

Energy in Crisis: New Perspectives on Petrocultures

Katie Ritson

Rachel Carson Center for Environment & Society, LMU Munich, Germany

katie.ritson@carsoncenter.lmu.de

Stacey Balkan, and Swaralipi Nandi, editors. *Oil Fictions: World Literature and our Contemporary Petrosphere* (University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 2021), 308 pp.

Carola Hein, editor. *Oil Spaces: Exploring the Global Petroleumscape* (London and New York: Routledge, 2022), 300 pp.

Caren Irr, editor. *Life in Plastic: Artistic Responses to Petromodernity* (London and New York: Routledge, 2021), 304 pp.

Fiona Polack and Danine Farquharson, editors. *Cold Water Oil: Offshore Petroleum Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 2021), 292 pp.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37536/ecoazona.2023.14.1.4933>



Strange to think there was a time (not so long ago at all) when energy—in particular energy derived from fossil fuels —was the invisible infrastructure of modern life, a material imbrication that petrocultural scholars needed to write about in order to draw attention to. As I write this, in October 2022, Europe is heading into winter on the cusp of an “energy crisis” and accompanying sense of emergency. Even though the nature of the crisis (the destruction of Ukrainian power stations supplying large parts of the country, and the lack of gas flowing through pipelines to Western Europe) is not quite the same as the crisis that drives research in the energy humanities (global heating caused to a large extent by fossil fuel addiction), there can be no doubt that our global energy dependencies are visible as never before. This energy crisis comes at the ebb of the Covid19 pandemic that worked in a different way to trouble established petro-flows, as flights were grounded, cars stayed parked in driveways, and we all had a brief glimpse of a world in which it was possible to do things differently.¹ There has scarcely been a more charged moment to reflect on petromodernity.

¹ Although, as Caren Irr and Nayoung Kim point out in their introduction to *Life in Plastic*, the immediate uptick in the amount of single-use plastic in circulation is a sobering reminder of the negative petrocultural impact of the Covid19 pandemic.

And reflection is underway. While political developments have propelled oil infrastructure to the forefront of international discussions, recent cultural productions bear witness to a growing interest in the aesthetic and cultural life of oil. TV dramas, such as the Danish political drama *Borgen: The Power and the Glory* (2022) and the Norwegian TV drama *Lykkeland (State of Happiness 2018-2022)* signal a greater mainstream engagement with the topic of petroculture in the Global North. Two large exhibitions in northern Europe took up this topic explicitly in 2021, in *Experiences of Oil (Opplevelser av olje, Stavanger Kunstmuseum 12.11.2021–8.4.2022)* and *Oil: Beauty and Horror in the Petrol Age (Oil: Schönheit und Schrecken des Erdölzeitalters, Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg 4.9.2021–9.1.2022)*; and the Norwegian Museum of Science and Technology in Oslo featured an artist intervention called “Mattering Oil” (29.10–7.11.2021) in its exhibition of North Sea extraction technology. (More recently, protesters from the group Just Stop Oil staged artistic inventions of a different kind, throwing soup and mashed potatoes at paintings in galleries in London and Amsterdam and gluing themselves to the walls to draw attention to their campaign).²

This moment of high petro-visibility in Europe comes together with what I consider to be a second-generation petrocultural scholarship, that moves beyond the broad challenge of pointing out and theorizing the uneven impacts of fossil fuel addiction, and starts to delineate, collect, and describe in detail the characteristics of a diverse array of oil modernities. The influential scholarship by the pioneers of energy humanities has put the notion of “petroculture” onto solid footing, but it has (necessarily, perhaps) been a largely Anglo-American undertaking. Notwithstanding the fact that it was Amitav Ghosh’s prescient and provocative review of an Arabic novel that first posited the difficulty of engaging imaginatively with oil (Ghosh 1992), it was North American scholars such as Frederick Buell, Stephanie LeMenager, Imre Szeman, Ross Barrett, Daniel Worden, and Patricia Yaeger who were among the first to theorize the field in the second decade of the twenty-first century (Grewe-Volpp). In the UK, Graeme Macdonald has done much to open up the concept of petrocultures for postcolonial literary analysis (Macdonald 2013; 2017). Their work continues to underpin and inform the edited collections I will review in this article, each of which brings together insights from global petromodernity in a new and thought-provoking constellation.

One such constellation is that explored in the collection *Cold Water Oil: Offshore Petroleum Culture*, edited by Fiona Polack and Danine Farquharson (2021). This rich collection brings together scholarship that gives a range of perspectives on the cold-water frontiers of “tough oil”—frontiers that are moving into ever colder waters and more extreme weather. The range of analytical approaches in *Cold Water Oil* is impressive, at times distractingly divergent, ranging from the representations of the ecological and human traumas of 1980s oil disasters, to the geopolitical limitations on oil exploration in the waters around Svalbard, to autobiographical accounts of a life devoted to drawing and painting offshore installations in the North Sea. But while the pieces in the volume differ significantly in the approach they take to exploring the cold water oil encounter, the

² See their campaign website: <https://juststopoil.org/2022/10/16/why-art-why-now/>

geographical coherence provided by the specificities of drilling for oil in the North (with ice floes, polar darkness, and geopolitical brinkmanship in contested waters amongst the challenges), the way that knowledge and technology is shared between key locations (Aberdeen, Stavanger, Newfoundland) and the fact that this kind of tough-oil extraction happens offshore make the book a worthwhile endeavour. As the editors of the volume note in their introduction “offshore petroleum extraction typically occurs well out of sight of land and within a context of deliberately cultivated corporate secrecy” (Polack & Farquharson, 2); the contributors have risen to the challenge in bringing to light these specific characteristics of cold water offshore extraction from their respective positions of expertise.

Many of the articles engage with the challenges of representing offshore oil, of rendering industry and its (actual and potential) impacts and entanglements visible. This is the case in the strikingly personal essays by Chie Sakakibara & Rosemary Ahtuanguruak, in which the authors talk of the erasure of Indigenous lifeways from Arctic Alaska, and by Sue Jane Taylor, whose portrayals of offshore infrastructure and its workers has brought her up against the corporate desire to avoid oversight. Other pieces, such as those by Graeme Macdonald and Fiona Polack, expose the mechanisms by which largely unseen offshore structures and their risks can make sudden, dramatic landfall. Polack’s essay is concerned with three terrible rig accidents involving huge loss of life—the *Alexander Kielland* in 1980, the *Ocean Ranger* in 1982, and the *Piper Alpha* in 1988—and the way they made both human and ecological trauma visible. Macdonald’s musing on the sudden appearance of a decommissioned rig, the *Transocean Winner*, onshore in Scotland in 2020, and the structures of obsolescence it reveals, finds an uncanny echo in Jason Haslam’s reading of a short story by New Weird writer China Miéville, who has revenant rigs returning to land by their own, malevolent agency.

The introduction of the collection reflects on the current moment and the possibility it represents to rethink the role of oil. While the volume was written during the pandemic and had gone to press when Putin’s troops invaded Ukraine, the sense of accelerating global crisis allows for war as well as global warming and disease. “*Cold Water Oil* considers offshore oil development in and across the oceanic territories of Canada, Norway, the UK, Russia, the US, and the Iñupiat of Alaska at a time of profound global instability and uncertainty,” as the editors write (4). This moment of upheaval is a thread running through the volume, and speaks to the value of fast publishing processes. The geopolitical tensions underpinning tough oil in the far north is the subject of Helge Ryggvik’s insightful analysis of oil exploration in the Arctic Sea around Svalbard, and Nina Poussenkova’s review of Russian attempts to drive forward oil extraction in Russia’s High North. Bright Dale and Danine Farquharson have edited their pandemic email-exchange (entitled “Dispatches from cold water oil cultures”) into an experimental essay that recursively constitutes the *in medias res* of an industry that is above all resistant to closure, even as the discussions turn upon the possibility of oil, or its political capital, running out.

The geographical and spatial rationale that underpins *Cold Water Oil* is also the constituting factor of the recent collection *Oil Spaces: Exploring the Global Petroleumscape*,

edited by Carola Hein (2022). This welcome addition to the petroculturalist's bookshelf explores the geographical and infrastructural implications of petromodernity, showing how pipelines, offshore installations, ports, petrol stations, and refineries shape the physical spaces we inhabit. Carola Hein introduces the concept of the "global palimpsestic petroleumscape" to describe the "layered physical and social landscape that reinforces itself over time through human action" (3) Besides contributions that complement and expand on the geographical terrain of *Cold Water Oil* through their exploration of specifically spatial and architectural dynamics (such as Nancy Couling's "The Offshore Petroleumscape: Grids, Gods, and Giants of the North Sea"), *Oil Spaces* presents a truly global array of case studies, analysing the delineation, cultural manifestations, and post-oil potential of petroleumscapes from the U.S.A. to Kuwait, from Brazil to China, Germany, Italy, and across Africa. This approach, providing a clearly defined point of access to different political, ecological, and cultural spaces through its lens of petro-modern architecture and planning, is useful in grasping the integrated, systematic global nature of fossil fuel infrastructure and culture, without losing sight of the very uneven patterning of the material benefits of cheap fuel. While acknowledging the limitations of a single edited collection in approaching so vast a topic, Hein writes of the need to "tease out a new vocabulary of conceptual understanding: of petroleum spatial systems, tangible and intangible spaces, oil materiality, oil ecologies, the energy humanities" (17) and this book is an important step in this direction.

Both *Cold Water Oil* and *Oil Spaces* move petrocultural discussions forward through their focus on specific geographies. Two further anthologies look at particular aspects of oil production and consumption through their representations in fiction and art. The collection *Oil Fictions: World Literature and our Contemporary Petrosphere*, edited by Stacey Balkan and Swaralipi Nandi and published by Pennsylvania State University Press in 2021, develops the field through literary-theoretical conceptions of global petroculture, in particular with respect to postcolonial literary theory. The oil nodes that are discussed in the book map onto many of the oil-extractive sites of the contemporary world—Nigeria, Colombia, India, the Persian Gulf—leaving North America and Europe as a shadowy, neocolonial presence; geographically, the collection is the opposite of *Cold Water Oil* (I was tempted to think of it as a companion volume, with a symmetrical title—"Hot Equatorial Oil?"), but this collection is concerned less with the physical environments and technologies of drilling for oil, cohering instead around the bodies labouring in oil production, their resistance to colonial modes of extraction, and the potential of literary work to expose the workings of petromodernity.

The collection self-consciously marks its place in the development of a new phase of petrocultural research, including a preface by Amitav Ghosh reflecting on his 1992 coinage petrofiction ("Petrofiction, revisited") that has a prime place in the genealogy of the field, and an edited and abridged version of the influential 2017 article "Conjectures on World Energy Literature" by Imre Szeman as well as an afterword by the same. Amitav Ghosh is a focal point of the volume as an influential figure linking scholarship with fiction, Global North with Global South: as the editors write, "petrocultural discourse has largely been tethered to cultural production in the Global North ... It has therefore been a central

aim of this volume to engage with petrofictions in a variety of postcolonial and world literature milieus: African, South American, South Asian, Middle Eastern, and transnational encounters addressing the all-pervasive oil economy” (Preface, x). The authors demonstrate in their introduction the prevalence of the American petro-imaginary and its fiction of wealth even as they seek to decenter it, and many of the individual contributions draw on and subvert this common petro-imaginary in their different world-literary contexts. This is the case for example in Helen Kapland’s excellent contribution on petrofeminism, in which she reads Nigerian romantic fiction (including in this expansive category Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s internationally acclaimed *Americanah*) for the way they reveal the cultural capital in the petromodern accessories of the car and the mobile phone. Sharae Deckard shows in her rich article how women’s labour is also implicated in sites of extraction, in sex work and in the aspirational notion of (white, north American) housewifization, and how women’s resistance can also be mobilised around oil. Two contributions read Ghosh’s work as a writer of fiction through his novels *The Glass Palace* and *The Circle of Reason* (analysed by Stacey Balkan and Micheal Angelo Rumore respectively).

On a theoretical level, Ghosh’s influence is felt also through the arguments he makes in *The Great Derangement* about the inability of the modern literary novel to represent the realities of the fossil-fuel dependence and the Anthropocene. The question of what literature—in particular, literary fiction—can and can’t do, is explicitly addressed with reference to Ghosh in many of the contributions. It is also implicit in the two more experimental contributions to the volume, the interview with Indian author Benyamin and the testimonies from the Permian Basin. These contributions are a welcome counterweight to the (admittedly excellent) literary criticism in the volume, a reminder of the limitations of literary culture as a framework for assessment. Imre Szeman, in his thought-provoking afterword, wonders, “What exactly is it that we learn about the practices and processes of extraction from an assessment of literature about it”? (269). Pointing out that many of the conclusions from energy-conscious literary analysis show the ways in which literature conceals the realities of energy extraction and energy dependence from readers, Szeman wants to know how we might refashion our critical practices around this, a question which, he admits, he is grappling with in his own work. The open-endedness of the afterword makes clear both the importance of the volume and the need for new theoretical engagements with the enormity of what Szeman calls “the lie of modernity” (266).

Petrocultural research has been disproportionately interested in what is often hidden from view; the messy, dirty and selectively visible processes of drilling for oil, and the uneven impact on bodies and ecologies. *Life in Plastic: Artistic Responses to Petromodernity*, edited by Caren Irr and published by Minnesota University Press in 2021, takes up a different, hypervisible aspect of petromodernity. “Plastics are”, Caren Irr and Naoyoung Kim argue in their introduction, “deeply integrated into the cultural imaginary of petromodernity. In a culture and economy defined by its dependence on the energy provided by finite fossil fuels, plastics promise a bright, cheap and sterile perfection that obscures the broken, soggy waste on our shores” (1). There is much to be said for reading

about plastic art alongside the imagination and politics of fossil fuel extraction; endlessly mobile, malleable, and enduring, plastic has an allure quite different from that of the raw materials from which it is produced. Whereas the visibility of oil extraction is localised, policed by corporations and vested interests, and kept out of mainstream view, plastic is so ubiquitous and commonplace that it takes special effort to consciously “see” it, and more still to imagine life without it.

Unlike the previous collections, which in different ways trouble the dominance of the US-American experience of petromodernity for the purposes of petrocultural scholarship, this volume has a strong North American focus—many key case studies in the first part of this volume, e.g. the comic superhero in Daniel Worden’s article, the graphic novel in W. Dana Philips’ close reading, and the film *Polyester* analysed by Paul Morrison, are firmly U.S. in scope. Loren Glass’ excellent article exploring the long-playing record is an excellent case study of petroculture at work, showing how the way music was composed and consumed in the twentieth century was tuned to the specific capacities and temporalities of vinyl. Seen against the previous collections, though, the dominance of North American or at least Global North petromodernity stands out somewhat in the first part of this volume. Indeed, much as the prevalence of plastic stymies attempts to imagine a different reality, so the North American petro-imaginary tends to stifle the bigger picture.

The second part of the collection, roughly speaking, integrates a greater global diversity of artistic interactions with plastic into the North American origin story in tracing the paths of plastic from shiny modernity to dispersed remnants—trash. We encounter in trash the durability of plastic and its potential for testimony, for example in Maurizia Boscagli’s contribution on the plastiglomerate, and in the lifejackets left behind by refugees on beaches that are recirculating in art exhibitions. Plastic’s longevity provokes a range of reactions, from its promise of a future to mourning the pasts it signifies. Lisa Swanstrom’s article, which shows in microcosm the journey of plastic in speculative fiction from H.G. Wells to Afrofuturism, ties this trajectory effectively to a changing narrative of futurity: where once plastic’s potentiality was promise, now it is trash that holds the only promise, of (partial) escape or (partial) redemption from the ruins of petromodernity.

It is clear that there is much more work to come, not just in reflecting on petromodernity in all its different geographical, cultural, and artistic manifestations, but also in looking ahead to a post-oil future. It is affirming to see some of the same scholars whose work is included here named as members of the After Oil Collective, whose most recent publication, *Solarities: Seeking Energy Justice*, (2022) edited by Ayesha Vermuri and Darin Barney, is published by Minnesota University Press in its Forerunners series. “Solarity,” the group writes, “is the condition we inhabit as we struggle to make worlds and build futures out of the ruins of petroculturalism” (1). Escape from oil dependence is going to require concerted effort from many quarters and requires upending almost everything we know about the spaces we inhabit and the histories that we inherit. The work goes on.

Works Cited

- Balkan, Stacey, and Swaralipi Nandi, editors. *Oil Fictions: World Literature and our Contemporary Petrosphere*. Pennsylvania State UP, 2021.
- Ghosh, Amitav. "Petrofiction: The Oil Encounter and the Novel." *Incendiary Circumstances: A Chronicle of the Turmoil of Our Times*. 1992. Houghton, 2005, 138–151.
- . *The Great Derangement. Climate Change and the Unthinkable*. The U of Chicago P, 2016.
- Grewe-Volpp, Christa. "Petrocultures." *Ecozon@*, vol. 11, no. 2, 2020, pp. 273–7.
- Hein, Carola, editor. *Oil Spaces: Exploring the Global Petroleumscape*. Routledge, 2022.
- Irr, Caren, editor. *Life in Plastic: Artistic Responses to Petromodernity*. Routledge, 2021.
- Just Stop Oil. "Why Art? Why Now." *Just Stop Oil*, 16 October 2022. Accessed 28 October 2022. <https://juststopoil.org/2022/10/16/why-art-why-now/>
- Macdonald, Graeme. "'Monstrous transformer:' Petrofiction and world literature." *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, vol. 53, no. 3, 2017, pp. 289–302.
- Macdonald, Graeme. "Research Note: The Resources of Fiction." *Reviews in Cultural Theory*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2013, pp. 1–20.
- Polack, Fiona, and Danine Farquharson, editors. *Cold Water Oil: Offshore Petroleum Culture*. Routledge, 2021.
- Szeman, Imre. "Conjectures on World Energy Literature: Or, What is Petroculture?". *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, vol. 53, no. 3, 2017, pp. 277–88.
- Wenzel, Jennifer. *Fueling Culture: 101 Words for Energy and Environment*. Fordham University Press, 2017.
- Vermuri, Ayesha, and Darin Barney, editors. *Solarities: Seeking Energy Justice*. Minnesota UP, 2022.