

# Oil-Sponsored Exhibitions and Canada's Extractive Politics of Cultural Production

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## Résumé de l'article

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

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Image credit: Ruth Beer, 2022

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## 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-*

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*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.<sup>1</sup> 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 Morriison). 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.<sup>2</sup>

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 Morriison), and was eventually supported by the contracted work of Mon-



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

trepreneur-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,<sup>3</sup> 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

**A**s 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.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> 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<sub>2</sub> 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 legitimization, 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 legitimization 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).<sup>1</sup>
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?<sup>2</sup>
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).<sup>4</sup>

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).<sup>5</sup>
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).<sup>6</sup>