

Introduction to Critical and Creative Engagements with Petro-Media

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Article abstract

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 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.

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Image credit: Ruth Beer, 2022

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INTRODUCTION TO CRITICAL AND CREATIVE ENGAGEMENTS WITH PETRO-MEDIA

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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; Sze-man 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.