlers at the time of first contact and had remained housed in various Canadian, American, and European institutions. A part of the 1988 Calgary Olympics, the show was hailed as the first time many of the artifacts would be displayed together in a Canadian museum, and its (primarily non-Indigenous) curatorial committee was likely well-meaning; indeed, the exhibition sought to blur anthropological lines between art and artifact, and efforts were made to depict Indigenous peoples as resilient and diverse. The exhibition also received the largest corporate sponsorship for a Canadian art exhibition at the time, a $1.1 million donation from Shell. But the record-breaking partnership would not be celebrated for long. When the sponsorship was announced, Shell had been drilling in the unceded territory of the Lubicon Cree in northern Alberta, deeply affecting the economy, health, and environment of the community. Needing to draw widespread attention to their grievances and ongoing land claim with the federal government, the Lubicon organized

an international boycott of both the Olympic Games and *The Spirit Sings*. On the exhibition's opening day in summer 1988, hundreds of Indigenous protestors and allies stood outside the Glenbow Museum, with one sign reading, "In whose interest does the Spirit Sing?" (Bicknell in Robertson).

The *Spirit Sings* controversy has been deemed a watershed moment in Canadian museology, primarily because the anti-Shell protest highlighted many other issues plaguing the exhibition—and indeed other Canadian museums—such as the lack of Indigenous consultation and the display of sacred artifacts. While many of these issues had been flagged and resisted by Indigenous peoples for decades,[3] this contentious moment became a catalyst for the *Task Force on Museums and First Peoples* (initiated in 1989 and published in 1992), which prompted numerous reforms in how Canadian museums engage with Indigenous communities and Indigenous material culture. However, while the Lubicon's land claim and resistance to Shell was the main driver of the exhibition's boycott, concerns over neither the Shell sponsorship nor Indigenous land rights made it into the *Task Force Report*. Referencing Glen Coulthard's *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition*, Kelsey Wrightson notes that much like Canada's official recognition of Indigenous peoples in federal policy, the Report ignored the political aims of communities like the Lubicon, thus decoupling its reformed framework of museum practice from the land-based aspirations of Indigenous communities.

The museological framework from which *The Canadian History Hall* emerged reflects a similar disconnect. Following a series of slow reforms prompted by a long history of Indigenous resistance and critical scholarship around museums, Canadian museums have recently been tasked with responding to another report, the Truth and Reconciliation's (TRC) Calls to Action, in which they, along with libraries and archives, are called upon to implement policies that meet the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) in an effort to promote reconciliation. However, some scholars have since critiqued the state-sanctioned Reconciliation narra-

tive of the TRC and its adoption by arts institutions. David Garneau, for example, notes that the report is constrained by Western ideology and calls for artistic and curatorial practices to be articulated outside of its assimilationist framework (24), while Lindsay Nixon's *A Culture of Exploitation: "Reconciliation" and the Institutions of Canadian Art,* published by Yellowhead Institute, highlights the ways that institutional commitments to reconciliation have only led to more tokenism, inequality, and exploitation of Indigenous cultural workers. Following the museological standards set by the *1994 Task Force* report, current museum responses to "decolonial" museology and the TRC remain primarily concerned with object-based practices like collections care, interpretation, and exhibitions, leaving unchanged the funding and governance structures of museums, themselves dominated by corporations and corporate elites. As such, the complexity and contradictions inherent in museum work and critical museology become visible in cultural spaces like the Canadian Museum of History: while its newest permanent exhibition is funded by a powerful lobby that actively resists Indigenous rights in legal courts, the Hall also incorporates Indigenous knowledge and histories and displays moments of anti-colonial resistance such as the Idle No More movement.

Ultimately, many of the contradictions affecting museum work can be traced back to the structural foundations of cultural institutions. Despite the powerful currents of "decolonization" and, indeed, climate-oriented frameworks (see Cameron and Neilson; Janes) in museology, museums remain limited by their historical, political, and economic contexts. Sumaya Kassim, for example, has made the poignant argument that museums can never truly be decolonized due to the persistence of their colonial epistemologies. Scholars like Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang have also critiqued the institutional appropriation of decolonial pedagogy and the subsequent de-emphasis of its primary motive, the repatriation of land (Tuck and Yang 7). Similarly, the entanglement of large museums and the global art market in personal and corporate fortunes makes them unlikely champions of ethical and sustainable funding. As such, while corporate sponsored museums like the Canadian Museum of History or the

Glenbow already navigate a wide-range of interests and often contradictory dynamics, their prominent partnerships with the oil industry signal the limited role they might play in advocating for land-based decolonization or environmental sustainability. It is no surprise, then, that in researching both museums, I found no policies or guidelines related to funding ethics. While reflective of the structural limitations mentioned above, such an absence also speaks to the larger extractive politics within which culture is produced in Canada. Having fueled western expansion and the development of the settler state, oil was historically foundational to the development of both the CMH and the Glenbow and remains embedded in their current structural fabric.

OIL, MUSEUMS, AND THE EXTRACTIVE POLITICS OF CULTURE

Today, oil companies (and extractive industries more broadly) are common supporters of museums across Canada, even beyond tar-sand adjacent museums in Alberta which frequently partner with the likes of Imperial Oil, Chevron, and Shell. In 2011, for example, the Canadian Museum of Science and Technology in Ottawa came under scrutiny as leaked emails revealed that Imperial Oil, its sponsor for an exhibition titled *Energy: Power to Choose*, exerted influence over some of the exhibition's content. In Toronto, the Royal Ontario Museum continues its perennial relationship with the mining industry with partners like Barrick Gold, Teck, and the Prospectors and Developers Association of Canada (PDAC), a leading mining lobby. While such relationships between resource extraction and Canada's cultural sector may become increasingly controversial, they also represent 'business as usual.' Since the beginning of corporate involvement in arts and culture in North America, oil wealth has had a significant presence, as nineteenth- and twentieth-century millionaires and oil stakeholders like John D. Rockefeller and Andrew Carnegie founded numerous libraries, museums, and universities. In Canada specifically, American foundations like Rockefeller's and Carnegie's began providing substantial grants to artists, scholars, and cultural institutions in the early 1920s and shaping Canadian cultural policy (Brison).

The CMH and the Glenbow Museum themselves can also be said to be founded on oil. In the mid-1800s, as oil became increasingly depended upon by European and North American settler societies, governments sought new sources of energy, including oil, and encouraged and funded exploration throughout pre-Federation Canada and the U.S. In Canada, such a task was handed to the Geological Survey of Canada (GSC), founded in 1842 to map British North America's geological resources. William Logan, director of the GSC in 1852, proposed that the Province of Canada create its own museum, with the main purpose to display rocks, minerals, and anthropological collections amassed by the GSC during its explorations (Pilon et al.). Thus, the provincial museum was created in Montreal, before moving to Ottawa and finally to Gatineau where it became the Canadian Museum of Civilization and eventually the Canadian Museum of History. In Alberta, the Glenbow Museum was founded by lawyer-turned-oil millionaire Eric L. Harvie, who had greatly profited from his leases in the Leduc oil field, operated at the time by Imperial Oil (Diehl). Harvie spent some of his fortune amassing a large collection of Indigenous and Canadian artworks, eventually donating it to the province of Alberta to form the Glenbow Museum (Cotton).

It is in these oil foundations of Canadian museums that a primary aspect of extractive politics can be found. However, as the foundational histories of the Glenbow and the Canadian Museum of History suggest, extractive politics precede contemporary and controversial forms of 'oil sponsorship,' with both institutions having been developed through extracted wealth and collections. Ever-growing critiques of oil funding in museums therefore lead me to ask, can such museums ever truly divest from their extractive foundations? Much like Kassim's conclusion that museums can never be decolonized due to the resilience of their colonial structures, the idea that museums in Canada may divest from oil in the near future is difficult to reconcile with the deeply rooted presence of resource extraction in their histories. Further, as Kirsty Robertson notes, there has been minimal resistance to oil sponsorship in Canadian museums, in contrast to the activism of groups like Liberate Tate and BP or Not BP in the UK, or Libérons le Louvre in France. Robertson proposes several theories

for this absence, including the "unbreakable connection between extraction and economy in Canada" (184), as well as the differing sites of environmental and Indigenous struggle, which in Canada are primarily found at blockades or in court proceedings and education. But these differences absolve neither the Canadian public nor museum scholars and professionals from scrutinizing oil sponsorship, and, as both 350.org and Lubicon protests have shown, Canadian museums are far from immune to such resistance.

Guided by increased efforts to dismantle the colonial and oppressive structures of museums and inspired by calls to study museums beyond the traditional foci of curation and exhibitions (Morse et al.), my research into oil and museums led me to interrogate the funding work that motivated and supported the Canadian Museum of History's partnership with CAPP. As I focused on email correspondence released by an Access to Information and Privacy (ATIP) request, additional aspects of extractive politics at the museum emerged.

First, rather than exert influence on the content of *The Canadian History Hall* (or engage in a "corporate takeover of public expression," as Herbert Schiller had predicted about sponsorship in the 1980s), emails between the museum and CAPP representatives reveal that the primary motivation for this partnership was behind-the-scenes political lobbying. Indeed, located across the Ottawa River from the federal capital's Parliament Hill, the museum is not only an important cultural, educational, and tourist destination, it is also a hub for political elites. As the primary funder of the museum's celebration of Canada 150 and the Hall, CAPP strategically gained access to museum-hosted events and gatherings where government officials often interact. ATIP documents show that CAPP sought specific information around the museum's political relationships before committing to the partnership. For example, in emails from 2013, CAPP's museum liaison asks development staff "how many events with government-related attendees are hosted each year" (Canadian Museum of History Access to Information Act Request # A-2016-2017/03 59). Later that year, when the sponsorship agreement was confirmed, CAPP also requested that the announcement of their partnership be scheduled when the federal government would not be in ses-

sion, thereby favouring a time when officials could receive the news (Canadian Museum of History Access to Information Act Request # A-2016-2017/03 373).

The museum was of course well aware of its valuable political and geographic positioning, noting in its sponsorship proposal to CAPP that their partnership would provide the lobby with "access to influential audiences and key decision makers in the National Capital [...]" (Canadian Museum of History Access to Information Act request # A-2016-2017/03 17). Thus, despite an absence of interference in the actual contents of the museum and its exhibitions, the CMH's partnership with CAPP nevertheless worked to promote the interests of the Canadian oil industry by consciously providing a space for industry to lobby government officials.

Lastly, it is important not to overlook the active role the museum undertook to secure its partnership with the lobby. The interpretation of the sponsorship by some news media has tended to obscure the reversed flow of extractive politics between both parties. While CAPP showed initial interest in the museum in the early 2010s, it did not necessarily "invite itself to the museum," as one headline noted (Orfali). The CMH's development team spent significant resources, including at least one trip to the lobby group's headquarters in Calgary, to cultivate the relationship. The flow of extractive interests from the museum to CAPP, rather than from CAPP to the museum, is further reflected in the language of the sponsorship agreement. As the museum-authored contract states, CMH offered CAPP "a key activation opportunity [...] to draw essential links between our progress as a country and the history of natural resource development" and asserted that "the quality of our life and the development of our country is inextricably linked to the development of our natural resources" (Canadian Museum of History Access to Information Act request # A-2016-2017/03 17).

As this history of oil in Canadian museums and the communications between CAPP and Canada's national history museum have shown, the extractive politics within which culture is produced in Canada extend beyond common assumptions of censorship and interference.

From the foundational links between Canadian cultural institutions and resource extraction to the contemporary partnerships forged between oil and museums, Canada's extractive politics of cultural production have become difficult to ignore. Indeed, while it is important to remember that the CMH-CAPP partnership occurred due to a need for funding in the cultural sector, the specific ways in which both the museum and the lobby conceived of their sponsorship agreement reflect the powerful presence of oil in Canada's museum landscape. The political lobbying opportunities emphasized by both parties also give reason to the concerns of the 350.org activists who had staged their pop-up exhibition in the museum's entry hall in April 2017. As this article demonstrates, the activists' claim that CAPP sponsored the CMH to "receive exclusive access to events with our political leaders" and actively meet "with government to push for tar sands expansion" stands strong (350.org). Nevertheless, I question the efficacy of such pressures in a country so deeply embedded in oil. In the absence of radical structural change around museums' funding and governance, what impact would divestment from oil sponsors have on Canadian culture? Furthermore, as the funding practices of museums continue to be overlooked in museum studies and siloed from object-based reforms in the museum field, what opportunities exist for such structural change? Lastly, noting increased concerns around the human and environmental impacts of the rising 'green energy' industry, what standards and policies might museums put in place to avoid being underwritten by other extractive industries, such as mining?

CONCLUSION: THINKING BEYOND DIVESTMENT

As I write this article, controversies over oil sponsorship in museums have not slowed. The Science Museum in London, U.K. was recently occupied by activists from various groups in protest of Shell's sponsorship of the climate change-related exhibition *Our Future Planet*. In an open letter signed by over 50,000 people, the U.K. Student Climate Network (UKSCN) accused the museum of providing Shell with an opportunity for "green-washing" and called for an end to the partnership (Polonsky). While the Science

Museum has yet to meet this demand, other institutions have severed some of their contentious relationships with corporations in the last few years. In 2016, the Tate announced the end of its partnership with BP, and in 2018 the Van Gogh Museum and the Mauritshuis in the Netherlands ended their relationships with Shell. And in 2019, Warren Kanders, whose company Safariland was linked to tear gas use in Gaza and Puerto Rico, resigned as Vice-Chair of the Whitney Museum following significant pressure from artists and activists. In Canada, however, while universities are increasingly committing to divesting from fossil fuels, there have been minimal pressures on museums to sever their ties with oil. Such pressures might be less likely to resonate with Canadian museum professionals, who are acutely aware of the country's need for funding of arts and culture. While Canada's cultural institutions rely on private funding to a lesser extent than their American counterparts, the sector reflects a combination of American and European models (Chong and Bogdan), and Canadian governments have been steadily encouraging museums to seek out more corporate support since the 1970s. Thus, while CAPP's sponsorship of the *Canadian History Hall* represented just over 3% of the exhibition's total budget, the stakes are different for museums located in extractive cities. For example, given the makeup of corporations and elites in Calgary, the Glenbow regularly receives funding from more than one oil sponsor and operates with several industry magnates on its board. In this current model, the Glenbow would likely have to close its doors if it suddenly divested from fossil fuels.

It is perhaps the feeling of helplessness—with many museums struggling to keep their doors open and retain staff in the midst of a pandemic—that has sidelined nuanced investigations of troubling museum-corporate incompatibilities. After all, this past year many museums have been reflecting on their embeddedness in colonialism, anti-Black racism, and the climate crisis, and have found innovative ways to increase their social relevance.[4] Nevertheless, the near impossibility of transforming entire institutional and economic structures is no reason to ignore the specific ways that capitalism and powerful corporations utilize cultural spaces to legitimize their destructive operations and their ongoing accumulation of capital. The absence of the

question of funding from critical discussions of museum practice has only reinforced the instrumentalization of cultural projects like exhibitions to uphold Canada's political, cultural, and economic system of resource extraction.

But activists, scholars, and cultural professionals alike ought to be wary of considering divestment from oil as a comprehensive solution to the ongoing issue of controversial museum-corporate partnerships. While the oil industry is expected to continue extracting its black gold until it is no longer profitable, a shift in global consciousness around the environment and 'green' practices and consumption has emerged and has made its way into museums: as entire activist organizations are strategizing against the fossil fuel industry's persistent sponsorship of cultural institutions in Europe, several special journal issues and reports around art, museums, and climate change have also been released, and museum conferences worldwide have taken up the theme of environmental sustainability.[5] In social, political, and economic landscapes, the shift has been primarily characterized by the emergence of a 'green energy' industry—one that depends on mining and which is equally entangled with extractive capitalism as a model of relating to and valuing the world. The focus on a single issue, or a narrow set of issues, has often been characteristic of movements targeting urgent environmental problems. Organizations, communities, and politicians seeking to solve the problem of CO_2 emissions and the affective images of destruction caused by oil spills have often demonized oil extraction, at the expense of intersectional class analysis. While I recognize that focused efforts are required to achieve change, it is important to note that much of the activism and burgeoning literature around museums and the climate crisis has been framed around a distinct imagining of oil as the primary culprit for climate change, separate from the larger structural violence of capitalism, and solvable through divestment. However, divestment leaves unchanged the current system of private-public partnerships in museums, thereby doing little to challenge the ways that extractive capitalism informs and enables cultural institutions.

I propose that fossil fuel divestment is not a comprehensive solution to the issue of corporate sponsorship in museums. Instead, more robust frameworks of critique and radically imagined futures are required to address the inevitable surge of corporate-cultural partnerships in years to come. Indeed, the relationships between museums and extractive corporations will soon become harder to ignore. First, increased environmental awareness and commitments to fossil fuel divestment suggest that the oil industry may double down on its strategies of cultural and ideological legitimation, within which museums are embedded. Second, political scientists like Thea Riofrancos have recently pointed to the ways that the global transition to renewable energy, culturally supported by climate change and divestment discourses, remains rooted in extractive capitalism. With the significant global shift toward electric, solar, and wind energy, which has led to intensive operations such as lithium mining in Latin America, 'green' extractivism has been shown to repeat the extensive exploitation of natural resources and promote social and environmental inequity, of which Indigenous Peoples continue to bear the brunt. With this in mind, it is fair to assume that proponents of such models of resource extraction will extend their efforts of cultural and ideological legitimation long after institutional divestment from fossil fuels. Without structural changes to museums' current models of funding and governance, disassociating with a single sponsor or donor simply benefits a museum's public image, appeasing the demands of a particular moment. While the narratives that posit fossil fuel as a singular culprit to be defeated through divestment may advance current climate goals, they leave us little to work with as we imagine museums beyond divestment.

As Canada continues to assert its sovereignty over natural resources through the promotion of a national oil culture, recent conflicts such as confrontations over the development of pipeline infrastructure are a stark reminder that extractivism fuels the contemporary conflict between the Canadian state and Indigenous communities. This reality troubles the overlap between museums' ongoing partnerships with extractive industries and the significant progress made around museum decolonization in the last several decades. Unfortunately,

divestment from fossil fuels is neither an easy nor permanent solution for museums, with rising 'green' extractive industries proving to be just as discriminating and destructive as fossil fuel production. As this exploration of *The Canadian History Hall* and the intrinsic ties between museums and oil has shown, the extractive politics of cultural production in museum spaces manifest in more complex ways than content interference. As such, there is an urgent need for museum communities—scholars, professionals, artists, and publics alike—to imagine alternative structures and futures for our institutions. It is high time for change, as much in museum scholarship as within museums themselves.

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IMAGE NOTES

Figure 1: Entry corridor to the *Canadian History Hall.* (Photo by the author, 2019).

NOTES

1. See, for example, Collison et al. (2018), Igloliorte (2017), and Lonetree (2012).

2. As my research focused on oil sponsorship, I did not investigate the three donor families' contributions to the Hall. However, I learned from one interviewee that the Eatons had a particular interest in lending their name to the Colonial Canada gallery since it includes a display about the Eaton store. Still, questions about the dynamics of funding from families and foundations remain. For example, how did the relationship between the Canadian Museum of History and these families manifest? In what ways do these contributions differ from corporate sponsorship?

3. Citing historian Michelle Hamilton, Kirsty Robertson (2019) notes that resistance to the collecting practices of Canadian museums began as early as 1797, when Indigenous people objected to the desecration of graves (a pervasive practice often undertaken by museum-employed

anthropologists to expand collections). Robertson also highlights a sit-in at the Royal Ontario Museum in 1976, twelve years before *The Spirit Sings*, during which members of the American Indian Movement demanded the return and reburial of bones that had been removed from a burial site for the Neutral Nation (53).

4. For example, in late 2020, Toronto History Museums launched its Awakenings program, a series of virtual art projects by BIPOC artists which operates "under the principles of anti-oppression, anti-colonialism, sustainability, advocacy, and story-telling" (Toronto).

5. See, for example, the "Museums and Climate Action" special issue of *Museum Management and Curatorship* (Davis) or the climate crisis campaigns of the UK's Museums Association (Museums Association).

OIL TOPOGRAPHY: WEAVING THE WORLD OF OIL

TOMAS BORSA
RUTH BEER

Taking inspiration from Pendakis and Wilson's (2012) call to "sight, cite, and site" oil, in this piece we consider how interventions in artistic material practice can offer up complementary, and at times entirely unique, modes of engaging with the materialities of oil and petro-media. Building on conversations of the past several years, we make particular reference to Oil Topography (2014), a hand-woven jacquard tapestry created and produced by Ruth Beer.

S'inspirant de l'appel de Pendakis et Wilson (2012) à "voir, citer et situer" le pétrole, nous examinons dans cette pièce comment les interventions dans la pratique matérielle artistique peuvent offrir des modes complémentaires, et parfois tout à fait uniques, d'engagement avec les matérialités du pétrole et des pétro-médias. En nous appuyant sur les conversations de ces dernières années, nous faisons particulièrement référence à Oil Topography (2014), une tapisserie jacquard tissée à la main et produite par Ruth Beer.

Over the past century, visual communication has played a key role in broadening public consciousness of the environmental impacts of extractive industries. On screens, on gallery walls, on wheat-pasted posters, and elsewhere, two-dimensional media forms the basis of much of what we know—and don't know—about oil refinement, transportation, consumption, pollution, and transition. Then, as now, the representational aptness of two-dimensional imagery continues to be seen as almost self-evident, and it is through such imagery that the politico-aesthetics of oil continues to be most prominently visually mediated.

In the case of petro-catastrophes—marine oil spills, pipeline ruptures, breached tailings ponds—this two-dimensional imagery is typically mediated through an aerial perspective. To see things from above—from the God's eye view, as Donna Haraway might put it—affords a certain legibility to situations of extreme flux and enormity that might otherwise elude human capacities for understanding altogether. So when the Exxon Valdez capsized in the early hours of March 24, 1989, news crews from around the world flew in with cameras aloft, each scrambling to find a more inventive means of communicating the scale and severity of the spill from an ever-greater distance. A media event in the truest sense (Dayan and Katz 1994), aerial telephotography soon became the default mode of visual witness.

The popularity of the aerial perspective is due at least in part to the quality of indisputability it can lend to an image. *My, what an awful lot of oil that is; I wonder how many barrels?* Likewise, the aerial perspective can provide a useful sense of scale and proportion. *I've seen bigger spills; at least it doesn't seem to be nearing the estuary.*

Of course, perspective is and has always been political. As Matt Dyce outlines in a fantastic history of the adoption of aerial photography by government-employed land surveyors in the early 20th century, the ability to take photos from afar and on-high was a critical node in both the project of statecraft and industrial expansion. For government branches like the Geological Survey of Canada or the Dominion Land Survey, it was often the case that "the most truthful pictures were those obtained from the farthest away" (Dyce 2). For consumers and producers of media alike, the truth claims inherent to the aerial perspective remain about as close to the notion of objectivity as visual communication tends to get.

And so, while we remain indebted to aerial strategies as a mode of seeing and knowing oil, we feel that the politico-aesthetics of oil could benefit from a deeper attunement to the contributions and idiosyncrasies of artistic material practice. To do so would involve treating the materialities of communication and the communication of materialities as coeval and equally expressive.[1] Looking beyond



Figure 1: Ruth Beer, Oil Topography (2014). Hand-woven jacquard tapestry: copper wire, polyester, cotton, 218 x 305 x 1.5 cm. Photo courtesy of the artist.

the content of representation and toward the materials, material conditions, and material infrastructures that make such representation possible, doing so would open up a world composed of "vibrant matter" and "evocative objects" (Bennett, Turkle).

Perhaps *Oil Topography* (2014) may be seen as one such evocative object. A hand-woven, double-weave structure measuring 218 (h) x 305 (w) x 1.5 (d) cm, *Oil Topography* is a jacquard tapestry comprised of copper wire, cotton, and polyester yarn whose three panels are positioned horizontally in a landscape orientation and suspended at eye-level. Experiencing it within the gallery space, viewers are often curious to make sense of the imagery and to know more about the materials and process of its production. *Oil Topography* was produced at the Centre des Textiles Contemporains de Montréal (Montreal Centre for Contemporary Textiles), an educational facility with one of the largest non-commercial jacquard looms in Canada which

provides research, creation, and dissemination support services for professional artists, designers, and artisans. With the help of a research assistant and the centre's technician, the warp was prepared on the loom and Pointcarré software[2] was used in order to establish the basic tonal composition design and weave patterns.

The process is essentially one of translation, in which the implicitness of the digital gradually takes on the expressiveness of the material. At once automated and yet visibly not, the work that emerges is in effect a hybrid image-based object, something both to look at and interact with in the space of the gallery. As in the case of a free-standing sculpture, the work is positioned away from the wall, such that the viewer is able to walk toward it and around it, to find changes of compositional focus and variations of pattern, to experience it from whichever angle and distance and height they wish.

From a distance, *Oil Topography* appears to depict a pixelated abstract space or objects, which many viewers have commented could be interpreted as something like a cluster of islands, or a constellation, or an oil slick. In fact, both sides of *Oil Topography* derive from a single base image, taken in aerial view, of the separation of oil and water in the aftermath of the 1989 *Exxon Valdez* disaster.[3] Yet neither side can offer much in the way of didactic certainty; where one object ends and the next begins remains open to speculation.

Precisely how the surfaces of the piece are experienced varies in response to ambient light conditions and the position of the viewer. Put differently, it is visually unstable, as the viewer's movement initiates changing reactions to reflected light on the weaving's surface. It is there, in front of you, but always reactive and in movement. Animated by the iridescence of its glinting materials, the two sides of the tapestry offer radically different aesthetic effects. On one side, flashes of warm metallic orange and pink appear more prominently, dancing and enticing across the surface. On the reverse side, sombre hues of blue, purple, and black—colours often associated with water, landscapes, and physical distance—predominate.

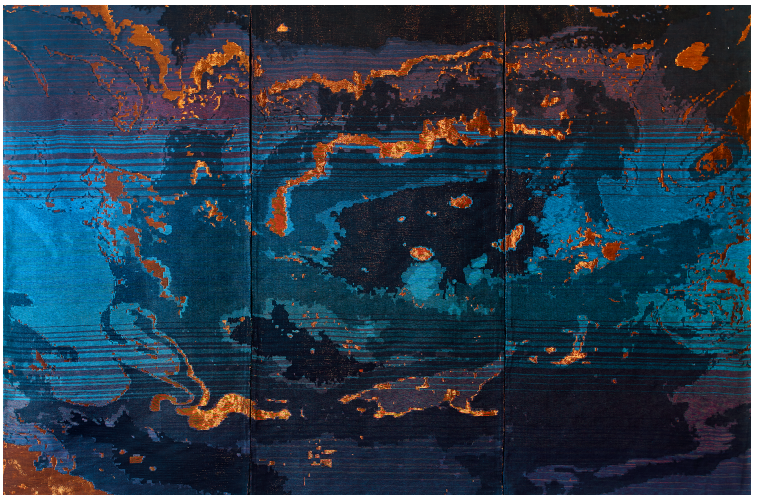


Figure 2: Ruth Beer, Oil Topography (detail). Photo courtesy of the artist.

By obscuring the base image through abstraction, its evidentiary promise is diluted such that the content of the piece is made secondary to its form (McLuhan). This unsettling condition of viewing, in which the burden of interpretation shifts to the viewer, represents one of the ways in which the work gestures toward the legacies of seeing, and knowing, oil. Using the abstracted base image as a strategy of citation,[4] *Oil Topography* leverages the "fragmenting of imagery" (Jefferies and Thompson 159) and disruption of stable perspective inherent to jacquard weaving to critique the provenance and representational aptness of two-dimensional imagery.

As the focus moves from content to form, the intimacies of interlaced warp and weft come into fuller view. Slowly, the viewer begins to both appreciate and question the logic of the artwork's structure. Emerging from a grid,[5] the tapestry's surface nevertheless appears uneven, even mottled—a result of the jacquard weaving process and patterning, in which the glitches and inconsistencies involved in the labour of weaving by hand (bodily movements, gestures) are recorded and materialized in the matrix of warp and weft.

The physicality of *Oil Topography* is undeniable. It is haptic, imposing, and possesses a certain "auratic power" (Crimp 96). In the site of the gallery, a space of contemplation, it is experienced not so much as a visual encounter but as a confrontation, a demand for acknowledgment by the thing itself. And yet, despite its heft, the effect of its scale *relative to the viewer's body* registers more as an invitation to intimacy.[6]

Confronted by their tangibility, the structural entanglement of the work's constituent materials comes into fuller view. Copper, cotton, and polyester: these are "the debris of industrial capitalism" (Teixeira-Pinto 2), materials which require the viewer to "ask questions not only about what the material is, but also about what is associated with it" (Lyotard 159). Lustrous and glinting, the 22-gauge copper filament is perhaps the most visually arresting of the work's primary materials, and advances the strategy of citation further by implicating copper's historic role in the development of visual and telecommunications, from Daguerreotype transfer sheets to copperplate maps to the coaxial cable underlying much of the present-day infrastructure of the Internet. Evoking the double-bind of representation or "problem of visualization" (Pendakis and Wilson 4), the filament thus engages with the image archive of oil disaster *on its own terms*.

Dig a hole along the banks of Prince William Sound and you'll find that, three decades after the Exxon Valdez disaster first entered the public consciousness, crude oil still seeps forth in a patina of blue and green. It is as if time has stood still. In a world awash with images—and with the understanding that materials do not exist in time, but are the stuff of time itself (Ingold)—*Oil Topography* stands as a counter-monument[7] to the ubiquity of petro-catastrophe, resituating a seemingly remote event into proximity.

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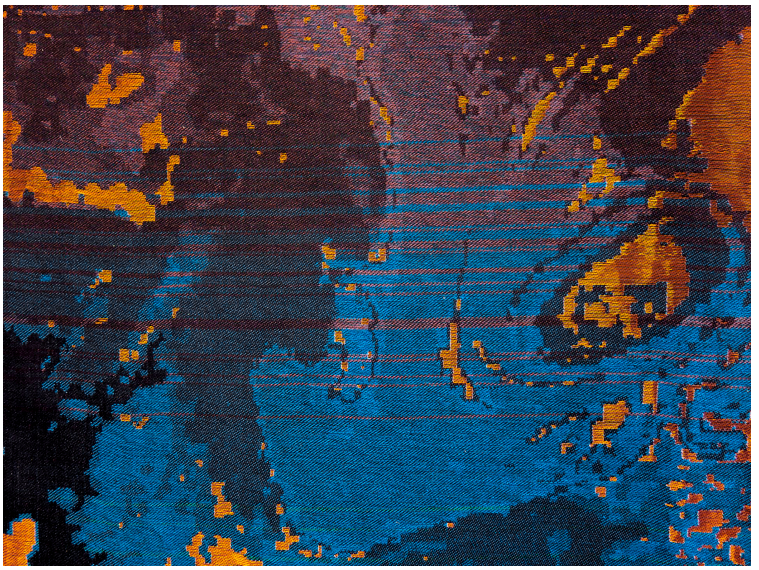


Figure 3: Ruth Beer, Oil Topography (detail). Photo courtesy of the artist.

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IMAGE NOTES

Figure 1: Ruth Beer, *Oil Topography* (2014). Hand-woven jacquard tapestry: copper wire, polyester, cotton, 218 x 305 x 1.5 cm. Photo courtesy of the artist.

Figure 2: Ruth Beer, *Oil Topography* (detail). Photo courtesy of the artist.

Figure 3: Ruth Beer, *Oil Topography* (detail). Photo courtesy of the artist.

NOTES

1. This is a characteristic of scholarship in the materialist tradition of media studies, in which the field of view of symbolic actants often includes such extra-textual entities as pipelines, pump-jacks, roads, and rivers. Writing with respect to bitumen, Tollefson and Barney (2019) propose that "the matter is not so much 'what meaning cannot convey' as it is 'what pipelines cannot convey'" (40).

2. Effectively a computerized loom, the jacquard machine requires that the weaver use Pointcarré to simplify and deconstruct the base image's attributes and assign woven structures in such a way that it can be partially-automated.

3. The Exxon Valdez disaster is in many ways the quintessential petro-catastrophic media event (Dayan and Katz), having attracted an as-then-unprecedented degree of news media coverage. Deliberately chosen for its ubiquity and ease of digital access, the base image was located through a cursory Google image search using the keywords "Exxon Valdez oil spill."

4. Citation refers to the practice of employing the idioms of one medium in another. As Maiko Tanaka writes, "citation […] is not only an acknowledgment of sources of inspiration, but also realizes the community it references, performatively bringing it into being" (1). By way of example, artist Gerhardt Richter deploys citation in his oil paint recreations of photographic images, through which he disrupts photography's claim to realism (Hawker 2002).

5. With its deep roots in the ideologies of high-modernism, critic Rosalind Krauss has described the grid as "what art looks like when it turns its back on nature" (2). Formalist, antinatural, and anthropocentric, in the world-at-large the grid similarly finds expression as the basic organizational unit of the sprawling networks of power generation, transport, and telecommunications which the project of extractivism both relies upon and self-perpetuates.

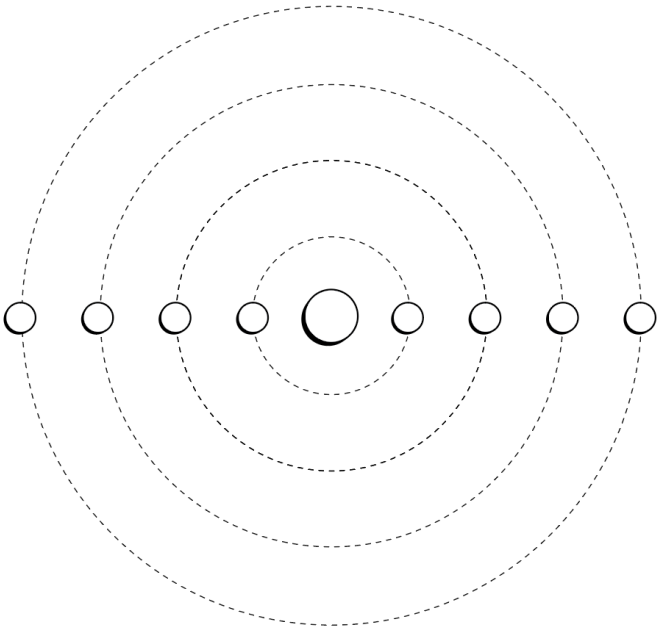
6. This invitation to intimacy is one of the ways in which *Oil Topography* distinguishes itself as a counter-monument. As Stevens et al. write, whereas traditional monuments primarily, "if not exclusively," engage "the sense of sight, and many are designed to be viewed from a dis-

tance," counter-monuments "typically unsettle these conventions of reception by inviting close, bodily encounter" (961).

7. Where a monument suggests remembrance in an unconditional sense, a counter-monument is intended to invigorate interest and invites critical scrutiny of commemorative landscapes (Stevens et al.).

EXCERPTS OF THE TOME OF LIGHT

COMPILED, RECORDED, AND SPECULATED BY
ELIA VARGAS

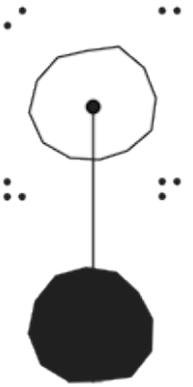


FIELD NOTES 1: THE PRESENT

Cement is a strange sort of material, a calcining lime and clay mixture, which hardens and binds other materials when water is added. The pathway of cement that runs the length of Oil Creek State Park in the Gregorian Calendar year 2017 follows the path laid previously by the Oil Creek Railway, built to move oil from Titusville to Petroleum City. Odd to walk this historical path, built upon technologies of the past, binding time as much as the materials that hold it together. Standing here-now, in this time, is a vantage point defined by other times. It is bolstered by the something else, made possible in conjunction with a being here-now. The river, the forest, a history of looking initiated by a history of extraction. There was a pulling out of the earth, which was then put back in place in a different ecological design set-parameter: railway, a cement path, energetic bodies. > Oil too was used as a cementing agent. Stories tell of a place-time that used it as home insulation. This was common practice until the urban metropolis went up in flames.



Odic Force



FIELD NOTES 8: A PART OF THE TOME OF LIGHT?

I found this story written by hand on the back of a pamphlet for Rock Oil Medicine while digging inside the Drake Oil Well Museum Archive. I had been camping for days. It was hot and rainy. The pamphlet was inside a short book titled, "Report on the rock oil, or petroleum, from Venango Co., Pennsylvania: with special reference to its use for illumination and other purposes" written by Benjamin Silliman Jr., a Yale chemist, in 1855. There are reportedly only a few original copies of this short book, the first comprehensive chemical analysis of Pennsylvania crude oil, for George Bissell, founder of Seneca Oil Company. I took advantage of the opportunity to look through the old text, responsible for so much of the financial investment in oil.

*The book was in better shape than the town of Titusville. Turning each page with great care, there was an unnatural knot in the thickness of the pages towards the back. Three quarters or so through the report, just after a page that ended with *The light from rectified Naphtha...*, a wad of paper emerged. It expanded quickly like a sponge as it was exposed to air. The folds marked the pamphlet's presence. Like a rag, its creases had worn soft and the white of the exposed paper pulp was smooth. They were wrinkles more than creases; the paper had aged well, smoothed and oiled from touch. An organism seeking contact. The pamphlet had been read by many.*

Beneath, above, and through the printed letter press of the "Rock Oil Medicine" header, there were an indeterminate number of handwritten words. They appeared to go on with no end. Turning the pamphlet over and rotating it continuously, the words found their way. This is what it said:

> >In this story, oil is the protagonist.
>
> >It is about a dark organic mass that hides underground and accumulates all the rich energy of the earth. It enlists the help of chlorophyl, algae, kerogen, hydrocarbons, and geologic pressure, among other kin, to escape the solar domination of light. A dark mass reconstituting light, defused, subterranean,

and in the shadows. Out of sight, after the breakdown, oil gains power over time, against the backdrop of the all-illuminating solar orb. Oil resisted the bath of transparency the solar orb radiated outward—The Solar Order of Enlightenment. The burning circle above, cleverly hiding its spherical nature, launched invisible matter transforming the globe. Oscillating at difficult to perceive frequencies amidst shinning transparencies, waves of energy shaped visibility.

>In its silence the dark mass remained. It remained even as it changed. A metamorphosis of power, shedding what it did not need, it accumulated and reduced. An unparalleled expression of meaning and matter, in hiding, for no one. Oil resisted. Oil was patient. Oil converted waste into strength. The dark mass grew; from out of itself it expanded. In different forms, amidst great variation, a seeping mass congealed as one/many things simultaneously. A monolithic monster of many pluralities. A monster absorbing the transparent sunbeams, feeding off them towards mutual opacity.

>The Solar Order of Enlightenment radiated a regime of total control. It conquered by illumination, co-constituting concepts of visibility as it rendered visible new visible forms. All will be seen; all that is, becomes through light. This was its coda, inscribed within the very bodies of visibility. All that there is, is governed by the possibilities of The Solar Order.

>Oil resisted; an impenetrable mass of decaying light, it absorbed the possible and diffracted it towards indeterminate outcomes. Subterranean, in/of the earth, a consortium of element beings, catalyzing a deep now instant/forever, oil became with its kin. A dark mass actualizing conditions for new existence, not against The Solar Order, but towards new possibilities. Oil remained in/of the earth, regenerating energies, catalyzing new infrastructures, materializing new perceptions.

>Then a new force emerged. Bodies that indexed the earth constructed arbitrary differentiations between technical ex-

> tensions of their forms. They conquered The Solar Order and advanced the regime of Enlightenment in their own image. New radiant powers emerged, shorter and shorter waves were harnessed, extended, wasted. Oil was discovered, hiding amidst its subterranean kin. The bodies depressurized oil's resistance, tapped and extracted it.
>
> >Oil sustained great losses. It's very form broken up, synthesized, reconfigured. The consortium of kin was divided again, the great fracture began. The opacity of oil was enlightened. But the dark mass congealed with deep kin amidst the...

Already, it was difficult to make out the final words. I lost track of the original orientation of the pamphlet. Despite the irregular shape, it was markedly clear. Thus, there was no doubting it ended abruptly, mid-sentence. I hadn't realized the energy rising in me until the tension of unresolve took hold. Such tension. It grasped me. How does it end? I did notice, however, looking over the entire document again, a set of symbols I had not seen next to the first sentence. Hard to discern them, they were inscribed in the paper in some way, neither letter press ink, nor lead or pen ink, nor worn wrinkles of time. They were, rather, a sort of emulsion of light, physical and impressed, but not tactile. There were three of them.

It is about a dark organic mass that hides underground and accumulates all the rich energy of the earth. It enlists the help of chlorophyll, algae, kerogen, hydrocarbons, and geologic pressure, among other kin, to escape the solar dominat
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diffracted it towards indeterminate outcomes. Subterranean, in/
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NOTES*

Vargas notes that to decipher *The Tome of Light*, certain explanations are required:

- Some of these diagrams may have been developed by Jason Huff; however, there is considerable question as to the authenticity of their dates, the origin of scanning, and the availability of geological minerals for digital reproduction.
- The vertical black lines on page three might depict a palimpsest relationship of crude oil pipelines at the Oil Creek region of Pennsylvania, Gregorian Calendar year 1866, from "Howe's Map of the Oil district of Pennsylvania," and the location of fiber optic cables in 2017, based on the University of Wisconsin Long haul infrastructure data IMPACT inter tubes map.
- On page four, "Odic Force" refers to the all-permeating mesmerist vital force that German chemist Karl Von Reichenbach devoted his later life to discovering. Reichenbach is known within Western oil industry history for his discovery of the paraffin hydrocarbon in Gregorian Calendar year 1830. However, the meaning of the relationship between the "Odic Force" and the illustrated diagram requires further examination of *The Tome of Light*.

FOUNDING FATHERS (IN A TAILINGS POND)

MELANIE DENNIS UNRAU

This speculative essay uses an imaginary (and non-existent) comic to call a tar-sands industry founder who may have thought of himself as a goose back to Fort McMurray to see how waterfowl fare in tailings ponds. It treats S.C. Ells (1878-1971), an early-20th-century Canadian Department of Mines engineer who was also an amateur writer and illustrator, as a colonial founder not only of the tar-sands industry but also of literary and visual representations of the industry and the Athabasca region. Drawing inspiration from artist and former tar-sands worker Kate Beaton's "Founding Fathers" comics, it compares the linkages between humans and waterfowl in Ells's works and in Beaton's 2014 webcomic "Ducks." By doing so, it takes Ells on a time-travelling adventure and homecoming tour in the petromodern dystopia that has become his legacy.

Cet essai spéculatif utilise une bande dessinée imaginaire (et non existente) pour rappeller à Fort McMurray un fondateur de l'industrie des sables bitumineux, qui se considérait peut-être comme une oie, pour voir comment la sauvagine s'en sort dans les bassins de résidus. Elle traite S.C. Ells (1878-1971), un ingénieur du ministère canadien des Mines du début du XXe siècle, qui était aussi un écrivain amateur et un illustrateur, d'un fondateur colonial non seulement de l'industrie des sables bitumineux, mais aussi des représentations littéraires et visuelles de l'industrie et de la région de l'Athabasca. S'inspirant des bandes dessinées, «Founding Fathers», de l'artiste et ancienne travailleuse des sables bitumineux, Kate Beaton, elle compare les rapports entre les humains et la sauvagine créés dans les œuvres d'Ells et dans la bande dessinée en ligne « Ducks » de Beaton (2014). Ce faisant, elle accompagne Ells dans une aventure dans le temps et une tournée dans la dystopie pétro-moderne qui est devenue son héritage.

INTRODUCTION

"Founding Fathers (in a Tailings Pond)" is a comic that I wish existed—a version of comic artist and former tar-sands worker Kate Beaton's Founding Fathers webcomic series that would poke fun at one of the 'founding fathers' of the Canadian tar-sands industry. In the absence of such a comic, this speculative essay creates an anachronistic encounter inspired by Beaton's representations of U.S. Founding Fathers in 21st-century shopping malls and amusement parks. It calls S.C. Ells (1878-1971)—a Canadian Department of Mines engineer and an amateur writer and illustrator who liked to be referred to as "the father of the tar sands" (McCook; "'Father'")—back to visit Fort McMurray and the Athabasca region. Comparing representations of waterfowl in Ells's works and in Beaton's 2014 webcomic "Ducks" (and suggesting that Ells may have thought of himself as a goose), it imagines taking Ells on a time-travelling, homecoming tour to see how waterfowl fare in a tar-sands tailings pond. This essay treats Ells as a colonial founder not only of the tar-sands industry but also of literary and visual representations of the industry and the region—a proud and deeply flawed 'father,' visionary, and nature-lover who failed to conceive of the destruction and harm that would become his legacy.

LOOPING BACK ON FOUNDING FATHERS

Kate Beaton's comics series "Founding Fathers (in a Mall)" and "Founding Fathers (Stuck in an Amusement Park)" imagine famous American historical figures in ubiquitous 21st-century settings. In the first panel of one two-panel comic drawn in Beaton's rough, cartoonish style and titled "Infinity," a man in 18th-century garb points to a roller coaster and expresses to another his hope that the "chain of carriages" will bring them "home"—presumably back to their own time and place (see Figure 1). In the second panel, the second founding father, who has seen the trajectory of the roller coaster, dashes the other's hopes, saying, in one speech balloon, "It is



Figure 1: "Infinity" from the series Founding Fathers (Stuck in an Amusement Park) by Kate Beaton.

merely a circle of violence," and, in a second balloon, "and then you retch."

"Infinity" can be read as meta-commentary on what Daniel Marrone calls Beaton's anachronistic practice of "a history that is constantly folding over on itself" (176): the Founding Fathers comics' seemingly infinite loops of jokes and juxtapositions represent the Fathers as variously appalled and enthralled by the dystopian, late-capitalist ends to which their principles and visions have been applied. At another level, the minutes-long roller coaster loop serves as an allegory for the violent project of homemaking on someone else's land—a "slow disturbance" that links its founders to ongoing dispossession, genocide, and harm through what architecture and media scholar Rafico Ruiz describes as infrastructural "chains of settler colonial materiality and accountability" (7). The point in the roller coaster loop where "you retch" is a temporal marker where past promises, as seen from the back loop, are emptied out and revealed as having been part of the "circle of violence" all along.

Beaton's roller-coaster scene anticipates urban geographer Stephanie Wakefield's application of resilience ecology theory to the geological era now known as the Anthropocene in *Anthropocene Back Loop*.

Like other natural-cultural systems, the Anthropocene is subject to patterns of growth, stability, fragmentation, dissolution, and adaptation that can be imagined as a figure eight, with opportunities for experimentation, resistance, and change arising especially in the back loop, where the logics and structures of the entire system are in question. Wakefield considers the 20th-century era of megaprojects such as dams and tar-sands mines as exemplifying the front-loop sense of "being a part of an order that was going somewhere better" (26)—like a roller coaster chugging upward on its tracks. The back loop, in contrast, is "our present, the moment of the naming of the Anthropocene (as a failure), in which the past (front loop) has not disappeared, like points trailing behind on a line, but is erupting in unpredictable ways in the present" (32). What is revealed in the eruptions of climate change, precarity, fragmentation, and confusion is that the modernist-colonialist-capitalist system has always been a "circle of violence."

Now a celebrated professional artist known for her *Hark! A Vagrant* comics, Beaton finished her undergraduate degree in history at Mount Allison University and then, to pay off her student loans, joined the droves of workers from the Maritimes in Fort McMurray during the oil boom between 2006 and 2008. It was while she was working in Fort McMurray and drawing at night that Beaton first began publishing her absurd historical, feminist comics online (Shimo). Beaton has published two scrolling webcomics about living and working at a tar-sands mine—"Night Shift" and "Ducks"—but there are no Founding Fathers comics about the tar sands. Following Patricia Yaeger's invitation to treat energy sources as modes of material and cultural production, however, we might describe Beaton's works as petro-media and cultural forms that can be traced to the tar sands in their place, time, and mode of production (even those not explicitly 'about' the tar sands). For this experimental essay-as-imagined-comic, I adopt Beaton's roller coaster as theoretical framework and as anachronistic method for reading (representations of) waterfowl in the tar sands.[1] Like Beaton, I approach "founding fathers" with skepticism and irony, rooted in Indigenous and decolonial critique of what Métis scholar and poet Emma LaRocque calls the "colonial sub-

terfuge behind the fantastic hero-ification of the White man" (36), and also in feminist and womanist critique of the dubious notion that the violent, dominant, and oppressive patriarchal father figure is necessary for the development of human individuals, families, or institutions.[2]

FATHER GOOSE

Sidney Clarke Ells was a white mining expert and civil servant, a stubborn, hands-on innovator who was sent in 1913 by the Canadian Department of Mines to investigate the tar-sands deposits in Treaty Eight territory, on the homelands of Cree, Chipewyan Dene, and Métis peoples near the Hudson's Bay Company fur-trading post of Fort McMurray. Ells would continue to work primarily on the Athabasca tar sands until his retirement in 1945, surveying and mining the underground deposits, paving experimental roads with asphalt made from bituminous sand, and developing early methods for bitumen separation. The 1931 photograph of Ells in Figure 2 shows Ells seemingly in the middle of work, holding a pail, with the Abasand Oil Plant behind him and the steep shore of the Horse River beside him. After former Abasand owner Max Ball first called Ells "the father of the Alberta bituminous sand research and development" in 1950 (quoted in Ells, *Recollections* 101), Ells encouraged his own reputation as "the father of the tar sands" (see, for example, McCook; "'Father'"). The Sidney Clarke Ells fonds at Library and Archives Canada reveal that Ells spent much of his career and his retirement defending and reasserting this reputation—in media interviews, letters, and multiple versions of and addendums to his memoir—against those of better-known and better-liked founders like Karl A. Clark and Robert Fitzsimmons. I picture Ells waiting beyond the grave, eager to be summoned up by future generations as a hero and innovator, but our summons to 2022—to "code red for humanity" ("Secretary-General"), to an Athabasca region treated as a sacrifice zone for extraction, and to the back loop of the tar-sands roller coaster—is a summons to a moment of reckoning and of asking where the founding fathers led us astray.

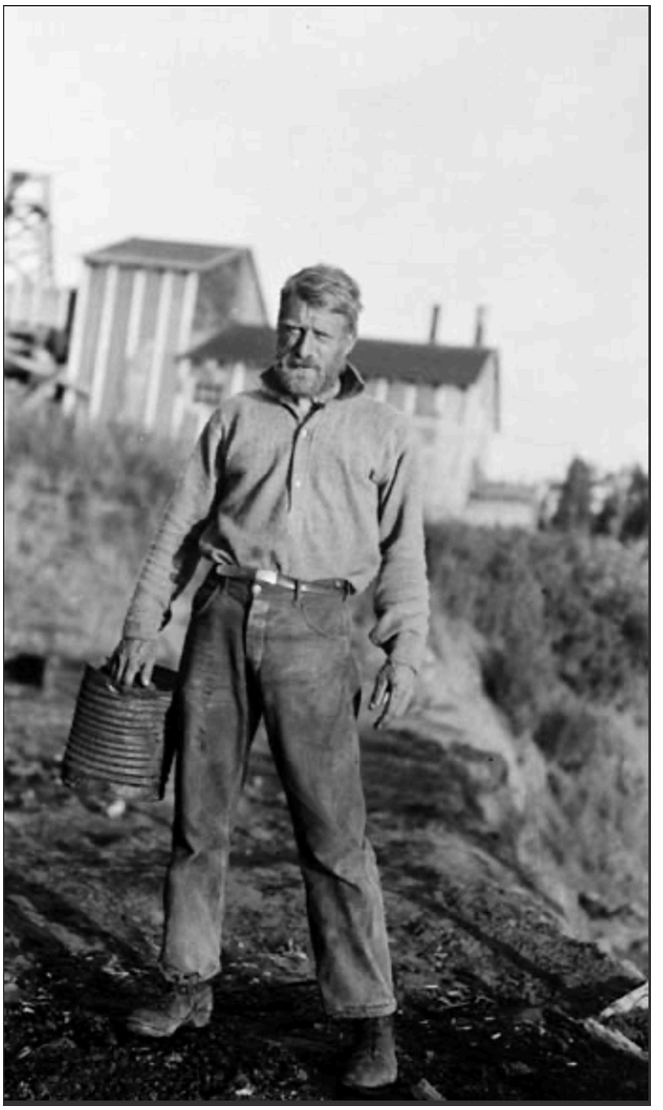


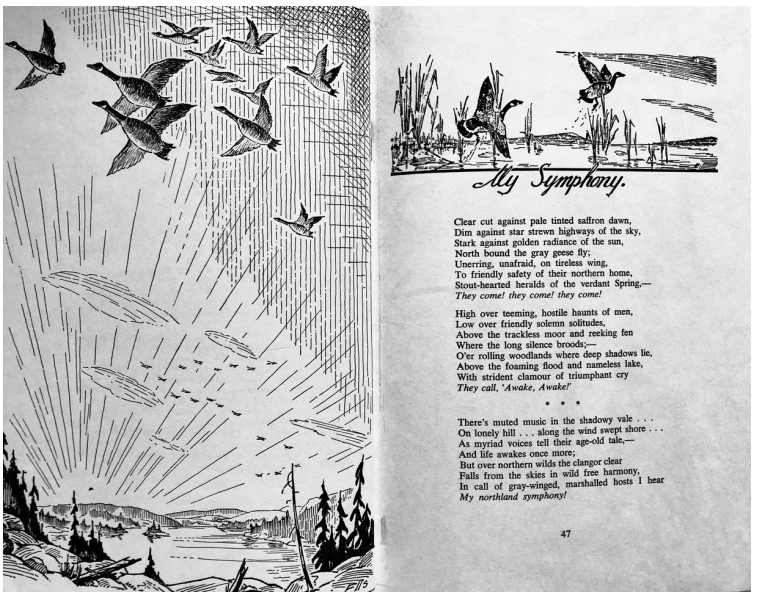
Figure 2: Sydney Ells at tar sand plant, Waterways, Alberta, 1931. Photo by H.S. Spence.

While Ells seldom receives the credit he deserves for founding the tar-sands industry, it is even more rare for Ells to be acknowledged as a precursor and perhaps founder of colonial literary and visual representations of the tar sands.[3] Ells was an author of old-fashioned amateur poetry, short stories, histories, and pencil-drawn illustrations about life in the Athabasca region, first created as Christmas cards for friends and family or as contributions to the *Canadian Geographical Journal* or the *Canadian Mining Journal*, and later collected in the book *Northland Trails*, published in 1938 and in an expanded edition in 1956. Ells's amateur writing was part of the popular-poetry tradition that flourished in the early 20th century (Chasar). Judging from the 26 reviews of *Northland Trails* published primarily in newspapers and geological and mining periodicals included in the Sidney Clarke Ells fonds, Ells's book was well received by a wide range of readers. Ells is seldom remembered today as an artist or writer in Fort McMurray,[4] not to mention in Canada, but he made significant contributions to the cultural and aesthetic project of laying claim to land that was already occupied as the sentient homeland of Indigenous peoples—making it seem available for extraction as a beautiful but empty hinterland.[5]

Reading Ells's memoir *Recollections of the Development of the Athabasca Oil Sands* and his technical reports with a view to how they contributed to a colonial visualization of the tar sands that emphasizes "industriousness" (39),[6] sociologists Debra Davidson and Mike Gismondi conclude that Ells "literally took the measure of the place, concentrating his geologist's eye on verticality and not on surfaces" (47). Literary scholar Jon Gordon likewise reads only Ells's *Recollections*, focusing on two poems by Ells used as the epigraph and epilogue. Gordon agrees with Davidson and Gismondi but adds that a repressed tension between "modernity and wilderness" propelled Ells's work and poetics (56), because Ells also loved the land he sought to conquer (57). Gordon's observations bear out in the rest of Ells's creative oeuvre, where the tension between modernity and wilderness is a prevalent and unresolved "energy unconscious" (Yaeger 306). *Northland Trails* vacillates between exultation in the

seemingly untouched nature of "the northland" (as seen through the colonial myth of *terra nullius*) and celebration of the rugged individualism of white engineers, prospectors, and explorers determined to industrialize and modernize the North. The collection avoids the clash between Ells's contradictory roles as lover and colonizer of the Athabasca region. It does this, in part, through the use of migratory geese—who travel between north and south like Ells did between Fort McMurray and Ottawa—as a subtle metaphor for Ells. The goose metaphor indigenizes Ells while also offering a distanced visualization of the tar sands that separates him from responsibility for the harms done by the industry he was so proud to have founded.

Perhaps the most obvious example of Ells's affinity with geese is "My Symphony," an illustrated ballad in rhyming pentameter and trimeter first published in the *Canadian Geographical Journal* in 1939 and included in the 1956 edition of *Northland Trails* (see Figure 3). In it, the Athabasca region awakens with the arrival of the geese in spring,



My Symphony.

Clear cut against pale tinted saffron dawn,
Dim against star strewn highways of the sky,
Stark against golden radiance of the sun,
North bound the gray geese fly;
Unerring, unafraid, on tireless wing,
To friendly safety of their northern home,
Stout-hearted heralds of the verdant Spring,—
They come! they come! they come!

High over teeming, hostile haunts of men,
Low over friendly solemn solitudes,
Above the trackless moor and reeking fen
Where the long silence broods;—
O'er rolling woodlands where deep shadows lie,
Above the foaming flood and nameless lake,
With strident clamour of triumphant cry
They call, 'Awake, Awake!'

* * *

There's muted music in the shadowy vale . . .
On lonely hill . . . along the wind swept shore . . .
As myriad voices tell their age-old tale,—
And life awakes once more;
But over northern wilds the clangor clear
Falls from the skies in wild free harmony,
In call of gray-winged, marshalled hosts I hear
My northland symphony!

47

Figure 3: "My Symphony" and illustration by S.C. Ells. Northland Trails, 1956 edition.

an annual event that often coincided with Ells's own arrival from Ottawa. The poem is preceded by a full-page drawing of a northern sunrise scene with Canada geese in flight in both foreground and background, a landscape with a station at its base for the viewer to stand and watch the geese fly over. Or, the viewer might raise their arms, imagining conducting the symphony or taking flight themself. A second image above the poem shows two geese lifting off from a body of water. The lines of the poem also seem to take flight, especially in the repetitive, emphatic, italicized lines that close each stanza and align the poet's ode or song with the honking of the geese. This visual-literary text positions the speaker, and Ells himself, as both a natural resident of the North who prefers the calls of geese over the symphonies of the city and a modernizing hero who brings change to the region.

Despite the attention to detail and realism in Ells's drawings of geese, the words of the poem reveal an inattention to the geese that suggest that "My Symphony" is more about Ells than the waterfowl. The descriptive language of the poem is focused on telling rather than showing, highlighting the contrast and visibility of the geese but, aside from the unimaginative description of Canada geese as "gray," not actually describing their appearances. Geese arriving from the south are described using adjectives that highlight characteristics Ells admired and emulated: *clear cut*, *stark*, *unerring*, *unafraid*, *tireless*, and *stout-hearted.* In contrast, the territory that the geese awaken in the second stanza is represented as *terra nullius*, as "trackless," silent, and "nameless," into which the speaker seems to hear the geese call "*Awake, Awake!*" The geese, who arrive as "gray-winged, marshalled hosts," calling out with "strident clamour of triumphant cry," recall not only the World War I veteran's own military-style discipline and work ethic but also colonial occupation, so that the sounds the speaker hears in the third stanza as "wild free harmony" also serve as the war cry of an occupying force (47). The third stanza contrasts the "muted music" of other northern animals and beings against the stridency and noise of the geese, seemingly justifying Ells's own aggressive behaviour and colonial motivations (as expressed elsewhere in

his celebrations of men who "push the frontier back" and "who won't take 'No'!" [*Northland* 43; 32]).

Geese are treated as literary devices in the poem, emptied of goose-being and imbued with human imagery and motivations. As a migrant whose indigeneity and belonging in the Athabasca region are never questioned, and as a loud and brash being whose arrival and departure signify seasonal change, the goose serves as a convenient metaphor for Ells to assert his belonging at the same time as his role as an agent of change. In this sense, Ells represents himself as one of the geese, flying and honking along with the natural rhythms of the wilderness while also asserting the right to modernize and change the region. The arrival of the geese also serves as pathetic fallacy, suggesting that all the beauty and the noise are a celebration of Ells and his arrival, so that the honk-like calls at the end of the first stanza—*"They come! they come! they come!"*—amount to the land itself exclaiming *you're here!* to celebrate the arrival of the mining engineer. Calling the sounds of geese a symphony is anthropomorphism and an act of composition akin to the human-centred framing of the visual images. Like Ells's memoir titled *Recollections of the Development of the Athabasca Oil Sands*, "My Symphony" situates individual geese within a bigger picture and a grander narrative, while also highlighting one exceptional human-goose as the composer or conductor of it all. It suggests that everything that happens as part of the symphony (or the long trajectory of the industry) was known and planned from the beginning by the conductor (or the "father of the tar sands").

"My Symphony" constitutes a founding visualization and "literary land claim" for the tar-sands industry (Fee). The framing of the visual imagery and the poem claim the symphony as being *by*, *for*, and *about* Ells more than the geese. Ells uses this sense of belonging and entitlement to make the symphony, the geese, and the land *mine*, ignoring the prior claims of Indigenous peoples and instead claiming the land for himself and the Canadian state as an extractive zone—that is, *as a mine*. Using a strategy of verticality that differs from but is related to the one that Davidson and Gismondi observe in his geological reports, Ells adopts the perspective of a goose's-eye view, or what Donna Haraway has famously called a "god-trick of

seeing everything from nowhere," a pretended objectivity that denies "the particularity and embodiment of all vision" (189). This strategy is a form of subterfuge that allows Ells to portray himself as a hero and founding father while avoiding engaging in good land relations with the Indigenous peoples, non-Indigenous settlers, trappers, and traders, and other sentient beings (including waterfowl) who already called the Athabasca region home when he arrived in 1913.[7] It also allows Ells to avoid taking responsibility for the harms that would be done by the tar-sands industry and the further colonization of the region.

Another example of Ells's irresponsible use of a goose's-eye view is his illustration for a World War II-era article he authored for the *Canadian Geographical Journal*, titled "Research Touches the North: Commercial Potentialities of Alberta's Bituminous Sands—to Meet Allied Oil Needs for Times of Peace and War" (see Figure 4). The viewer of this image might be a goose flying low over a futuristic imagination of a large-scale tar-sands plant located on the same site along the Horse River that is seen in the background of Figure 2. Nowhere in Ells's article is this image signalled as an imaginary future for the tar sands; the lack of a caption for only this illustration makes it seem either that such a plant already existed in 1942 or that its future existence was inevitable—yet this is a dream image, an idealized future and an empty infrastructural promise. It adopts what literary scholar Jennifer Wenzel calls a resource aesthetic of improvement, one that would ultimately be replaced with a resource aesthetic that treats everything that had been improved and preserved as "overburden after all" (n.p.) Although Ells's vision and visualizations for a tar-sands industry to come did influence and shape its eventual development, this image—with its clean lines, efficient delivery systems, and integration into the surrounding ecosystem, as well as its now-preposterous assumption that crude oil could be extracted from bituminous sand in a process so clean that its only by-product would be "waste sand" (and maybe a few wisps of smoke)—reveals Ells's incomprehension of the scale, waste, and disregard for nature of a profit-driven tar-sands industry to come.

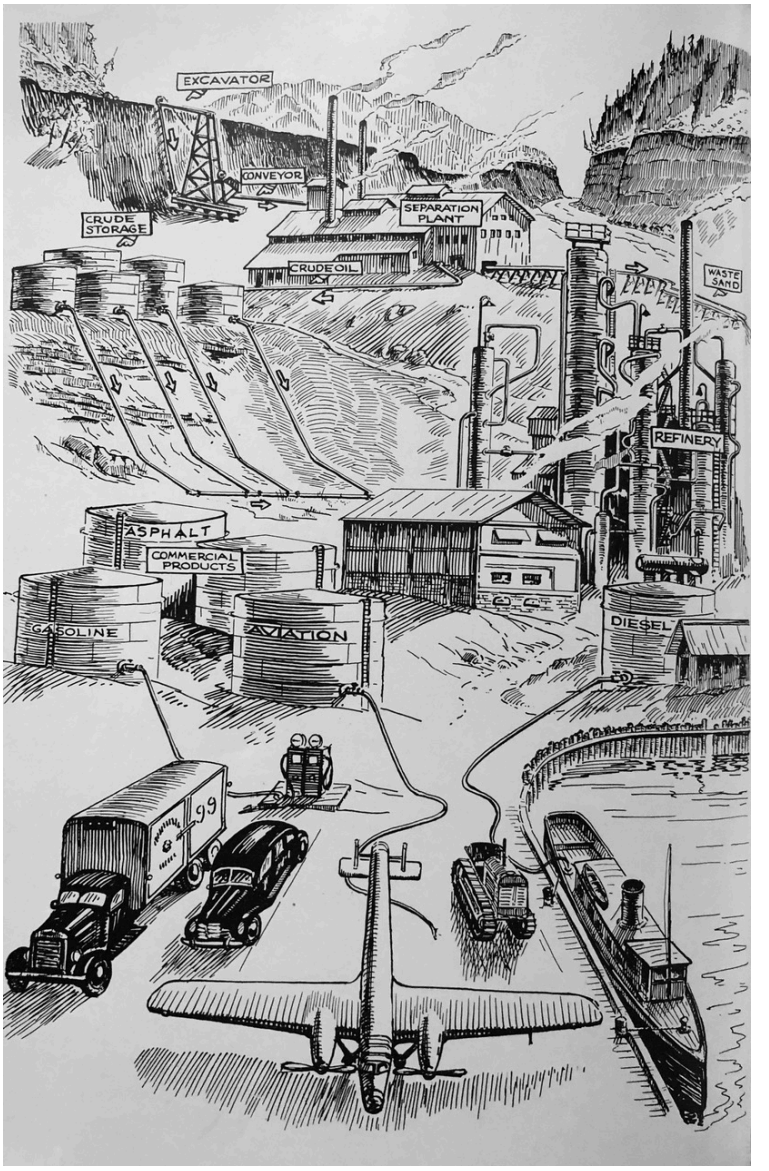


Fig. 4: S.C. Ells's drawing of a future Abasand plant in "Research Touches the North."

When called up alongside the all-too-familiar imagery of tailings ponds and open-pit tar-sands mines in the Athabasca region today, this image demonstrates Ruiz's argument that settler-colonial resource frontiers are made through processes of infrastructural mediation as "slow disturbance." Although each link in the chain of such a disturbance may make only incremental changes, the result, under late racial-industrial capitalism, is the condition of what cultural scholar Michael Truscello calls "infrastructural brutalism," through which "the 'critical' infrastructure that sustains life in industrialized societies also generates necropolitical assemblages, death-dealing dispossession, and structural oppressions" (6-7). Despite Ells's claims to have started or foreseen the trajectory of the "development of the Athabasca oil sands," it is the voracious and indiscriminate appetite of capital, and not the visions of a handful of innovative "fathers" that drives the trajectory of the oil sands industry. The disparity between Ells's vision of a future tar-sands industry and the actual conditions in the region today reveals some of the problems inherent in the hero-ification of founding fathers. A back-loop perspective on the tar sands suggests not only that the visionaries and founders of the industry should be held responsible for their actions instead of being celebrated but also that vilifying them as if they foresaw the destruction that would be wrought in their names does little to resist and break ongoing practices of colonization, extraction, and harm.

"DUCKS"

In the early 20th century and the Anthropocene front loop, Ells created images of waterfowl in the tar sands that emphasized flight and his own presumed-to-be-glorious legacy. Since 1600 ducks became mired and drowned in a tailings pond at Syncrude's Aurora mine near Fort McMurray on April 28, 2008, waterfowl have played a significant role in 21st-century public opinion and debate over the tar sands. In his book *The Patch*, journalist Chris Turner argues that the Syncrude ducks represent a collision between High-Modern industrial utopianism and Anthropocene dystopia. He critiques the metonymy of a media response that might be described as

a back-loop inversion of the hyperbolic imagery and symbolism of Ells's symphony: "[t]he birds and the tailings pond became a proxy for a wider polluted world in conflict, and in short order the whole industry became the embodiment of climate change itself, the poster child for the whole sinful age of fossil fuels, the face of an invisible global catastrophe" (xxiii). Today, no one wants to be the father of the tar sands. With the symphony of the front loop crash-landing in the muck and mire of the back loop, the oil lobby wants responsibility to run like water off a duck's back (as it does all too often in relation to contamination and accidents affecting nearby Indigenous communities), but, in the case of the ducks, it sticks like tailings-pond sludge.[8] Observing a related phenomenon in the United States following the BP oil spill, literary scholar Ruth Salvaggio considers an iconic oiled Pelican as a "Pelican Angel," a version of Walter Benjamin's Angel of History, watching the wreckage of petromodern progress piling up before its eyes (384). Through the "traditional linkage of birds and human imagination" (Salvaggio 393), reading waterfowl in the tar sands exposes an unfolding catastrophe that is also a crisis of imagination; through the impulse to save an oiled bird, the image sticks. It compels us to respond.

Kate Beaton's "Ducks" responds to the Syncrude ducks incident in the form of an autobiographical, scrolling, sketch-style webcomic about living and working on a tar-sands mining site. Made in 2014, the comic is based on the two years Beaton spent in Fort McMurray and is set in spring 2008.[9] Beaton's long-awaited book-length graphic memoir on the same theme, *Ducks: Two Years in the Oil Sands*, is forthcoming with Drawn & Quarterly in 2022. The unnamed protagonist of "Ducks" is a young, white woman from Cape Breton who works in an office in the work camp where she also lives. She is veggie deprived, homesick, lonely, worried about the air quality, rashy from the water, and showing signs of having been harassed by the men in the camp.[10] Yet, she also feels solidarity and a sense of community with the other workers, who are all living and working in the fraught place referred to as "the oil sands" (Part Five)—a place where bitumen, workers, residents, and stolen land are rolled into one resource to be exploited. Indigenous people are either absent from or

unmarked in the comic, although their proximity and vulnerability are signalled through references to workers catching and releasing deformed and inedible fish, through the ducks, and perhaps through a scene where the protagonist tries to help a sex worker someone snuck into the work camp who is having a mental health crisis in the bathroom.[11] The protagonist visualizes and inhabits the Athabasca region as an extractive zone; she seems only vaguely to understand it as an Indigenous homeland. In contrast to Ells's polished images and his affinity for aerial perspectives, Beaton's comic is messy and grounded. The images are scaled to the perspective of a worker in a camp, based on Beaton's experience and on what a worker can see from inside a mine site. Work camp life lends itself neither to grand narratives nor to aestheticized or politicized landscapes; instead, the framed and unframed panels that scroll one at a time form a litany of images of workers that push back at their representation as perpetrators of violence and ecocide by showing how they are also exploited and harmed.

Beaton's comic begins with the protagonist hearing the news about the Syncrude ducks from a coworker, then looking up a news story on her computer. On the way to a safety meeting, she sees ducks flying overhead, then puts on her hardhat to block them from view, choosing not to face these bodies freshly weighted with significance as symbols of human violence, ecocide, and broken relationships with the land (see Figure 5).

As the death count climbs from 300 to 500 and eventually over 1000 ducks in the course of the five-part comic, Beaton accumulates comparisons between ducks and oil workers (including sex workers) as expendable and exploited in the tar sands. At the safety meeting, other workers joke and giggle through the announcements both about the new air cannons and scarecrows the company is installing to protect waterfowl and about the tragic death of Gerald Snopes, a crane operator who had a heart attack and threw himself out of the crane to avoid falling on the controls and injuring others. One worker, Chris, scolds the others, saying, "As far as I'm concerned the man's a hero," contrasting Gerald's selfless behaviour with the stubborn in-



Figure 5: Three panels from Part One of “Ducks” by Kate Beaton.

dividualism of famous tar-sands heroes such as Clark and Ells (Part One). The workers, meanwhile, survive and inflict the indignities, toxicities, and dangers of work-camp life while installing cannons and building scarecrows, sacrificial figures who are dressed in the same clothing as the workers themselves. For example, in Figure 6, George dresses up a scarecrow and suggests, inappropriately, that the protagonist might be attracted to it; the scarecrow in the second panel stoops forward like the protagonist and stands in for her.

When Chris criticizes the half-hearted efforts of the company to protect ducks, saying "somebody high up thinks ducks are pretty fucking stupid" (Part One), he implicitly critiques similar half-measures to protect workers, while also commenting on the dangers and pitfalls of being "high up"—referring both to the corporate hierarchy and the too-distant perspectives of those outside the work camp who have so much to say about it. When Greenpeace activists block a Syncrude tailings pipe, a worker calls out a god trick when he asks, "Who puts their life on the line to unclog that pipe?" and continues, "I tell you it sure as fuck isn't the President of Shell" (Part Three).

"Ducks" ends with an epilogue in which the protagonist is having drinks with a friend, somewhere far from Fort McMurray. When asked by her martini-drinking companion if she feels "bad about working in a place like that," the protagonist stammers and pauses for one wordless frame before responding, "I feel a lot of things." Her pause creates a reflexive moment to consider all there is to feel bad about in the tar sands, and how far from simple it is to assign guilt or blame to the people who work there. The final, borderless panel depicts a sludge-covered duck drawn from the news coverage of the 2008 incident (see Figure 7), linking all of the incidents of human endangerment, violence, abuse, and kindness in the preceding frames with the duck, and suggesting an environmental politics that is in solidarity with workers and that refuses god- and goose-tricks.



Figure 6: Two panels from Part Four of "Ducks" by Kate Beaton.



Figure 7: Final, frameless panel from "Ducks" by Kate Beaton.

CONCLUSION

In the front loop of the tar sands, Ells spun out visions of industrialization as improvement on land that he perceived, wrongly, as pristine and practically empty. Operating under the illusion that modernity and wilderness could blend harmoniously in the Athabasca region, he laid the groundwork for an extractive industry that would treat the land, its inhabitants, and workers alike as overburden. Despite Ells's use of geese and a goose's-eye view to legitimize his presence and claims on the land, waterfowl in the tar sands have always exceeded and resisted the limits of representation, and they have taken on new meaning in the back loop. As a disillusioned material and cultural worker in the Canadian petro-state, Beaton uses images of ducks to call out the founding fathers and higher-ups of the tar-sands industry for setting us and keeping us on a roller coaster of violence and abjection. This journal-article-as-imaginary-comic picks up where Beaton left off, giving Ells the Founding Fathers treatment. To catch up with Ells at the site of a 21st-century tailings pond is to reframe "My Symphony" as the receding view of the Syn-

crude duck as tar-sands Angel of History, rewriting Ells's legacy as a brutal accumulation of wreckage, damage, and harm. With industry and political rhetoric still amounting to puffery and mansplaining in the face of the urgent projects of decarbonization and decolonization, "Founding Fathers in a Tailings Pond" suggests it is time, to borrow another phrase from Beaton, to *Step Aside, Pops*. In the face of oiled birds, unemployed workers, threatened Indigenous peoples and territories, brutal infrastructure, and a climate emergency, please take this article as a call for a just energy transition such as the Green New Deal, one that leaves no one behind and that follows the lead of Indigenous land and water protectors, workers calling for green jobs, and young climate activists.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author wishes to thank Siobhan Angus, Kevin Coleman, and the two anonymous peer reviewers for their insightful feedback and advice; and to gratefully acknowledge the support of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council and the University of Manitoba Institute for the Humanities.

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IMAGE NOTES

Figure 1: "Infinity" from the series Founding Fathers (Stuck in an Amusement Park) by Kate Beaton. *Hark! A Vagrant*, 2006-2018, www.harkavagrant.com/index.php?id=375.

Figure 2: *Sydney Ells at tar sand plant*, Waterways, Alberta, 1931. Photo by H.S. SpenceCanada. Dept. of Mines and Technical Surveys, Library and Archives Canada, PA-014454. Public Domain.

Figure 3: "My Symphony" by S.C. Ells. *Northland Trails*. 1938. New and Enlarged Edition. Burns & MacEachern, 1956. Public Domain.

Figure 4: Illustration for "Research Touches the North" by S.C. Ells. *Canadian Geographical Journal*, vol. 24, no. 6, 1942, p. 256.

Figure 5: Three panels from Part One of "Ducks" by Kate Beaton. *Hark! A Vagrant*, 7 Apr. 2014, http://www.harkavagrant.com/images/ducks1.png.

Figure 6: Two panels from Part Four of "Ducks" by Kate Beaton. *Hark! A Vagrant*, 7 Apr. 2014, http://www.harkavagrant.com/images/ducks4.png.

Figure 7: Final, frameless panel from "Ducks" by Kate Beaton. *Hark! A Vagrant*, 7 Apr. 2014, http://www.harkavagrant.com/images/ducks5.png.

NOTES

1. I use this phrasing to signal the affinity of this looping method with poet Stephen Collis's similar method in the poem "Reading Wordsworth in the Tar Sands," written (referencing poet William Wordsworth) after Collis participated in a Tar Sand Healing Walk around a tailings pond near Fort McMurray. Collis writes,

> Wordsworth—I feel you too!
> Though there is no mechanism

> To nuance this conversation
> Across the years—so I brought
> Your ruined cottages your
> Evening walks and Grasmere
> Homing here to the Tar Sands[.] (62)

For other examples of something like the Founding Fathers treatment in poetry about the tar sands, see David Martin's *Tar Swan* and Lindsay Bird's "The Peter Pond Mall."

2. See, for instance, hooks; Lorde; Ruddick.

3. For example, poetry such as Lindsay Bird's *Boom Time*, David Martin's *Tar Swan*, Garth Martens's *Prologue for the Age of Consequence*, Lesley Battler's *Endangered Hydrocarbons*, and Kelly Shepherd's *Shift* and *Insomnia Bird*, fiction such as Rudy Wiebe's "The Angel of the Tar Sands," Richard van Camp's *Godless but Loyal to Heaven*, and Warren Cariou's "An Athabasca Story"; comics and graphic novels including Beaton's "Night Shift," Nicole Burton, Hugh Goldring, and Patrick McCurdy's *The Beast*, Joe Sacco's "Bitumen or Bust," and Cariou and Nicholas Burns's "An Athabasca Story"; other visual texts like Cariou's petrography, Lucas Seaward's bitumen paintings, Edward Burtynsky's *Oil*, Louis Helbig's *Beautiful Destruction*, and Elizabeth LaPensée's *Thunderbird Strike*; and polemical nonfiction including Ezra Levant's *Ethical Oil*, Andrew Nikiforuk's *The Energy of Slaves*, Naomi Klein's *This Changes Everything*, and Chris Turner's *The Patch*.

4. The Wood Buffalo Regional Library (the public library in Fort McMurray) has a copy of Ells's *Recollections of the Development of the Athabasca Oil Sands* but no copy of *Northland Trails*. The library at Keyano College, the community college in Fort McMurray, does not hold either book. I visited the Oil Sands Discovery Centre in Fort McMurray in 2017 and saw no reference to *Northland Trails*; I have since shared a copy of the book with employees at the museum. I did, however, find several copies of *Northland Trails* in the University of Manitoba libraries, including a copy once owned by Margaret Laurence.

5. On the framing of northern Alberta as homeland vs. hinterland, see Westman, Joly, and Gross.

6. An unauthorized version of Ells's memoir, *Recollections of the Development of the Athabasca Oil Sands*, was published by the Department

of Mines in 1962; it was reissued by Syncrude sometime in the 1970s. Ells's many notes and revisions to the published version of the memoir are available in the Sidney Clarke Ells fonds at Library and Archives Canada.

7. On the complex land and treaty relations of the Athabasca region prior to 1913, see McCormack. My thinking on extraction and pollution as land relations is indebted to Max Liboiron's *Pollution is Colonialism*.

8. Tailings ponds are used to contain toxic waste from the extraction and separation of bitumen from the Athabasca tar sands. Although the industry is required to remediate land affected by extraction, the problem of how to fully remediate tailings ponds has gone unresolved for the lifespan of the industry (that is, since the Great Canadian Oil Sands plant opened in 1967); despite this (and with existing tailings ponds big enough to be visible from space), oil-sands projects predicated on unproven remediation strategies continue to be approved. For a literature review of scientific articles about the remediation of fine tailings, see Saborimanesh.

9. I read this comic with my students in Introduction to English: Reading Culture at the University of Winnipeg in 2020 and 2021; I am indebted to my students, who shared their insightful readings and influenced my own reading.

10. Another comic by Beaton, "Night Shift," about working the night shift in the tool crib in 2006, features the same protagonist and depicts overt sexual harassment. (In "Night Shift," the protagonist is compared to a fox who has been hanging around the mine site.)

11. The final report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls includes findings about resource extraction projects, including the following: "Industries that create 'boom town' and 'man camp' environments are implicated in increased rates of drug- and alcohol-related offences, sexual offences, domestic violence, and gang violence, as well as sex industry activities in the host communities. These occurrences disproportionately impact Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA people" (593).

EXCAVATING CBC'S DOCUDRAMA THE TAR SANDS

PATRICK MCCURDY

This article examines the political controversy around the banned 1977 CBC docudrama The Tar Sands, which portrays the personal and political struggle of Alberta Premier Peter Lougheed to secure the Syncrude agreement to develop Alberta's bitumen sands. Immediately following the docudrama's broadcast, Lougheed launched a lawsuit which ultimately resulted in the show's expulsion from CBC archives. While the CBC docudrama sought to dramatize and elevate political critiques of the tar sands, Lougheed's litigious reaction quickly buried them, obfuscating the real possibility that The Tar Sands—while a work of fiction—portrays the genesis of Alberta's corporate capture by foreign oil.

Cet article examine la controverse politique entourant le docudrame banni de 1977 produit par la CBC: The Tar Sands. Le docudrame dépeint la lutte personnelle et politique du premier ministre de l'Alberta, Peter Lougheed, pour obtenir l'accord de Syncrude pour l'exploitation des sables bitumineux de l'Alberta. Immédiatement après la diffusion du docudrame, Lougheed a intenté un procès contre la CBC, qui a abouti à le retrait de l'émission des archives de la CBC. Alors que le docudrame de la CBC cherchait à dramatiser et à soulever des critiques politiques à propos des sables bitumineux, la réaction litigieuse de Lougheed les a rapidement enterrées, occultant toute possibilité de permettre à _The Tar Sands_—bien qu'étant une œuvre de fiction—à dépeindre la genèse de la capture de l'Alberta par des sociétés pétrolières étrangères.

On September 12, 1977, after seven months of internal debate and multiple scheduling delays, CBC aired its 58-minute docudrama *The Tar Sands* to an eagerly awaiting nationwide audience of 1.1 million Canadians. Inspired by the academic book *The Tar Sands* (1976) by University of Alberta political scientist Larry Pratt, CBC's loose adaptation presented a dramatized re-enact-

ment of the political struggles surrounding Alberta's then Premier, Peter Lougheed, in negotiating and securing the Syncrude Canada Ltd. agreement to develop Alberta's Athabasca bitumen sands. The docudrama, which combined actors playing real-life figures with composite characters, was part of CBC's *For the Record* series, a collection of what CBC labelled "journalistic dramas" with an objective of "making complex news stories and political issues accessible to a mass audience" (Martin 60). *For The Record* promotional material described *The Tar Sands* as:

> "Explosive, political drama, zeroing in on powerbroke-ing [sic] by the international petroleum industry. The dramatic story of negotiations and confrontations between major oil industries and the governments of Canada, Alberta and Ontario, that climax with the Canadian taxpayer putting up nearly two billion dollars to ensure development of the Athabasca Tar Sands. Provocative, contemporary drama!"

Explosive and provocative it was. Less than twenty-four hours after the show aired an indignant Peter Lougheed held court in his Edmonton legislature office to a throng of eagerly awaiting journalists where he disclosed his intention to sue the CBC for defamation. The Premier's pronouncement made national news. It also marked the start of a nearly five-year legal battle. Lougheed originally launched a $2.75 million lawsuit (equivalent to $11.6 million in 2021), which ended in May 1982 in an out-of-court settlement, with CBC paying the Premier $50,000 in damages and $32,500 in costs (respectively $128,000 and $83,400 in 2021). CBC also agreed to televise a nationwide apology and never again "publish" *The Tar Sands* docudrama.

The settlement helped to bury the docudrama deep in public memory, as it was removed from CBC's internal archive and made unavailable to staff, and remains so to this day.[1] Yet the show's 1977 broadcast and Lougheed's ensuing lawsuit and public controversy stands as a critical, though mostly forgotten, moment in the mediated history of Canada's bitumen sands.[2] Indeed, it is only recently that scholars such as Longley (2021) have begun critiquing Lougheed's legacy and—much like Pratt (1976)—questioning the corner Lougheed and



Figure 1: Page from For the Record promotional pamphlet produced by CBC, 1977.

his government backed themselves into. Excavating *The Tar Sands* affords a unique opportunity to further expose fossil fuel's long-standing dominant position in the Canadian political and social imagination. This article, as part of a larger research project, is an initial attempt to extract *The Tar Sands* and its surrounding controversy from the tarry memory hole into which it was cast. It argues that while

CBC's docudrama sought to dramatize and elevate Pratt's (1976) political critiques, Lougheed's litigious reaction quickly buried them, obfuscating the real possibility that *The Tar Sands*—while a work of fiction—portrays the genesis of Alberta's corporate capture by foreign oil interests.[3]

SEEING THE TAR SANDS: LOOKING BACK, LOOKING FORWARD

Scholars Debra Davidson and Mike Gismondi have traced the evolution of the tar sands' visual conventions, which tell a story of taming rugged frontiers, conquest, as well as scientific and technological innovation (Davison and Gismondi 2011; Gismondi and Davidson 2012). The authors conclude their *Imaginations* article with an analysis of the Great Canadian Oil Sands Company (GCOS, now Suncor) and the "legitimacy work" of images showcasing the immense machinery—from draglines to bucketwheels—involved in mining bitumen. Such images, they argue, "became selling features to the public, symbolizing the enormity of challenges overcome" (Gismondi and Davidson 2012). Author Chris Turner, in his well-researched history of Alberta's oil patch, identifies the start of what he calls the "High Modern" era as GCOS's 1967 bitumen plant opening ceremony (Turner 24). What Turner labels the beginning of oil's "High Modern" period also represents the thickening of petroculture marked by a steady rise in global oil consumption, growing Western efforts to develop domestic synthetic plays, and the further material and cultural enmeshing of oil in everyday life (Wilson, Carlson, and Szeman 2017). And while Stephanie LeMenager (2014) rightly traces back the genesis of oil-driven consumer culture decades earlier, the late 1960s and early 1970s were a period of significant social, economic, and political change for Alberta and its tar sands (Chastko 2004; Elton and Goddard 1979).

Ultimately, what Gismondi and Davidson map is not just the tar sands' construction, but the construction of its myth; a myth created, in part, from images which remain in public circulation—from advertisements and books to museum exhibitions and education centres—which represent and reconstruct the tar sands' past. Cultural

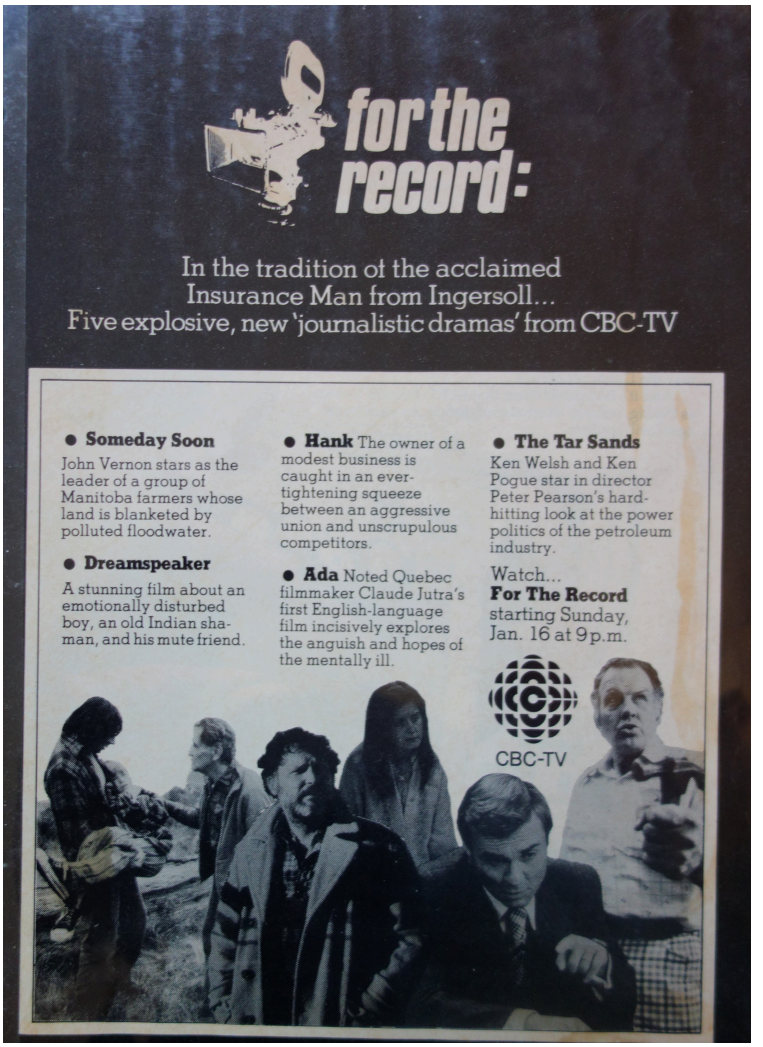


Figure 2: For the Record Advertisement, 1977

myths, Roland Barthes reminds us, make history seem natural, yet their creation "is constituted by the loss of the historical quality of things: in it, things lose the memory that they once were made of"

(1972, 142). Myths are the selective representations of history sedimented into unquestioned fact. Myths are anchored in ideology and rest upon silences and absences. As Michel-Rolph Trouillot in *Silencing the Past* suggests, silences occur at "the moment of fact creation (the making of *archives*); the moment of fact retrieval (the making of *narrative*); the moment of retrospective significance (the making of *history* in the final instance)" (1995, 26). The task at present is to bring back into focus one such absence from the hegemonic myth of Alberta's bitumen sands: CBC's docudrama *The Tar Sands*. Acknowledging this "silence"—and the political implications behind it—affords an opportunity to unsettle the sediment of history by revisiting the docudrama and its accompanying controversy and questioning the political forces and driving ideology underwriting its erasure. As such, while scholarship on Canadian oil films traditionally focuses on textual analysis, this article focuses on the show's broadcast as an inflection point in the myth of the tar sands.

TRACES OF THE TAR SANDS

History sediments in books, and while there is mention of *The Tar Sands*, references are sporadic, disjointed, and often made in passing. For example, the docudrama lands just two sentences in Peter Foster's 1980 *The Blue-Eyed Sheiks* noting, "The CBC subsequently produced a 'docudrama' based on the Syncrude crisis. Lougheed subsequently sued the CBC for a total of $2.75 million" (99). Meanwhile, Syncrude's self-published book *Syncrude Story: In our own words* briefly acknowledges the program (but not the broadcaster) noting: "While [Syncrude President] Frank Spragins was amused to find his name misspelled and pronounced incorrectly in the television show, then Premier Peter Lougheed did not find his portrayal a laughing matter. He launched a $2.75 million lawsuit against the offending station for defamation of character" (1990, 51). Paul Eichhorn, in an essay on the history of CBC's *For The Record* series, gives a succinct nod to *The Tar Sands* and writes that Welsh's portrayal was "widely known to be an unflattering portrait of Peter Lougheed" (1998, 40). More recently Peter McKenzie-Brown notes that while Larry Pratt's book was "certainly a reasonable study.

However, the docudrama was not. It went beyond the facts to portray the personalities involved—including Frank Spragins and Peter Lougheed—as foul-mouthed, cigar-chomping and conniving" (2017, 145). While these characterizations certainly align with how Lougheed viewed the docudrama, they clash with other interpretations in the historical record.

Perhaps the most detailed documentation of *The Tar Sands* comes from film scholar Seth Feldman, whose publications (1978, 1986, 1987) and CBC *Ideas* episode (Feldman 1982) skillfully explore the history, tensions, and politics of the docudrama genre. Feldman viewed Lougheed's portrayal by actor Kenneth Welsh as "entirely sympathetic" (1978, 73), and some years later reflected, "The Tar Sands was, if not tame, a fairly straightforward production […] There was nothing flamboyant about Kenneth Welsh's performance […] Pearson's style was similarly professional and well to the right of glitz" (Feldman 1987, 16). Beyond Feldman, most academic references to *The Tar Sands* are in passing. It has been briefly mentioned in studies of CBC programming and policies (Miller 1987; MacDonald 2019). Epp (1984), in his analysis of Lougheed's media strategy, described *The Tar Sands* as a docudrama "based loosely on a book by Larry Pratt—which portrayed Lougheed as a foul-mouthed dupe of the oil companies during the Syncrude negotiations" (53). David Hogarth's (2002) study of documentary television in Canada affords *The Tar Sands* a mid-sentence reference in parentheses. The show has also received some brief attention from scholars studying the relationship between Alberta and its energy industry such as Geo Takach (2017) who succinctly pinpoints *The Tar Sands* as a seminal moment in the mediated history of Alberta's bitumen sands. Meanwhile, Debra Davidson and Mike Gismondi (2011) dedicate a paragraph to the show and include an acknowledgment of the program's erasure from CBC archives. These published and conflicting accounts, together with other fragments such as news clippings and government and institutional archival records, construct *The Tar Sands'* current legacy; a legacy—to use a phrase from Michel-Rolph Trouillot—built on a "silence" (Trouillot 1995).

MYTH AND REDISCOVERY OF *THE TAR SANDS*

In 1977, when CBC aired *The Tar Sands,* Imperial Oil—a Canadian oil company controlled by Exxon and portrayed in *The Tar Sands*—was intensifying its oil sands play in Cold Lake, Alberta. Meanwhile, Exxon's Dr. James Black, Scientific Advisor in the Products Research Division of Exxon Research & Engineering, had already told company management that summer "that the most likely manner in which mankind is influencing the global climate is through carbon dioxide release from the burning of fossil fuels" (Hall 2015). Yet broad public awareness as to the link between burning fossil fuels and climate change would not happen for more than a decade. The now universal scientific consensus of anthropogenic climate change and its explicit link with burning fossil fuels has an undeniable impact upon our relationship with media texts about petroleum and its attendant socio-political and economic structures. In the case of *The Tar Sands*, its *rediscovery* in the context of this article and my wider research project allows us to consider how the docudrama—and the energetic political reaction which lead to its quashing—make visible the power and grip of "petro-hegemony" in Alberta both in the 1970s and today. Drawing from Theo Lequesne (2019), petro-hegemony is the public internalisation of a Gramscian common sense and philosophy rooted in three relations of power—consent, coercion, and compliance—which, together, serve to further fossil fuel companies' material and discursive objectives. Of particular interest for the case at hand is Alberta's political and cultural climate whereby critics who dare question the power and reach of foreign-owned oil companies are silenced, marginalized, and/or vilified. Also relevant is the province's economic reliance upon the foreign-dominated fossil fuel industry which forces compliance through a structured dependency and addiction thus serving to maintain hegemony.

Understanding the reaction to *The Tar Sands* requires us to first consider Alberta's dominant ideology and the myth surrounding Lougheed. R. W. Wright (1984) suggests that Alberta has come to operate primarily under a "hybrid" corporatist ideology of "managerial capitalism," a perspective which is "entrenched and virtually unop-



Figure 3: Peter Lougheed (Kenneth Welsh) and Willard Alexander (Ken Pogue) in The Tar Sands, 1977.

posed" in the province (105). Related, and almost three decades later, Davidson and Gismondi (2011) suggest:

> "In many ways, it was ideology, not economics, which ensured the tar sands' eventual development. A westernized world-view of frontier individualism, a utilitarian view of ecosystems, and confidence in continued progress supported decades of investment in research and marketing by the provincial state, public investments that were crucial to eventually attracting the interest of private capital." (170)

Thus, it was Conservative ideology—under Lougheed's Premiership—which ensured the tar sands were developed and never nationalized (Doern and Toner 35; Pratt 1976). Lougheed's Conservatism was grounded on a commitment to extract the maximum benefit out of the provinces' natural resources for its people by private industry. Steward summarises Lougheed's approach as follows:

> "Lougheed saw government as a counterweight to the economic power and influence of the petroleum industry. He believed that since government managed natural resources on behalf of Albertans it had a responsibility to obtain as much revenue and other benefits as possible from those resources." (1)

Kevin Taft (2017), in his stinging critique of oil's "deep state" presence in Alberta, eulogises Lougheed as a Premier who fiercely fought for Alberta's interests and would bend the knee to no one. This portrayal is particularly noteworthy as Taft's book advances a "deep state" thesis that Alberta government has since been captured by the oil industry and an assemblage of interested political and bureaucratic boosters. However, for Taft, Lougheed's government was unmolested by corporate or political pressures which swayed subsequent Premiers. Taft's divine framing of Lougheed is consistent with his mythic position in Alberta lore as "King Peter" (Lewis 27) of Camelot West. It is then perhaps understandable why *The Tar Sands*—both Pratt's and CBC's version—was viewed within Alberta as an act of *lèse-majesté*.

Lougheed's mythic status rests, at least partly, on the erasure of *The Tar Sands* from public memory. The CBC's docudrama directly challenged the doubly articulated myths of Syncrude's founding and Lougheed's Premiership. To this end, *The Tar Sands* presents a dramatized interpretation of events depicting a proud and determined Premier Lougheed becoming boxed in over the course of the Syncrude negotiations by world events and pressure applied by the foreign-controlled Syncrude consortium. Here, it is perhaps prudent to offer more information on the TV show itself, beginning with the show's two-minute disclaimer, aired at the start and read by journalist and CBC icon Barbara Frum. The disclaimer informs the audience that *The Tar Sands* is, "a work of fiction constructed around certain known events" based on "an imagined recreation of negotiations leading up to an agreement reached on February 3, 1975" (Feldman 1978, 71). "Since most of the agreement was worked out behind

closed doors," Frum tells viewers: "Much of the film's dialogue and many of its scenes and characters are, of necessity, fiction" (ibid).

Frum also briefly discusses the show's four main characters, differentiating between two characters with real-world counterparts and two composite characters. The two real-world characters were the show's lead, Premier Peter Lougheed, expertly portrayed by Canadian actor Kenneth Welsh and, second, Frank Spragins, President of Syncrude Canada (Mavor Moore) who is portrayed as the spokesperson and chief negotiator for Syncrude's interests (Figure 4). *The Tar Sands* also featured two main composite characters, the most prominent of which was Willard Alexander (Ken Pogue). Alexander was a perpetually critical, cigarette-smoking, alcohol-drinking confidant of Premier Lougheed whose function was to represent "the Alberta civil servants who argued against proceeding with the Athabasca tar sands development in the manner finally chosen" (Pearson, 1977). The second main composite character was the sleek and smartly dressed David Bromley, played by George Touliatos (Figure 4). In the disclaimer Frum identifies Bromley as an "oil company representative" who is "a composite of the many oil men involved in the real negotiations," however he is identified in the show itself as being from Imperial Oil (Pearson, 1977). Bromley, with his disdainful and impatient attitude towards public service and relentless focus on profit, perfectly personifies Pratt's (1976) critical view of foreign interest squeezing the Albertan and Canadian government to their advantage.

The "real life" characters in *The Tar Sands* are also caricatures. Both the on-screen Lougheed and Spragins are dramatic representations of the interpretation of certain historical events based on Pratt's book and supplemental research conducted by the show's two main writers, Peter Pearson and Ralph Thomas. As will be discussed in the next section, Premier Lougheed took exception to his portrayal and that of the Syncrude negotiations. However, there were also public misgivings about Frank Spragins' representation. For some in the industry such as John Barr, Head of Syncrude's Public Relations department, and Harold Millican, former Lougheed Chief of Staff and prominent oilman, Spragins was a "gentleman" and Moore's por-



Figure 4: Production still from The Tar Sands featuring director Peter Pearson (crouching in foreground), Mavor Moore (with glasses and his back to the camera) in character as Frank Spragins, President of Syncrude Canada Ltd., and George Touliatos as oil company representative David Bromley.

trayal was unfair. Calgary-based petroleum industry historian Peter McKenzie Brown summed up the on-screen Frank Spragins as a "foul mouthed […] cigar chomping, American oilman" (Spragins 2012, 22). In a 2012 interview conducted by McKenzie Brown for *The Oil Sands Oral History Project*, Nell Spragins described her husband Frank's portrayal as, "unbelievable, you know. Just how they could make it up like that and not even try to come close to what kind of man he was, unbelievable, really" (ibid). Yet compared to Imperial Oil's fictional representative David Bromley, Frank Spragins' screen persona was not unlikeable. Larry Pratt, who was not involved in making CBC's adaptation of his book, said in a September 13, 1977 Canada-wide live radio interview on *CBC Morning Side*: "I didn't think that the portrayal of Mr. Spragins was that unfair. But it is the case that they had to personify—they had to personify the oil industry in one individual and, if it's unfair to Mr. Spragins, that's unfortunate" (CBC Morning Side, 1977).

Frank Spragins appears for the first time in *The Tar Sands* about four minutes into the broadcast when "top executives" from the American-controlled oil companies behind Syncrude Canada Ltd. have been asked to meet with Premier Lougheed (Welsh). The scene takes place in a screening room where Premier Lougheed is about to be shown a Syncrude advertisement intended to help sell the infrastructure project to Canadians. As this scene unfolds the show's narrator—famed NFB director and producer Donald Brittain—provides context for the gathering and introduces the audience to the "American-controlled" oil companies in the room and "Syncrude's President Frank Spragins, a Mississippian by birth and in his words, 'A Canadian by choice'" (Pearson, 1977). Spragins, portrayed by celebrated actor Mavor Moore, delivers his tar sands pitch in an exaggerated raspy rounded southern drawl which serves as a persistent reminder of Spragins' foreign origin and presumed foreign allegiance.

Frank Spragins never officially commented on the CBC broadcast, however Syncrude's head of Public Relations John Barr spoke to the media. Barr defended Lougheed's bargaining skills, called the show "inaccurate," and said *The Tar Sands* "is best treated as a work of imagination, or, better, as a work of fantasy" (Calgary Herald, 1977).

As for why Syncrude did not react to *The Tar Sands* in an official capacity, Barr said Syncrude "decided not to make any comment [...] It would be like trying to refute *Mein Kampf* —you wouldn't know where to start" (ibid). While Syncrude didn't know where to start, Premier Lougheed did: by calling his lawyer.

DEFAMATION AND THE DRAMA OF DOCUDRAMA

As Peter Lougheed publicly expressed his displeasure about *The Tar Sands* during a news conference the morning after its September 12th broadcast, the wheels were already in motion for a defamation lawsuit. Lougheed's lawyers had sent a preemptive telex to CBC on September 11, 1977 warning of possible legal action and then followed up two days later with a hand-delivered registered letter sent to CBC Edmonton requesting "the name and address of the operator of your station" (CBC ATIP A0062824_1-000759). Although the letter was delivered to CBC Edmonton, the Premier's real target was further east: the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's national headquarters in Toronto, Ontario.

The Tar Sands had been delayed multiple times since its first anticipated air date in February 1977 due to CBC management concerns. The Barbara Frum disclaimer was added in what Feldman, post-broadcast, called "a futile attempt to avoid legal repercussions" (1978, 72). Nonetheless, the disclaimer helped the program get to air. But, publicly, the specifics of *The Tar Sands'* path to being broadcast by the CBC were kept a mystery. Indeed, even one of CBC's top brass seemed surprised about the show's airing as reported in *The Calgary Herald:* John Hirsch, head of CBC-TV drama, told reporters and critics who saw a preview of the work Wednesday that God alone knows "who let it go on the air" (Nelson 1977, C3). Publicly, the CBC was confident about *The Tar Sands* with producer Ralph Thomas quoted at the pre-screening as saying "no legal complications are expected" (Zanger 1977, 26). However, Mel Hurtig, staunch Canadian nationalist and publisher of Larry Pratt's *The Tar Sands*, thought differently. When Hurtig was asked how he thought Lougheed and Spragins



Figure 5: Kenneth Welsh as Peter Lougheed in The Tar Sands, 1977.

would react to the show, he replied "I suspect both of them are going to go through the roof" (Waters 1977, A23). Perhaps unsurprisingly, with his political leanings, Hurtig stood behind the show, commenting "It is a very accurate reflection of the process of bargaining that occurred over the Syncrude plant" (Calgary Herald 1977, A1) and went as far to say that the CBC had "performed a remarkable public service and has, in fact, been very courageous. It (the show) was unique, one of a kind. They'll never put on anything as tough" (Toronto Star 1977, A69).

Hurtig, it should be noted, also had a cameo in *The Tar Sands*. The brief scene shows Hurtig re-enacting a 1973 news conference where he revealed a leaked civil service report to the press. The report—which plays a vital role in Pratt's 1976 book—was authored by a collection of top Alberta government senior civil servants and took a critical position towards what it described as the creep of foreign ownership of the province's tar sands (Pratt 1976, 22; also see Longley 2021). Hurtig was supposedly given the confidential report—titled "The Fort McMurray Tar Sands Strategy"—by an unnamed civil

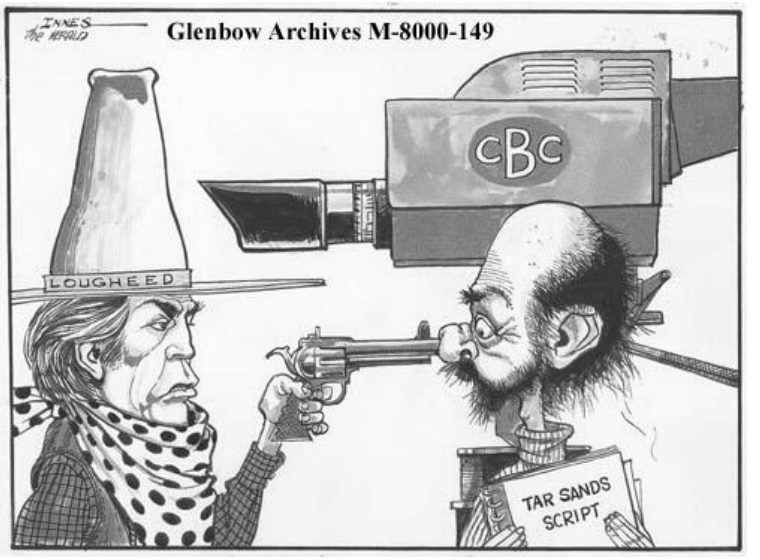


Figure 6: "Them's fightin' words, Mister.'" An editorial cartoon by Tom Innes, published in the Calgary Herald September 16, 1977.

servant who had become frustrated with the Lougheed government for ignoring the report's recommendations (ibid).

Hurtig was correct: Lougheed went through the roof. Visibly angry at a September 13th press conference, Lougheed used a prepared statement to describe *The Tar Sands* as "immoral," "outrageous," and "unfair," commenting:

> "If the CBC is allowed to get away without a fight with this approach of characterisation of real people involved in public events in the guise of a drama to suit the CBC's interpretation of such events then, they no doubt will not hesitate to use this vehicle to escalate their distortions of public affairs and in so doing, to destroy or damage reputations." (Albertan Edmonton Bureau 1977, A33)

Members of Lougheed's cabinet were equally disturbed by *The Tar Sands*. Lougheed's Business Development Minister Bob Dowling said, "It was a bunch of garbage […] The writer has no regard for 5,000 people who have jobs up there (on the Syncrude project)" (Gilchrist 1977, A1). Alberta's Solicitor-General Roy Farran told the *Edmonton Journal* the program was "a complete distortion of fact," and went on to make flippant comparisons with Nazi propaganda commenting, "I think it was similar to Dr. Goebbels at his worst" (Hume 1977, P1). Minister of the Environment Dave Russel was more concise, simply calling it "a load of crap" (ITV News 1977). While there was Conservative consensus about the program, NDP leader Grant Notley believed Lougheed overreacted to the broadcast saying, "Quite simply if one reads the Syncrude papers that is the story that was there" (Thorne 1977, A6).

The docudrama's national broadcast was an act of counter-hegemony; it openly challenged the near sedimented view of the Syncrude negotiations as a public win, not a corporate oil coup. Consistent with Pratt's (1976) book, *The Tar Sands* offered a dramatized interpretation critical of the sway and power of foreign corporate oil interests in Canada. However, as argued above, this dissenting perspective was discursively dismissed by ruling politicians and coercively quashed via the court system. Together these actions worked towards achieving hegemony over Syncrude's founding and the presence and implications of foreign oil corporations in the tar sands. Nonetheless, and as Feldman notes, the fact that CBC made a docudrama about Alberta's "tar sands" was a testament to its standing and the accompanying politics it had attained. Feldman (1985) suggests:

> "The act of seeing the recreation after being taught the history, reading the news or living through the period is essentially narcissistic; we are looking at something that is already part of ourselves. Further satisfaction is derived from the communal sharing of an event and the mass catharsis inherent in jointly exposing social anxieties experiencing the retelling of a familiar horror." (349)

If, as Feldman argues, watching a docudrama is a "narcissistic" experience, for Lougheed it was likely closer to "narcissistic mortification" (Eidelberg 1957). A clinical term popularised by psychiatry professor Ludwig Eidelberg in the late 1950s, narcissistic mortification refers to feelings of anger and terror over the loss of control over a situation. "If the unpleasure caused by a narcissistic mortification is too great," Eidelberg warns, "the individual eliminates it from his consciousness by repression or denial" (1957, 596). While it is not possible to know how Lougheed's consciousness handled *The Tar Sands*, Lougheed certainly ensured it was repressed from the Canadian consciousness.

Lougheed's actions in the media and courts are consistent with his overall media strategy as premier, which was characterised by image control and party-wide message discipline (Epp 1984). Yet not only was the CBC docudrama firmly outside of Lougheed's command, its dramatized depiction of events—shown to a nation-wide audience—directly disputed Lougheed's own carefully constructed media image. As one of Canada's first media savvy politicians, a case could be made that Lougheed had little choice but to sue the CBC; performative politics demanded it. Marshall McLuhan once said of Peter Lougheed, "on TV Lougheed strives for a role rather than a goal" (Hustak 1979, 191). In this case, Lougheed's role was one of an indignant western Premier eager for justice (and keen to be seen seeking it) after being slighted one too many times by feckless Easterners.

At the time, those seen criticizing the province's Conservative establishment were largely treated with contempt as Pratt himself acknowledges in *The Tar Sands*: "The present political atmosphere in Alberta is such that criticism tends to be regarded as treasonous ('alien forces,' to quote Premier Lougheed) and unpleasant facts are dismissed as ideological heresy" (1976, 10). Pratt's quotation is significant as it acknowledges the inhospitable political environment for narratives which sought to challenge the dominant government discourse. As an economic nationalist, Pratt sought to caution against the growing powers and political sway of foreign-owned oil corporations whose interests, from his perspective, didn't necessarily align with the province. However, Pratt's concerns were dismissed and

shelved while his presence was met with hostility; the CBC docudrama based on Pratt's book would meet the same fate.

Immediately after the show aired, Lougheed, his cabinet, and indeed most critics directed their criticism towards *The Tar Sands* docudrama format, describing it as "unfair" and "unjust"; as a medium to explore contemporary politics it was decried as heretical. Yet as Feldman rightly notes, "the images that result from both *The Tar Sands* and *The National* are simply two interpretations of the same role, a role that may loosely be described as "the public image of Peter Lougheed" (Feldman 1978, 72). Both representations—*The Tar Sands* and *The National*—are synthetic, processed for public consumption. Interestingly, Lougheed and his cabinet reacted primarily to the medium and not the message, thus directing public attention towards the dramatization of current events and not the critiques it contained. To be sure, the docudrama format could have easily been deployed as a mediated mistrial to memorialize the conquests of King Peter of Camelot West. Yet the majority of public discourse around *The Tar Sands*—including news articles—centred on the ethics and use of docudrama to explore the Syncrude Agreement. Consequently, discussions around the creeping power of foreign oil interests over Alberta's resources were largely sidelined in favour of debate around the docudrama's scandalous format and propagandist nature; petrohegemony prevailed. While the docudrama may have sought to tell a cautionary tale about the potential consequences of foreign oil's sway over Alberta, Lougheed and his supporters drew upon discursive and legal means to quickly quash this heretical challenge to the dominant orthodoxy.

CONCLUSION: REPRESSION AND REDISCOVERY

The initiation of a defamation lawsuit against CBC for *The Tar Sands* sealed the show's fate as a media event destined to become repressed in the Canadian consciousness. Larry Pratt's 1976 book, on the other hand, remains publicly available, though it has become increasingly difficult to find despite having sold 13,000 copies (Mackenzie-Brown 2017). Yet *The Tar Sands*—both Pratt's

book and the banned CBC docudrama—are important texts for their contrapuntal narratives challenging the dominant myths around Syncrude's founding, concessions won and lost, and the influence of corporate power. Reflecting on Lougheed's legacy, Foster (1980) suggests:

> "It remains uncertain just how much of Alberta's modern-day wealth can be attributed to Lougheed's trenchant bargaining stance. The OPEC crisis, by quadrupling oil prices, would have made the province much richer whoever was in power, but his intransigence has led to him being inseparably linked to the province's fortune. In the eyes of many Albertans, it is Lougheed who has made the province the wealthiest and fastest growing in Canada." (43)

Forty years later, Foster's statement would undoubtedly be taken as heretical by many, especially when compared to the legacy of many subsequent Albertan premiers. Moreover, Albertans and Canadians have unquestionably benefited from the tar sands extraction which Lougheed kickstarted. Yet if Taft's (2017) "deep state" thesis is correct and democratic institutions provincially in Alberta and federally have indeed been "captured" by the oil industry, who let them in and under what terms? Taft, as argued above, puts the blame squarely beyond Lougheed's premiership. But what if CBC's docudrama *The Tar Sands* captures the origin story of the corporatization and exploitation of the Athabasca tar sands?

Ours is a political moment when the tar sands' future is openly and actively challenged, and so too is the ideological grip of fossil fuels. Despite decades of corporate obfuscation and obstruction, the link between burning fossil fuels and climate change is undeniable. Spurred by an ever-intensifying climate emergency, there is near universal consensus on the need to rapidly transition away from societies and economies built on oil, especially resource intensive oil such as the tar sands; however, some political and corporate actors continue to actively challenge the pace and urgency of this transition in pursuit of their own interests (Carroll 2021). To be clear, neither the docudrama nor Pratt's book addressed the issue of cli-

mate change, while the environmental concerns expressed, though present, were minor. Yet Pratt's (1976) concerns about the influence of corporate power over government formed the docudrama's core: concerns about petro-hegemony's creep. Indeed, while works such as Taft (2017) are rightly critical of Alberta's current deep state oil links, the reaction to a now forty-four-year-old docudrama reveals concerns early in Alberta's synthetic energy history as to the consequences of a political culture and common sense underwritten by and intertwined with corporate oil interests.

In conclusion, if docudrama provides the building blocks for "self recognition" (Feldman 1985, 354), Premier Lougheed did not like what he saw, so much so that he had it metaphorically thrown into a tar pit. Common sense at the time—particularly in Alberta—accepted this dogma; the docudrama was heretical. Yet, *The Tar Sands* was not an indictment of Lougheed, despite him seeing it that way. It was and remains a skillfully dramatic and damning critique of fossil-capitalism; a critique which remains as compelling today as when *The Tar Sands* aired forty-five years ago, for its first and only time.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research was supported by an Insight Grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada under Grant 430-2018-1019.

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IMAGE NOTES

Figure 1: CBC, *For the Record*. Pamphlet, 1977. Library and Archives Canada, Peter Pearson Fonds, R-899, VOL 12; File: For the Record "Tar Sands" Correspondence and Memoranda 1976-1978-12-14.

Figure 2: CBC, *For the Record*. Advertisement, 1977. Source: Peter Pearson, Personal Collection.

Figure 3: Peter Lougheed (Kenneth Welsh) and Willard Alexander (Ken Pogue) in *The Tar Sands*, 1977. Source: Peter Pearson, Personal Collection. Reproduced with the permission of Peter Pearson.

Figure 4: Production still from *The Tar Sands* featuring director Peter Pearson (crouching in foreground), Mavor Moore (with glasses and his back to the camera) in character as Frank Spragins, President of Syncrude Canada Ltd., and George Touliatos as oil company representative David Bromley, 1977. Source: Peter Pearson, Personal Collection. Reproduced with the permission of Peter Pearson.

Figure 5: Kenneth Welsh as Peter Lougheed in *The Tar Sands, 1977*. Source: Peter Pearson, Personal Collection. Reproduced with the permission of Peter Pearson.

Figure 6: "Them's fightin' words, Mister.'" (CU12608121) by Tom Innes. Courtesy of Libraries and Cultural Resources Digital Collections, University of Calgary. Reproduced with the permission of Glenbow Archives.

NOTES

1. The film is not available from CBC, however the author has viewed a copy. This article is based on an ongoing research project that has involved multiple archive visits, government Access to Information and Privacy requests, as well as interviews with individuals involved in making *The Tar Sands*, reporting on the controversy, and the court case itself. The film's source cannot be named at present given the nature of the project and effort to locate it.

2. While relatively little attention has been given to *The Tar Sands*, there is an established body of academic research on Canadian films about oil as well as the cultural representation of Alberta's tar sands including, but not limited to Jekanowski (2018), Szeman (2012) and Takach (2017).

3. My use of "capture" draws from Miller and Harkins (2010) who propose "corporate capture" to conceptualise corporations' ability to obtain and maintain power and self-serving influence across multiple social, political, ideological, and communicative domains. Taft (2017) in his writing also uses the idea of capture to describe the industry's role and influence in Alberta's "deep state."

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 despoiled?) critical model, petrocultural analysis appears as a flashpoint 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 / SHIIIIIIRK-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-oowee
QUEEEE 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!

59

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 Fractionater. 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
> Cathodic 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 "Cathodic 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 "Cathodic," 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" ("Quarclet").

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 ecopoetics 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).

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.

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).

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).

9. There are a few hits for the term on Google. As far as I can tell, "Diacel" 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®").

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.

"CRUDE FUTURES" AND "AFTER THE AMPLIFY ENERGY OIL SPILL"

KRISTIN GEORGE BAGDANOV

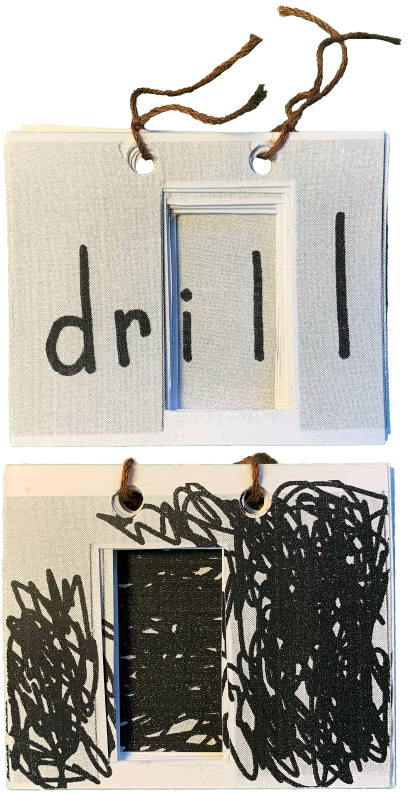
MAKER'S STATEMENT

A zine is a noncommercial, nonprofessional, small-circulation (maga)zine that is made and distributed by the zine makers themselves. Easy access to Xerox machines helped invigorate zine movements in the 1980s, though there is a longer history in print and DIY culture that connects zines to little magazines made by mimeograph as well as pamphlets, newsletters, and broadsides. The simplicity and accessibility of the zine form means anyone can make one with whatever tools they have available. As a poetic form, zines illustrate the portability and sociability of poems. The form demonstrates the relationships that zines create through circulation and reproduction.

The two zine poems included here, "Crude Futures" and "After the Amplify Energy Oil Spill," explore the fissures in our global oil economy. I made the former in April 2020 after crude oil futures reached a negative price for the first time in history. The pop-up structure of this zine allows the reader to create multiple versions of the poem—each future is slightly different from the last. I made the second zine in October 2021 after a pipeline operated by Amplify Energy spilled thousands of gallons of oil (the final quantity still pending) off the coast of California. This zine, which flips through a series of words linked by two letters, explores the relationship between different forms of life and the systems that shape their ability to live. A reversible zine, getting to the 'end' of the poem means entering

the beginning of another. Because I wrote these poems while physically shaping their forms—writing and revising based on the constraints of paper, folds, reproducibility—I view the "flat" versions of these zine poems as entirely different poems, re-formed to match the constraints of traditional book publishing.

AFTER THE AMPLIFY ENERGY OIL SPILL



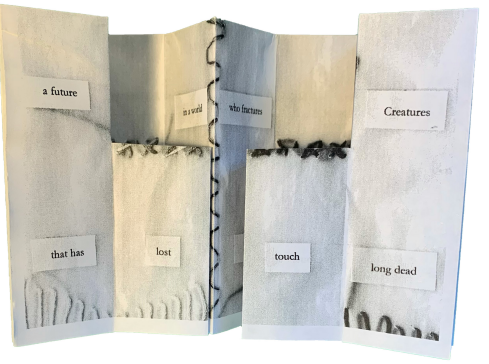
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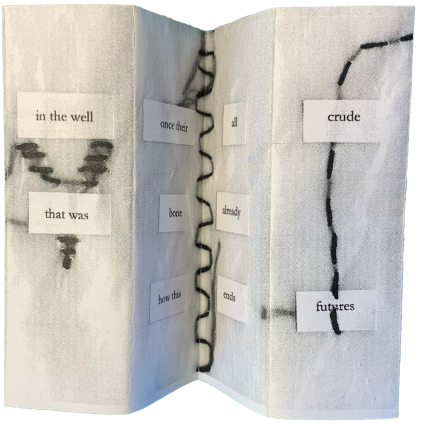
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CRUDE FUTURES





Crude Futures

oil

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PETRO-LANDSCAPES AND POLITICAL IMAGINATION: INTERVIEW WITH STEVE ROWELL

EMILY ROEHL

STEVE ROWELL

American artist Steve Rowell has been described in a number of ways: as a curator, collector, archivist, activist, geographer, and archaeologist. In a recent conversation with interdis-



Figure 1: Oil tank emblazoned with a message for passing drivers caring for the globe. History is often written by the winners, so how do we contend with the largest industry on Earth now that we know the truth? Who will own the narrative of climate change? Steve Rowell, Midstream at Twilight, production still, 2015-16.

ciplinary artist and scholar Emily Eliza Scott, he describes himself as a "curator of the landscape." Over the past twenty years, he has been captivated by the human-altered landscape, first as a frequent collaborator with the Center for Land Use Interpretation (CLUI), and more recently on a series of long-term projects that use image, sound, and archival practice to interrogate the relationship between humans, industry, and the environment.

Rowell's work has impressive geographic and political scope, and spans institutional contexts from galleries and arts organizations to universities, archives, and government agencies. For example, in his 2016 "experimental documentary" film, *Midstream at Twilight*, Rowell uses the camera of a drone to follow the oil from the Alberta tar sands through the complex network of pipelines, storage facilities, and financial institutions that keep the contemporary oil industry flowing. For Rowell, landscape is "a site of political imagination."

In this interview, Rowell and special issue editor Emily Roehl discuss the artist's background and interest in petro-media and oily landscapes, expanding outward from *Midstream at Twilight* to consider aerial vision, the relationship between landscape and soundscape, and Rowell's fascination with not only great distances but also deep time.

Q: How did growing up in Houston influence the kind of work you've made over the years?

In Houston, everyone is essentially one degree of separation from the fossil fuel industry. My father's first job was working on oil rigs across Texas and Louisiana as a teenager. My grandfather worked at a plant that made oil drilling bits and rotors. Growing up, we could always tell when the winds were blowing westward from the Gulf of Mexico because the air brought in from the nearly 20 miles of petrochemical plants east of downtown Houston carried that sulfuric stench of rotten eggs or other chemical smells. Generally speaking, it was my access to museums and art classes at an early age which put me on a path towards becoming an artist. Of course all of these institutions are floating on a sea of oil money. It wasn't until years later, when I began working on environmental themes, that commis-

sions from these institutions began to directly fund my work, which was clearly aimed directly at the same fossil fuel industry. The irony was never lost on me, and I would never accept funding like this if I wasn't allowed to express my beliefs clearly, either as represented in the work or through talks and interviews about my agenda. In 2007 I was given a chance to survey this strange landscape when the Center for Land Use Interpretation was commissioned to create a new research project around the petrochemical industry in Texas. This was exhibited at the Blaffer Gallery in 2008 as *Texas Oil: Landscape of an Industry*. After photographing every single plant from above and on the ground, I now know which plants spew those pollutants I smelled growing up as a kid. My work with the Mitchell Center for the Arts in 2014 during a prototype of my *Uncanny Sensing, Remote Valleys* project allowed me to further investigate, where I created a dystopian drone soundtrack for a three-channel moving image work. This was made using an experimental sonification of data of atmospheric toxins sampled by a vast array of remote sensing units deployed across hundreds of square miles of the city.

Figures 2-8 (online link)

Q: Can you say a bit about how Midstream at Twilight (2016) came into the world and where it has traveled? As you mention above, this wasn't the first time you addressed extractive landscapes in your work—for example, in Texas Oil (2008-2009), Urban Crude (2009), and American Oil, Volume 1 (2009) as part of your collaboration with the Center for Land Use Interpretation. How does Midstream at Twilight relate to this earlier work, and how has it influenced the work you've done since?

Midstream at Twilight was commissioned by the Museum of Contemporary Photography (MoCP) in Chicago and the National Resources Defense Council for the 2016 exhibition Petcoke: Tracing Dirty Energy. This was initiated after lawsuits had been filed to close three piles of petroleum coke (petcoke) on the post-industrial south side of Chicago, an area with a long and tragic history of environmental racism against underserved communities. Having developed methodologies for surveying and representing a vast landscape from

the *Texas Oil* project, I wanted to expand that geographically, but along a thin line. In the case of *Midstream at Twilight*, it was the pipelines that link the tar sands in Northern Alberta to Chicago, but also further "downstream" (in oil logistics terminology) to places like Paducah Kentucky and The Port of Long Beach in California, where the petcoke is sent to be burned in extremely "dirty" power plants in other countries like China. Since the *Texas Oil* project targeted hundreds of oil corporations headquartered in Texas, I decided to focus on only a handful of the corporations responsible for this extremely hazardous exploitation of natural resources in Canada but also federal regulation and tax loopholes across the U.S. landscape where the pipelines crisscross. These include Koch Industries and its headquarters and the Koch family estate in Wichita, Kansas. If the CEOs and shareholders of fossil fuel corporations want their companies to be considered "people" as a way of hiding their power and influence, then maybe the people who run these same "corporations" should be viewed as part of the industrial landscape of extraction, profit, and toxic waste? In my eyes, they're fair game. For more on my stance on shadow money, see my 2016 film *Parallelograms,* which peers into democracy's dark side, hidden in plain sight, looming above the streets of Washington, D.C.

Figures 9-24 (online link)

Q: How does your work relate to or depart from that of other artists who have documented extractive landscapes from the air? I'm thinking of Edward Burtynsky and Terry Evans in particular—especially of Evans, because of her shared interest in military landscapes.

This could be a very long answer, but maybe it's best to focus on how it differs? I was inspired by Terry Evans' Disarming the Prairie way back in 2001 or 2002 when I read her book from the project at CLUI. It was an honor to meet her and show alongside her in the *Petcoke* exhibition at the MoCP. Burtynsky is useful to teach and inspiring for students who are in awe of his work, but I find the level of production of his films and photographs excessive and myopic sometimes in its pronouncements. Titling his film *Anthropocene* al-

so struck me as a bit presumptuous, to be honest. An oblique, poetic, or maybe even a slightly obscured view, whether shot from a drone or from the ground, invites the audience to discover on their own as they respond to the questions a work is posing. My work is often combined with abstract and/or sensorially challenging components which allows the work to orbit apart from the more conventional documentary style work many artists in this genre are making. An example might be the use of loud electronic compositions or appropriated music with my moving image work, like the use of Wendy Carlos' soundtrack to *A Clockwork Orange* in *Midstream at Twilight*, or the data sonification drone piece I created, mentioned above, which vacillates between meditative, entrancing, and unsettling due to its dissonance. I departed from the wry didactic style of landscape representation CLUI has become famous for when I made a series of sound installation projects from the automated recordings of sonic booms in 2005-06. The playback levels had to be just above the threshold of pain or it wouldn't honestly represent the reality of imperial militarized airspaces or my political convictions and opinions about them. Of course I provided earplugs—I'm not interested in putting anyone's health at risk or glorifying technologies of violence. Quite the opposite.

Q: I'd love to hear more about the way you use a drone's camera. In your 2020 interview with Alex Teplitzky from Creative Capital you say, "The way I shoot with drones is extremely abstract, usually straight down from above and with color and mirror distortions of the landscape applied in post-production." Could you say more about your motivation for making images in this way?

Explaining my motivation for using drone sequences this way is a response to the overuse of this relatively new technology and consumer-accessible aerial vantage in commercial film, advertising, and art. It's so ubiquitous now, so easy, so boring to be honest. I began using drones in 2013 before stabilized gimbals and high quality lightweight camera drone systems existed. In 2008, Matt Coolidge and I filmed the Texas Oil video 'land scan' sequence using a rented helicopter and nose-mounted 4K professional camera system which came with a human operator in addition to the pilot. It was by far

the most expensive single day event in CLUI's history. When better drones became available, I immediately upgraded and, almost immediately, regretted how slick the footage looked. While the reality of being able to reach a vantage point of a site, otherwise hidden or obscured, on the landscape in seconds is still incredibly empowering and valuable to my work, I've outgrown the aesthetic of the aerial oblique unless it serves some purpose otherwise unattainable. One solution for me is the direct-down shot which resists the wow factor of the oblique and instead sits in that uncanny space below the range and level of detail of satellite aerial photos we've become so accustomed to. I see it like using the drone as a camera on a very high laterally adjustable copy-stand camera where I can hover between a few inches above to hundreds of feet straight up. The mirroring and splitting of imagery I use in my abstract sequences function in the same way as the audio tones I construct from data sources—as methods to entrance the viewer, disorient them, create a sense of wonder and sometimes distrust in what they're hearing and seeing. There's a value in giving the viewer/listener a chance to distrust the work in the same way there's value in giving them room to question the work. The landscapes I feature are all altered. What landscape isn't now? That's the point. These abstract sequences are meant to depart from the more didactic sequences as a means of underscoring loss or active destruction of anything wild, original, pre-human, or "natural" left on the landscape. There's something in that which comes from my interest in annihilating the anthropic bias we inherently have as a species, as impossible as this is. It's an unachievable goal in the same way that we can never be truly objective, especially in regards to how we represent the world around us. I create art because I'm an artist, but my involvement in the subjectivity of what I create, as much as I try to avoid this, is as problematic as it is nourishing and satisfying and necessary. Aerial photography gives me a remote sensing power, beyond the extent of my own senses, and I value that, but it's too easily exploited. I suppose I see my abstraction of this vantage as a way to embrace the artificial quality of how I film with a drone, enhancing it… as a way of allowing the technology to somehow override my involvement as the operator of the drone. If an AI

drone existed that required nothing from me but a point of interest to film, I'd happily let it take over and show me/us what it saw instead. Maybe that's at least one possible future of photography and the moving image?

Q: Soundscape is also an important aspect of your work. In Midstream at Twilight, the audio brings to mind the air cannons that continuously blast over tailings ponds in the Athabasca region as well as military drums or a funeral march. I appreciate the way you include detailed notes about where sounds in a particular work come from (geographically, culturally, temporally). I'd love to know more about your process for creating soundscapes to accompany your films and installations. Put another way: when I watch clips of your aerial video work, I can't help but think of the two senses of "drone": the drone/camera and the drone/sound. What is the relationship between the drone image and the droning quality of your soundscapes?

The drone-as-homograph is convenient isn't it? Image and audio can work in harmony as well as in disharmony. I like to play with these variances. This question often comes up in Q&A and I don't really have a solid explanation for a relationship which works for every instance. More and more, my editing workflow is intuitive, which tracks with my research and fieldwork relying more and more on discoveries along the way to lead me down avenues and rabbit holes. The drone sounds I use now with my moving image work were inspired by my sound art projects beginning in 2006 when I began composing Shepard tones. Most notable are the installation projects with SIMPARCH which were critiques on U.S. militarized air space and, later, as a commissioned score for *O'er the Lan*d, a film by Deborah Stratman which is another type of critique on the militarized landscape. Shepard tones create aural hallucinations in the listener, during and after playback, much in the way optical illusions trick our eyes and can leave afterimages. I was struck by how these *aftersounds* worked with installations and wanted to deploy that same trance-like effect in my moving image work. In 2008, for the slow-crawl aerial *Texas Oil Landscan* film with CLUI, I used an audio drone track made by the U.K. band, Sleep Research Facility. We chose this not only because it suits the sci-fi/horror industrial landscape pic-

tured, but because the band composed the music as an emulation of the sounds inside the intergalactic ore refinery from the sci-fi/horror film *Alien*. The *Uncanny Sensing, Remote Valleys* (2013-2020) project includes an audio component which is a sonification of data of atmospheric pollution in one of the worst air-quality cities in America, Houston. It's meant to be both beautiful and unsettling at the same time as it washes over the listener/viewer in waves of dissonance and resonance, often paired with aerial footage or shots of the equipment used to detect and monitor the toxins as well as the industrial sites spewing the chemicals into the air. I've been told my work embraces the sinister. The world we've made has a lot of sinister in it but I don't acknowledge it to glorify destructive technology, capitalism, or industry. I turn it back on itself as a strategy for targeting it and to inspire viewers to develop their own ways to do the same. Power in numbers.

Q: In your recent exhibition at the University of Oregon, Uncanny Sensing, Remote Valleys, you display a number of what might be called "documents" of the natural world—film, photography, maps, cameras, field recordings, etc. In a virtual conversation with Emily Eliza Scott that accompanied the exhibition, you mentioned that only a small percentage of the material you collected or created made its way into the installation. This makes me think about the relationship between art-making processes—especially those concerned with landscape and the environment—and environmental research or natural history archives. How do you think about your work in relation to the academic and archival resources you draw on?

This is a very hot topic right now with a collaborative workshop I'm running with my partner, Priyanka Basu, at the HKW (House of World Cultures) in Berlin in a congress called the *Whole Life Academy*. We're interrogating the institutional archive and exploring unconventional archives in the fringe spaces in and around Berlin. Stay tuned on that as things are developing rapidly over the winter months of 2021-22.

Q: How has the response to your work shifted over the years? I ask this because I imagine reactions (and perhaps even the questions you are



Figure 25: Kilgore, TX is the home to the East Texas Oil Museum, known for its uncanny animatronic figures. Seen here with his face lit by a projected video of an actor is the self-taught geologist Pattillo Higgins telling the history of the Spindletop gusher. Nicknamed the "Prophet of Spindletop," Pattillo lost an arm in 1885 during a shoot-out with deputies after they responded to a complaint that he was threatening African Americans at a local church. He was 17 years old. After striking black gold aka Texas Tea, he became the world's first oil millionaire. Steve Rowell / Center for Land Use Interpretation, Texas Oil: Landscape of an Industry, production still, 2008.

asked in interviews like these) have changed as more folks have become aware of pipeline opposition across North America—particularly Indigenous-led struggles—and as concern over fossil-fueled climate change has grown.

The 2016 film *Midstream at Twilight* was started in the summer of 2015, six months or so before the Dakota Access Pipeline crisis began. By the time the film premiered at the MoCP in Chicago in the summer of 2016, millions of people around the world were suddenly made aware of the politics of oil extraction and how that's been impacting Indigenous communities not only in the U.S. and Canada, but around the world, since the first oil rush a hundred years prior. The

response to my work and the work of others in the field hasn't shifted, it's been made more articulate. People now know how the infrastructure of oil and gas distribution plays a role in their lives. We all are reliant on and addicted to oil products and by-products whether we admit it or not. Limiting this reliance and breaking the addiction is something we all must grapple with.

Q: A lot of your work seems to ruminate not only on humans' relationship with the environment but also the ways this has shifted over time (both recent and deep time). How has your engagement with extractive landscapes and oil in particular influenced the way you think about time in and through your work?

Once we understand the time required for things like oil to form over millions of years, we understand what the headlong exploitation of the planet's resources, buried or not, is doing to life on Earth, indeed to Earth itself as a biosphere. Geology has long fascinated me. When I was able to visit the location that inspired James Hutton to develop geology as a science and deep time as a concept, it really sunk in. This extreme "long view"—both reverse-looking into the depths of history as well as the unknown speculative futures we face—seems, to me, like an absolutely vital mindset to have. I can't understand how any active citizen of the world can comprehend the complexities of life in the 21st century without it. This includes anyone, from student to scholar, who's even vaguely interested in race, gender, intersectionality, decolonialism, accelerationism, critical landscape studies, or what it means to be invested on any level with environmental issues. Art just seems like the best place for all of this to intersect in ways that can be productive, creative, even world changing.



Figure 26: The Permian Basin oilfield covers 86,000 square miles. Countless perforations of the Earth's crust pockmark the land from horizon to horizon as far as the eye can see in far west Texas. Steve Rowell / Center for Land Use Interpretation, Texas Oil: Landscape of an Industry, production still, 2008.

IMAGE NOTES

Figure 1: Oil tank emblazoned with a message for passing drivers caring for the globe. History is often written by the winners, so how do we contend with the largest industry on Earth now that we know the truth? Who will own the narrative of climate change? Steve Rowell, *Midstream at Twilight*, production still, 2015-16.

Figure 2: Vopak Terminal Deer Park. The Dutch company Vopak operates a large tank farm, rail, and ship dock terminal here on the south side of Houston's Ship Channel, for storing and shipping petrochemical products entering and leaving through this, the heart of the nation's largest petrochemical corridor. Vopak is one of the largest bulk liquid handling companies in the world, with 80 terminals in 32 nations. The terminal is adjacent to the locally owned and operated Intercontinental Terminals Company, which performs a similar function. Steve Rowell / Center for Land Use Interpretation, *Texas Oil: Landscape of an Industry*, production still, 2008.

Figure 3: Drilling pipe manufacturer in East Texas. Steve Rowell / Center for Land Use Interpretation, *Texas Oil: Landscape of an Industry*, production still, 2008.

Figure 4: Lots of love at one of the first oil wells in the world. Steve Rowell / Center for Land Use Interpretation, *Texas Oil: Landscape of an Industry*, production still, 2008.

Figure 5: Marathon Corporate Headquarters, 5555 San Felipe Road, Houston. Marathon, based in Houston, is the fourth-largest U.S.-based integrated oil and gas company, after ExxonMobil, Chevron, and ConocoPhillips. Founded as the Ohio Oil Company in 1887, it grew by acquiring other oil and pipeline companies, and by expanding its operations into West Texas, Alaska, Canada, and elsewhere. It took the Marathon name in 1962, and moved its headquarters to Houston in 1990. Its revenue in 2007 was $65 billion. Steve Rowell / Center for Land Use Interpretation, *Texas Oil: Landscape of an Industry*, production still, 2008.

Figure 6: Coke Dock, Port Arthur. Located in the port area at the southern end of the city, Port Arthur's Coke Dock is a major transfer point for petroleum coke produced by the region's refineries. The black solid material is mostly carbon, and is used in a variety of industrial applications, including steel production. Most refineries produce some

amount of the product. Steve Rowell / Center for Land Use Interpretation, *Texas Oil: Landscape of an Industry*, production still, 2008.

Figure 7: Considered the oil gusher that started the U.S. oil industry as we know it, the historic Spindletop oil well can be best understood these days at this museum in Beaumont, Texas. Steve Rowell / Center for Land Use Interpretation, *Texas Oil: Landscape of an Industry*, production still, 2008.

Figure 8: Enter the 19th century-era fossil fuel universe at warp speed at one of the dozens of museums in Texas dedicated to inspiring a new generation of oil product consumers. Steve Rowell / Center for Land Use Interpretation, *Texas Oil: Landscape of an Industry*, production still, 2008.

Figure 9: Enbridge owns many of the pipelines bringing tar sands oil to the USA from Canada. Just south of the border, in northern North Dakota, markers alert farmers, construction crews, and drivers, warning them to not dig and carry on, ignoring the infrastructure. If not for regulations, these markers wouldn't exist and the pipelines would be completely covert. Steve Rowell, *Midstream at Twilight*, production still, 2015-16.

Figure 10: The industry protects its reputation and relations with the public through visitor centres and carefully curated museums such as the Oil Sands Discovery Centre in Fort McMurray, Alberta. Steve Rowell, *Midstream at Twilight*, production still, 2015-16.

Figure 11: "Returned to Nature" claim by the company Syncrude Canada Ltd., which owns 400 square miles of open-pit mines, refineries, man camps, and toxic tailings lakes in the area. Resembling a nature preserve, Gateway Hill is a privately owned estate of roughly 100 square miles of evenly planted conifers, rectangular ponds, and grids of sod, sand, and muskeg. Steve Rowell, *Midstream at Twilight*, production still, 2015-16.

Figure 12: The abandoned historic ground zero of the ongoing tar sands experiment being conducted on the environment locally as well as globally. Steve Rowell, *Midstream at Twilight*, production still, 2015-16.

Figure 13: Part of the Athabasca Tribal Council, the Fort McKay First Nation is comprised of members of Cree, Métis, and Dene heritage. Beneath this land is the McMurray Basal Water Sands Aquifer which is at risk of contamination due to activities at the various oil sands operations on

the reservation. Steve Rowell, *Midstream at Twilight*, production still, 2015-16.

Figure 14: Syncrude frozen tailings lakes foreground the mine and plant sites at the Athabasca Oil Sands, Alberta, Canada. The dramatic ricocheting sounds of gunshots heard at all hours of the day and night are, in fact, sensor-triggered propane cannons deterring birds from landing on the toxic slush. Steve Rowell, *Midstream at Twilight*, production still, 2015-16.

Figure 15: Syncrude is the world's largest producer of synthetic crude oil from oil sands. They produce 350,000 barrels per day and have leases on 12 billion barrels worth of oil sands, which will keep them mining and producing for another 90-100 years at this capacity. Most of this oil is pumped across North America through thousands of miles of buried pipelines. Their corporate flag is often seen flying above the Canadian national flag. Steve Rowell, *Midstream at Twilight*, production still, 2015-16.

Figure 16: Reclamation billboard advertisement with tailings waste lake. Syncrude uses the word reclamation loosely. Steve Rowell, *Midstream at Twilight*, production still, 2015-16.

Figure 17: A man camp which houses thousands of mostly male employees of companies like Syncrude and Suncor. Miners are rotated out in regular shifts of weeks-on / weeks-off to allow them to return to family across Canada's provinces. Like an offshore rig, tanker vessel, or orbiting space station, these remote habitats are entirely enclosed and self-sufficient with local power stations, waste treatment facilities, recreation, and dormitories. Steve Rowell, *Midstream at Twilight*, production still, 2015-16.

Figure 18: Picnic spot and interpretive signage explaining the surrounding altered surface of the land. Steve Rowell, *Midstream at Twilight*, production still, 2015-16.

Figure 19: Roadside attraction of decommissioned mining equipment such as this giant bucketwheel which uses carbide tipped incisors to gouge the muskeg peat and soil, exposing the oil-rich sands beneath. In the background is a dragline which is used to carry away extracted material. Steve Rowell, *Midstream at Twilight*, production still, 2015-16.

Figure 20: Autonomous, radar activated robo-hawk bird deterrents awaiting the thaw of a frozen waste filled tailings lake adjacent to Syncrude's

Mildred Lake tar sands plant. The retaining dam built to form this basin is one of the largest earth structures in the world. The water is so toxic that birds can die within minutes of exposure. Each dead bird costs the responsible company $120,000 Canadian dollars, if reported. Steve Rowell, *Midstream at Twilight*, production still, 2015-16.

Figure 21: Tar Sands diluted bitumen pipelines run beneath this clear swath of land, dividing this subdivision in suburban Edmonton, Alberta. The oil in these pipelines, owned by Enbridge Inc., flows at five miles per hour across the plains of North America, terminating at refineries in Minnesota, Illinois, Indiana, Louisiana, and Texas. Steve Rowell, *Midstream at Twilight*, production still, 2015-16.

Figure 22: Barges carrying petcoke from bitumen oil refineries in the Midwest move down the confluence of the great Mississippi and Ohio Rivers to ports in the Gulf of Mexico and beyond. Steve Rowell, *Midstream at Twilight*, production still, 2015-16.

Figure 23: Storage tanks of tar sands oil along the Marathon Pipeline site in Vernon, Illinois. Steve Rowell, *Midstream at Twilight*, production still, 2015-16.

Figure 24: Koch Industries, Inc. KCBX petcoke terminal, South Chicago. This terminal is anything but. Petcoke, a waste product of the refining of crude oil and tar sands bitumen, is sent downstream by rail and barge and, eventually, by tanker to countries in Asia like China where it is burned in power plants. The material accretion of the North American fossil fuel industry may terminate in those furnaces, but the chemical toxins return home, in the form of global greenhouse gases and runaway climate change. Steve Rowell, *Midstream at Twilight*, production still, 2015-16.

Figure 25: Kilgore, TX is the home to the East Texas Oil Museum, known for its uncanny animatronic figures. Seen here with his face lit by a projected video of an actor is the self-taught geologist Pattillo Higgins telling the history of the Spindletop gusher. Nicknamed the "Prophet of Spindletop," Pattillo lost an arm in 1885 during a shoot-out with deputies after they responded to a complaint that he was threatening African Americans at a local church. He was 17 years old. After striking black gold aka Texas Tea, he became the world's first oil millionaire. Steve Rowell / Center for Land Use Interpretation, *Texas Oil: Landscape of an Industry*, production still, 2008.

Figure 26: The Permian Basin oilfield covers 86,000 square miles. Countless perforations of the Earth's crust pockmark the land from horizon to horizon as far as the eye can see in far west Texas. Steve Rowell / Center for Land Use Interpretation, *Texas Oil: Landscape of an Industry*, production still, 2008.

CONTRIBUTORS

Ruth Beer is a visual artist whose interdisciplinary research creation practice examines and envisions contested geographies and landscapes in transition. Her artworks, which include sculpture, video, photography, and tapestry, have been exhibited internationally at venues such as Nordic House (Iceland), Kimura Gallery (Alaska), and Arctic Centre (Finland). Ruth's recent SSHRC-supported research-creation projects include *Trading Routes: Grease Trails, Oil Pipelines* and *Shifting Ground: Mapping Energy, Geographies and Communities in the North*. Ruth is Professor of Art in the Faculty of Art and Graduate Studies and the Director of ACE (Art/Culture/Ecology) Research at Emily Carr University of Art and Design.

Ruth Beer est une artiste visuelle dont la pratique de création de recherche interdisciplinaire examine et envisage des géographies contestées et des paysages en transition. Ses œuvres, qui comprennent la sculpture, la vidéo, la photographie, et la tapisserie, ont été exposées à l'échelle internationale dans des endroits comme la Nordic House (Islande), la Kimura Gallery (Alaska), et l'Arctic Centre (Finlande). Les récents projets de recherche-création de Ruth, financés par le CRSH, comprennent *Trading Routes : Grease Trails, Oil Pipelines* et *Shifting Ground : Mapping Energy, Geographies and Communities in the North*. Ruth est professeure d'art à la Faculté des arts et des études supérieures et directrice de la recherche ACE (Art/Culture/Ecologie) à l'Emily Carr University of Art and Design.

Tomas Borsa is a Ph.D. student at the Oxford Internet Institute, University of Oxford, who uses experimental ethnographic methods to explore the social histories and future imaginaries of ultrafast 'full fibre' broadband infrastructures on Haida Gwaii. An occasional

filmmaker and photographer, Tomas' documentary and experimental media works consider the human experience of industrial expansion and have been exhibited internationally at venues such as the Raglan Street Gallery (Australia), Gulf of Georgia Cannery (Canada), and The Dark Outside (Scotland). Tomas is a co-convenor of the *Oxford Digital Ethnography Group*, a loose affiliation of collaborators with a shared aim of extending inter-disciplinary research on digital ecologies, broadly conceived.

Tomas Borsa est un étudiant en doctorat à l'Oxford Internet Institute, Université d'Oxford, qui utilise des méthodes ethnographiques expérimentales pour explorer l'histoire sociale et l'imaginaire futur des infrastructures à large bande ultra-rapides "full fibre" à Haida Gwaii. Réalisateur et photographe occasionnel, les œuvres documentaires et expérimentales de Tomas portent sur l'expérience humaine de l'expansion industrielle et ont été exposées à l'échelle internationale dans des lieux tels que la Raglan Street Gallery (Australie), Gulf of Georgia Cannery (Canada) et The Dark Outside (Écosse). Tomas est l'un des co-convenants de l'*Oxford Digital Ethnography Group*, un groupe de collaborateurs ayant pour objectif commun d'étendre la recherche interdisciplinaire sur les écologies numériques, au sens large.

Melanie Dennis Unrau (she/her) is a settler of mixed European ancestry living on Treaty 1 territory in Winnipeg. Melanie is a Visiting Fellow at St. John's College (University of Manitoba) and a Research Affiliate at the University of Manitoba Institute for the Humanities. She is the author of *Happiness Threads: The Unborn Poems* (Muses' Company, 2013), a co-editor of *Seriality and Texts for Young People: The Compulsion to Repeat* (Palgrave, 2014), and a former editor of *Geez* magazine and *The Goose: A Journal of Arts, Environment, and Culture in Canada*. Melanie is working on a book titled *The Rough Poets: Petropoetics and the Tradition of Canadian Oil-Worker Poetry*, which is on contract with McGill-Queen's University Press.

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Max Karpinski is an Izaak Walton Killam Memorial Postdoctoral Fellow in the Department of English and Film Studies at the University of Alberta, where he researches the intersection of experimental poetics, environmental humanities, and critical studies of settler colonialism. His work has appeared in venues such as *Canadian Literature*, *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature*, and *Studies in Canadian Literature*.

Max Karpinski est titulaire d'une bourse postdoctorale à la mémoire d'Izaak Walton Killam au département d'anglais et d'études cinématographiques de l'Université de l'Alberta, où il effectue des recherches à l'intersection de la poétique expérimentale, des humanités environnementales et des études critiques du colonialisme. Ses travaux ont été publiés dans des revues telles que *Canadian Literature, ISLE : Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature, et Studies in Canadian Literature.*

Patrick McCurdy is an Associate Professor in the Department of Communication, University of Ottawa. His research draws from media and communication, social movement studies, and environmental communication to study the media as a site and source of struggle. Since 2014, Patrick has focussed on the polarized debate over Canada's energy future with a particular interest in Alberta's bitumen sands. Patrick is currently completing a research project on the 1977 CBC docudrama *The Tar Sands*. He is the co-author of *Protest Camps*

(Zed, 2013) and the co-editor of three books, including *Protest Camps in International Context* (Policy Press, 2017).

Patrick McCurdy est professeur associé au département de communication de l'Université d'Ottawa. Sa recherche s'inspire des médias et de la communication, des études sur les mouvements sociaux ainsi que de la communication environnementale pour étudier les médias en tant que site et source de lutte. Depuis 2014, Patrick s'est concentré sur le débat polarisé sur l'avenir énergétique du Canada avec un intérêt particulier pour les sables bitumineux de l'Alberta. Patrick termine actuellement un projet de recherche sur le docudrama de 1977 de la CBC, *The Tar Sands*. Il est le co-auteur de *Protest Camps* (Zed, 2013) et le co-éditeur de trois livres dont *Protest Camps in International Context* (Policy Press, 2017).

Emily Roehl is an energy humanities scholar and artist whose work has recently appeared in *Environmental History*, *Southern Cultures*, and *Jump Cut*. Over the past few years, she has collaborated on a series of publications and events on energy justice, place-based research-creation, and lower-carbon research methods. Her collaborative project (with Sage Gerson and the graduate students of the Sawyer Seminar at UCSB) on the history of oil in Santa Barbara is forthcoming from *Media+Environment*. Roehl is an Assistant Professor of English and Journalism at Augustana University and the co-founder of artist book publisher Mystery Spot Books.

Emily Roehl est une artiste et chercheuse en sciences humaines de l'énergie dont les travaux ont récemment été publiés dans *Environmental History, Southern Cultures et Jump Cut*. Au cours des dernières années, elle a collaboré à une série de publications et d'événements sur la justice énergétique, la recherche-création basée sur le lieu et les méthodes de recherche à faible émission de carbone. Son projet de collaboration (avec Sage Gerson et les étudiants diplômés du Sawyer Seminar de l'UCSB) sur l'histoire du pétrole à Santa Barbara est à paraître chez *Media+Environment*. Roehl est profeseur adjoint d'anglais et de journalisme à l'Université Augustana et cofondateur de la maison d'édition de livres d'artistes Mystery Spot Books.

Steve Rowell is an artist who works with photography, moving image, sound, archives, and maps. His practice investigates terrains of perception, nonhuman intelligence, extinction, and technology, exploring the landscape as a site of political imagination. Steve contextualizes the morphology of the built environment with the surrounding medium of Nature, appropriating the methods and tools of the geographer and archaeologist. His work has been exhibited internationally at a range of galleries and museums, including MoMA PS1, LACMA, the MCA in Chicago, and the Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin. From 2001 to 2013, Steve collaborated with the Center for Land Use Interpretation. He is a MacDowell and Guggenheim fellow.

Steve Rowell est un artiste qui travaille avec la photographie, l'image en mouvement, le son, les archives et les cartes. Sa pratique s'intéresse aux terrains de la perception, de l'intelligence non humaine, de l'extinction et de la technologie, explorant le paysage comme un site d'imagination politique. Steve contextualise la morphologie de l'environnement construit avec le milieu environnant de la nature, s'appropriant les méthodes et les outils du géographe et de l'archéologue. Ses œuvres ont été exposées dans de nombreuses galeries et musées, notamment au MoMA PS1, au LACMA, au MCA de Chicago et à la Haus der Kulturen der Welt de Berlin. De 2001 à 2013, Steve a collaboré avec le Center for Land Use Interpretation. Il est boursier MacDowell et Guggenheim.

Camille-Mary Sharp is a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Toronto's Faculty of Information, where she researches the relationship between Canadian museums and the oil industry. She has shared her research at conferences internationally and has written for several publications, including the *Journal of Curatorial Studies*. Recently, Camille-Mary developed and taught the course "Museums, Activism and Social Change" for the Master of Museum Studies program at the University of Toronto. She is also a member of the Beyond Extraction collective, where she collaborates on efforts to investigate and critique extraction beyond traditional academic channels.

Camille-Mary Sharp est candidate au doctorat à la Faculté d'Information de l'Université de Toronto, où elle étudie les liens entre les musées canadiens et l'industrie pétrolière. Elle a présenté ses recherches à plusieurs conférences internationales et a publié dans des journaux tels le *Journal of Curatorial Studies*. Récemment, Camille-Mary a développé et enseigné un cours intitulé « Les musées, l'activisme et le changement social » pour le programme de Master d'études muséales à l'Université de Toronto. Elle est également membre du collectif Beyond Extraction, au sein duquel elle collabore aux efforts visant à enquêter et critiquer l'extraction au-delà des canaux académiques traditionnels.

Elia Vargas is an Oakland, California-based artist and scholar. He works across multiple mediums, ranging from video and sound to writing and performance, focused on nature-cultural media practices. He is a Ph.D. candidate in Film and Digital Media at the University of California, Santa Cruz and is the co-founder and co-curator of the Living Room Light Exchange, a monthly salon on critical, intersectional perspectives of art and technology. His current work considers the cultural, philosophical, and techno-scientific conditions of the early American oil industry and argues for refiguring crude oil as media to decentre anthropocentric representations of nature.

Elia Vargas est un artiste et un chercheur basé à Oakland, en Californie. Il travaille sur de multiples supports, allant de la vidéo et du son à l'écriture et à la performance, en se concentrant sur les pratiques médiatiques nature-culture. Il est candidat au doctorat en cinéma et médias numériques à l'université de Californie, à Santa Cruz, et cofondateur et coorganisateur du Living Room Light Exchange, un salon mensuel consacré aux perspectives critiques et intersectionnelles de l'art et de la technologie. Son travail actuel porte sur les conditions culturelles, philosophiques et techno-scientifiques de l'industrie pétrolière américaine et plaide pour une refiguration du pétrole brut en tant que média afin de décentrer les représentations anthropocentriques de la nature.