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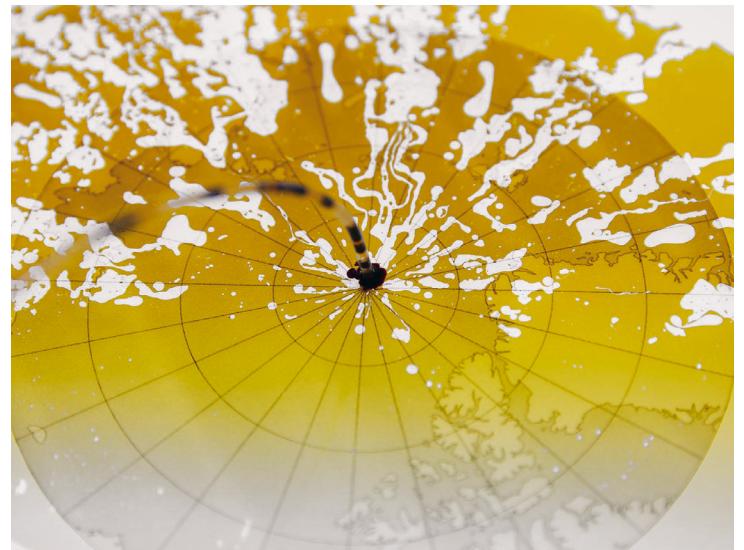
From Oil Encounters to Oil Reflections

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Niger Delta
Arcic
oil encounters
crude oil
fossil economy
Alberta tar sands
oil spill

To encounter oil is to experience oil in one or more of its formats—as a crude raw material, as an abstracted commodity circulating on the world market, as a refined substance beyond the crude such as petroleum. Well-travelled as an animating concept in the study of petrocultures and its umbrella field of the energy humanities, the “oil encounter” was first articulated by Amitav Ghosh in a review of Jordanian oil economist and writer Abdelrahman Munif’s series of novels on the petroleum industry’s formation in the Gulf Emirates, including *Cities of Salt*.¹ Here, the oil encounter presents oil to readers of *Cities of Salt* as a particular and peculiar historical and political economic force, a force mediated by the encounter between an emergent American petroleum industry and an existing Arab community whose ways of life would be forever altered. In his review, Ghosh meditates on how such an oil encounter has largely been absent in literary production, the result of a kind of intentional obscuration by the agents and architects of the fossil economy, which relegated oil as a substance of such political-economic significance to the domain of the invisible, inflected as it has been with “muteness.”² In 1992 when Ghosh named the oil encounter, from the vantage point of these architects and agents, the less we collectively knew about oil as a fuel for global capital, the better. This remains true today.

Yet, the alarm has been sounded. Twisting the dial from mute to ten, IPCC reports, news headlines, and journal articles continue to repeat the present and future impacts of climate change propelled by the burning of fossil fuels. Perhaps, then, it is more appropriate to speak of *oil encounters* today than an oil encounter. George Osodi’s documentary photography offers some such encounters in the Niger Delta where sweet crude sits so close to the surface that it bubbles up in a kind of perpetual spill. These spills are the dregs left by the handful of multinational oil companies



Left: George Osodi
Oil Stains, 2004

Right: Ernst Logar
Arctic Circle, 2021
Crude Oil Experiments
lecture performance
Kunstraum Lakeside, 2021

operating in the region such as Shell, whose hands remain stained in blood through, for instance, their role in the execution of the Ogoni Nine. The oil-soaked hands in Osodi's photo are an embodied reminder that, while production may be moving offshore, the costs of extraction persist. Ernst Logar's *Arctic Circle* creates and documents another kind of oil encounter. Produced in a laboratory setting following safety protocols as part of an arts-based research practice, *Arctic Circle* was made using the Hele-Shaw flows. Logar's work speaks both to the planetary character of oil's ubiquity, as well as the emergent oil frontier in the Arctic made all the more viable due to melting icecaps. Set and setting prove paramount as, together, Osodi's and Logar's works register the tensions between scale and proximity that form oil's totality—the immediate, embodied experience of oil's materiality on the one hand and an abstracted one that figures oil as a planetary substance on the other. Some are in conditions to control their relation to and contact with oil; others are compelled into these relations by forces beyond their control. The boundary between these experiences is more porous than may first appear.

Our collective material and aesthetic encounters with oil are defined by uneven pluralities.

Material encounters with oil, bound as they are to these aesthetic ones and the imaginaries they inform, are often shaped by proximity to the raw material itself and the sites of production, like refining and transportation, or they occur solely at sites of consumption. For some, oil encounters begin and end at the gas pump. In the setting of Northern Alberta, Canada, which is home to the tar sands, Métis anthropologist Zoe Todd pivots from an oil spill that happened on her home territory to figure the agents and architects of the fossil economy as participating in a weaponization of oil, asking “how we may de-weaponize the oil and gas that corporate and political bodies have allowed to violate waters, lands and atmospheres across the prairies.”³ Todd’s provocative line of questioning highlights the powerful role of energy imaginaries in shaping our past, present, and future relations to oil. Todd’s answer is to approach oil as kin in a move that adds another dimension to existing oil epistemologies, or “how to know about oil.”⁴ But are we limited to only knowing about oil in these terms? Or can artistic interventions like those of Osodi and Logar help us to better know oil directly, an experience sitting somewhere between encounter and reflection that demarcates horizons of de-weaponization?

- 1 Abdelrahman Munif, *Cities of Salt*, trans. Peter Theroux (New York: Random House, 1987).
- 2 Amitav Ghosh, “Petrofiction: The Oil Encounter and the Novel,” in *The New Republic* 206, no. 9 (March 2, 1992), 29–34.
- 3 Zoe Todd, “Fish, Kin and Hope: Tending to Water Violations in amiskwaciwâskahikan and Treaty Six Territory,” in *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry* 43 (2017), 102–7.
- 4 Imre Szeman, “How to Know about Oil: Energy Epistemologies and Political Futures,” in *Journal of Canadian Studies/Revue d’études Canadiennes* 47, no. 3 (2013), 145–68.