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Angaben zur Veröffentlichung / Publication details:

Hess, Linda M. 2022. "Playing the petrocene: toxicity and intoxication in Leigh Fondakowski's Spill and Ella Hickson's Oil." *Journal of Contemporary Drama in English* 10 (1): 199–214. https://doi.org/10.1515/jcde-2022-0013.

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Playing the Petrocene: Toxicity and Intoxication in Leigh Fondakowski's *Spill* and Ella Hickson's *Oil*

https://doi.org/10.1515/jcde-2022-0013

Abstract: Ella Hickson's *Oil* (2016) and Leigh Fondakowski's *Spill* (2014) make palpable to their audiences what I call the *Petrocene*: the age in which human existence has become impossible to conceive without oil. Each play illuminates the pervasive presence of petroleum infrastructures in its own way: while *Spill* focuses on the specific and sensational crisis of the BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010, *Oil* presents a series of scenes which focus on two women (mother and daughter) who struggle to carve out their existence in various time periods and in the context of different fossil-energy regimes. Both plays succeed in unveiling not only the toxicity of extractive regimes necessary to fuel the Petrocene, but also the toxicity of the narratives that uphold extractive regimes and their attendant injustices. Moreover, both plays convey the intoxicating effects of oil, which appears as a near-magical substance that promises unfettered progress and access to the good life. Examining these plays in conjunction not only highlights the increasing presence of ecological concerns in dramatic pieces, but also illustrates the ways in which dramatic performance can distill enormous oil infrastructures into apprehensible worlds and thus create vital spaces for pondering the Petrocene.

Keywords: Petrocene, petro-culture, toxicity, oil, extraction, Deepwater Horizon, Ella Hickson, *Oil*, Leigh Fondakowski, *Spill*

Geologists still have not finalized the official starting point of the epoch called the *Anthropocene*, but the most likely candidate for such a "golden spike" seems to be around the year 1950.[1] This year marks at once the beginning of the "nuclear age," the beginning of the Cold War era, the beginning of post-Second-World-War eco-

1 Other dates have also been debated as plausible starting points for the Anthropocene. However, in recent years, the 1950s seem to crystallize into the most likely date for the official starting point picked by geologists (Hersher). For a more detailed discussion of the different proposed starting

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nomics, and of the period generally known as the Great Acceleration. Robinson Meyer, in his piece in *The Atlantic* on "The Cataclysmic Break that (Maybe) Occurred in 1950" defines this period as one of

> rapid global industrialization that followed the Second World War. As factories and cars spread across the planet, as the United States and U.S.S.R. prepared for the Cold War, carbon pollution soared. So too did methane pollution, the number of extinctions and invasive species, the degree of surface-level radiation, the quantity of plastic in the ocean, and the amount of rock and soil moved around the planet.

Meyer's description makes clear how central fossil fuels are in and for the Anthropocene. In her 2014 study *Living Oil*, Stephanie LeMenager uses the term *Petroleum Culture* to mark the ways in which our lives are so deeply entangled with oil that it "mediate[s] our relationships [. . .] to other humans, to other life, and to things" (6). It sustains our lives to the extent that "Petroleum infrastructure has become embodied memory and habitus for modern humans" (104). Human everyday existence has become impossible to think without petroleum; so much so that its existence as *the* integral substance of life (electronic devices, clothing, containers, medicine, asphalt) has become invisible.

In *Earth Matters on Stage: Ecology and Environment in American Theater*, Theresa J. May states: "Theater can help us to remember and re-member our relationship with the land and to consider the permeable boundaries between human life and the environment" (13). May follows her observation with several questions that theater can ask to "help us to examine our own ecological identities" (13). The most prominent one that will be significant for my considerations here is: "Where do we draw our boundaries of skin and kin?" (13). This question is central to the portrayal of ecological crisis and extractive practices in the two plays, one British, one US-American, on which I will focus my analysis: Ella Hickson's *Oil* (2016) and Leigh Fondakowski's *Spill* (2014). Reading these two plays in conjunction, I aim to show how they illuminate what I term the *Petrocene*. Many names have been coined in reference to the Anthropocene to point to specific aspects of it, such as the Capitalocene, which emphasizes capitalism as the root of the ecological crisis, or the Plantationocene, which draws particular attention to the plantation mode of cultivation as well as to the racial exploitation at its basis.[2]

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points, see, for example, Simon L. Lewis and Mark A. Maslin's *The Human Planet: How We Created the Anthropocene*.

2 The term *Capitalocene* is attributed to sociologist and environmental historian Jason W. Moore; the term *Plantationocene* is attributed to feminist technoscience scholar Donna J. Haraway. However, various scholars, such as Kathryn Yusoff and Anna Tsing have contributed important aspects to the debates around those terms.

For my analysis, the term *Petrocene* underlines the crucial role of fossil fuels in shaping the contemporary world and moreover serves to highlight the underlying extractive practices that maintain continuous access especially of post-industrial societies such as the UK and the US (and Europe) to these resources.

Both Hickson's *Oil* and Fondakowski's *Spill* play the Petrocene. They present the ubiquitous petroleum infrastructures to us on various scales, ranging from a giant oil rig in *Spill* to cars, kerosene lamps, and kitchen appliances in *Oil*. The plays at once *are* products of petroleum culture in LeMenager's sense, and they examine petro-culture as a source both of toxicity and of intoxication. Looking at these two plays in conjunction illuminates ways in which the theater offers apprehensible, temporary worlds, which should, however, not be mistaken as simply creating the illusion that issues like climate change and ecological catastrophes can be sealed off and regarded as isolated problems. Rather, these worlds provide audiences with entry points for considering much more expansive and intricate connections of petro-culture.[3] *Oil* and *Spill* achieve this by creating a kind of double vision, simultaneously allowing the audience to observe the plays' own *cosmoi* from within and without. In this way, the plays draw the audience in, eye to eye with the characters, but also allow the audience to observe the ways in which the protagonists exemplify our current ultradeep entanglement with oil. Central to the plays' double vision is the fact that *Oil* and *Spill* locate toxicity not only in substances like oil, but likewise in those cultural narratives which facilitate and sustain the extractive logics that frame what Heather Sullivan calls "our dependency on vegetal power in its many phases" (1) in terms of human supremacy. The toxicity of such extractive logics prominently emerges via questions of where we draw what May has called "our boundaries of skin and kin." By revealing the imminent toxicity of the very narratives that justify the uneven power relations and that maintain the creation of what Vivian G. Shinall terms "expendable bodies," both plays put the audience in a position to reconsider their own "intoxication" with and by petroleum culture.

3 One of the most impressive explanations of the problem of scale and the total disorientation it can cause, has been provided by Douglas Adams in his novel *The Restaurant at the End of the Universe* (1980), in which he introduces the Total Perspective Vortex: "For when you are put into the Vortex you are given just one momentary glimpse of the entire unimaginable infinity of creation, and somewhere in it a tiny little marker, a microscopic dot on a microscopic dot, which says 'You are here'" (58). This passage can be excellently transposed to the difficulty humans have in fathoming the enormous scales of petroleum culture, or of the Anthropocene, and thus offers also a more immediate example of the phenomenon Timothy Morton has described in his work on *hyperobjects*.

Petro-Culture's Expendable Bodies

Both plays offer worlds shaped by petro-culture. Their narratives center on the complicated political as well as practical intricacies of extracting oil. However, while Hickson's *Oil* focuses on conventional oil sources, the kind that can be drilled for in the ground, Fondakowski's *Spill* deals with so-called tough oil, which is "tough, not just because it's hard to get, but because of the devastating scale of its externalities" such as requiring fracking or deepwater drilling (LeMenager 3). While *Oil* zooms in on two main protagonists, its narrative's temporality is expansive; *Spill* on the other hand features a broad cast, but zeros in on a much narrower time period.

Spill's two acts focus on the 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil rig explosion and subsequent massive oil spill off the coast of Louisiana in the Gulf of Mexico. The play premiered in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, in 2014 and was created from interviews that Fondakowski had conducted with surviving crew members, clean-up workers, and industry experts who were involved in the spill and subsequent clean-up operations. While the first act traces the events leading up to the explosion and the explosion itself, the second act focuses on the immediate aftermath and the attempts to plug a well, which was over 18,000 feet (over 5000 meters) below sea level, to stop the oil from continuously spilling out.[4]

Oil premiered in 2016 in London. The play's five parts span the period from 1889 to 2051, and the main protagonists are a mother and her daughter, May and Amy, who reappear in each part. As Benjamin Poore has observed, the play thus "experiments with history and disrupted time" (22). The play begins with May walking out on her husband to save herself and her unborn child from a harsh existence on the brink of starvation, and throughout the whole play, May and Amy move through various constellations of international politics and geopolitical struggles over land rights and oil, until, in the play's last part, British dominance of the industry is superseded by globally operating Chinese companies, and oil is replaced by nuclear fusion technologies that require mining the moon.

Given their focus on the toxicity of life-worlds in which oil, or, more precisely, "objects derived from petroleum [. . .] mediate our relationship, as humans, to other humans, to other life, and to things" (LeMenager 6), it is not surprising that both plays are anthropocentric in their focus on human characters and human voices. The demand to leave anthropocentrism behind and to find ways of decentering the human has reverberated soundly through ecocritical scholarship for a

4 Since no script of this play is readily available, a recorded live performance that was released in 2018 serves as the textual basis for *Spill* for this article.

number of years, producing approaches from Donna J. Haraway's posthumanism and strategies of "making kin" with the more-than-human world, to Jane Bennett's material ecocriticism, or Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Lowell Duckert's elemental ecocriticism – approaches which explore the agency of nonhuman animals, plants, and even inanimate environments. Theater has entered its own struggles in reshaping its form and studying its possibilities in that regard. In the introduction to *Performance and Ecology: What Can Theatre Do?*, Carl Lavery points out that "Theatre's long obsession with the *anthropos*, with expressing human psyche in dialogue form" has led scholars to consider it precisely not a medium well-suited to ecological or ecocritical thought (2). In her work on *Ecodramaturgies*, Lisa Woynarski, in turn, emphasizes that "thinking ecologically requires a shift in perspective to decenter the human" (26). A significant current focus therefore seems to be on ways in which "theatre and performance [can] trouble the anthropocentrism that has long been associated with the theatrical medium" (Lavery 2). However, one way of successfully troubling such anthropocentrism in a medium that comes alive through human voices and bodies is to consider Erin James's argument that, in addition to reading works that explicitly challenge anthropocentric viewpoints, it is very productive to "get to grips with the mechanisms by which anthropocentric and anthropogenic attitudes of human supremacy circulate in our culture" and to study "how ideas about the dominance and importance and supremacy of humans circulate in the texts that we tell each other" (James and Spengler 234).

This form of critical examination is precisely what *Spill* and *Oil* carry out successfully. The plays draw attention to contexts in which ideas about the dominance and importance and supremacy of humans thrive, but they also expose how unequally this presumed supreme status is distributed. Especially *Oil* makes clear that the processes of extraction that profit some mean that others are rendered what Shinall calls "expendable bodies." Or, to borrow Judith Butler's terminology: the plays demonstrate how such discourses and material realities produce lives under precarious conditions that at the same time are rendered nongrievable, meaning their losses are not perceived as losses by society at large (38). Expendable bodies also appear in *Spill*, for example, in the following interview with Jorey Danos, one of the clean-up workers in the Gulf of Mexico:

> Yeah, this is my story. Now BP says, come on, come on, we've got an opportunity, vessels of opportunity, that's what they called it. We're hiring. Come, be a hero. Come, clean up the oil. Come, clean up BP's mess. [. . .] But then the dispersant come into effect. Dispersant B52-Bombers. They are going to the left and spraying the dispersant and we are going to the right, pick up the gunk, the thick stuff that's still left over. I forgot which scripture it is in the Bible that Jesus turned that water into wine. Well that wine sparkled like crystal-clear glass . . . and when that dispersant hit the water [. . .]. It sparkled, it was beautiful. But we would

> pass through it, what the fuck, what's that smell, what is going on, what is this shit, what are we going through? [. . .] We had no respirators; respirators, okay? No training. They gave us tyvek suits and gloves – that's it, no instructions or anything, no, nothing. They gave us a paper to sign, that if we saw any sea-turtles, we would call this number, that's it. (1:20:51–1:25:02)

The clean-up workers are thus exposed for long hours day after day to the toxins of both the oil itself and the dispersants (mixed with the oil), lured by the possibility to build up their meagre income by $300 a week. But their health suffers enormously, and Danos is no longer able to work at the time of the interview, with no means of making BP assume responsibility, yelling helplessly: "They say, file a BP claim, file a BP claim – fuck a BP claim! How could I prove the toxins? How can I prove that BP put the toxins in me?" (1:27:37–1:27:50). This passage, from the second act of the play, is especially noteworthy because it clearly shows how Danos, the clean-up worker and others like him, become expendable bodies. At the same time, their labor serves to sustain a narrative of "repairing the damage," which in turn serves to transport tropes of the American Dream, right down to the facetious name of the clean-up boats/operation: "vessels of opportunity." The name foregrounds the industry's premise that upward social mobility and prosperity are possible for anyone who is willing to work hard, and thus ironically echoes earlier interviews in the first act of *Spill* in which the speakers confidently emphasized the oil industry as a place where the American Dream is still alive and well.

As Hari M. Osofsky et al. argue in their article on "Environmental Justice and the BP Oil Spill," there is broad evidence in scholarly literature that "massive environmental degradation" is closely "intertwined with human suffering that accompanies oil and other extractive industries around the world," which, in turn, goes hand in hand with "the unequal distribution of the burdens and benefits" (107–108). Over 55 per cent of the BP Deepwater Horizon oil spill waste "was dumped in communities that are comprised predominantly of people of color" even though in those affected coastal regions of Louisiana, Alabama, Florida, and Mississippi, people of color make up just 26 per cent of the population (Bullard qtd. in Osofsky et al. 116).

The voices that comprise *Spill* make clear that the expendability of nonhuman lives is also readily apparent, and even inhabitants of the coast who are not directly exposed to toxins in the way that Danos is are revealed to be expendable – at least in terms of economics – as they face the consequences of the spill. The coast guard orders fishers whose livelihood depends on the ocean to stop work indefinitely, and in the marshes of the Mississippi Delta the lives of "thousands of species, birds, plants, and fish" are threatened by the oil as it reaches the coast (1:06:41–1:07:16). One of the fishermen makes it very clear in his interview that

the coast guard was told to protect BP and "not the wildlife, not the wetlands, and not our way of life" (1:08:34).

Oil also shows how the oil economy creates expendable lives and steep, often racialized, hierarchies, of those who profit from the oil industry and those whose labor and bodies are used to keep it running. In part 4 of *Oil*, May's daughter Amy has fled from her mother to the desert just outside of Baghdad, with Aminah, an Iraqi woman who is her friend but who rebukes Amy for her white savior complex[5] and her ignorance of the true cost of oil politics:

> You want to save my soul? Hm? Is that it, Amy? You stood in front of a desert and you said it makes you feel humble. It takes a whole fucking desert, does it? I have to take gas out of my car and put it in the generator so my mother has enough light to eat. In your country you keep the lights on all day from our oil and you don't even have the decency to sit under them [. . .]. When your country drops its bombs – it is briefcases that get thrown in the air. My father was on his way to work. I am a qualified engineer. I am working cleaning shit in a hospital. It takes a desert to make you feel humble? You come here to feel humble? So you can feel the pain of my people? Do you? You feel it? Because you stay awake all night when I am nearly dead? (94)

Aminah can only scoff at Amy when Amy tells her "You have to fight," retorting: "There has been a war in my country as long as I've been alive. She [May] lets them sell oil – maybe it will run out and at last we can have some peace" (95).

Both Aminah and Danos expose the physical price paid by those Othered in the context of oil extraction who make the maintenance of petro-culture possible. They exemplify the "cultural hierarchy that is established" through "ecoracism" which "creates bodies that are viewed by popular society as expendable" (Shinall 16),[6] which, consequently, normalizes the fact that these bodies are impacted disproportionately by environmental degradation.

5 The term *white savior complex* was coined by Teju Cole in 2012, naming the belief that (white) heroism is needed to save the day for "less fortunate" people, often in countries that experienced settler colonialism – without, however, recognizing the role of settler colonialism and white supremacy "in creating those conditions in the first place" (Smith qtd. in Aronson 37).

6 Shinall makes her argument about ecoracism in a specific context of Indigenous communities (such as the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe) and the "embodied toxicity experienced by marginalized populations" (16). I expand her term of *expendable bodies* here as I find it a productive way to think about the racialized and marginalized Others presented in the two plays I am analyzing here.

Toxic Narratives – Intoxicating Narratives

Spill in particular foregrounds the toxicity of oil as a substance and the massive risks of the "tough oil" industry as oil resources become increasingly remote and hard to reach but petro-culture's demand only increases. *Oil*, on the other hand, highlights that the presumed accessibility of conventional oil resources is maintained via colonial and neocolonial structures of exploitation, and that oil is a finite resource. Both plays, however, expose the ways in which cultural narratives facilitate and sustain the extractive logics of petro-culture. In this way, both dramas push their audiences to think about what James has called "the mechanisms by which anthropocentric and anthropogenic attitudes of human supremacy circulate in our culture" (209).

In both plays, such mechanisms are largely revealed via blunt nationalist discourses that also demonstrate via their allusions to boundaries of kinship (to expand May's reference to the "boundaries of skin and kin") the frequently narrow and exclusionary definitions of the category *anthropos*.[7] In part 3 of *Oil,* May, who has become the CEO of a British oil corporation, simply tells Mr Farouk, a representative of the Libyan Revolutionary Command Council: "We inherited an empire. We are defending a superpower. I will not leave my child with less than I was given. I have worked too hard" (73). May's assertion shows that the power of the nation ensures personal freedom, which for some, like her, ties into a narrative in which that freedom can even be claimed as personal merit. However, she contradicts this narrative of personal merit immediately since she begins by emphasizing the empire as *inheritance* – thus the fraught logic and harmfulness of such a narrative, which she nevertheless defends fervently, are clearly displayed for the audience.

Similarly in *Spill*, the father of Jason Anderson, one of the rig workers who died in the explosion of the oil rig, speaks out against the moratorium that then-President Barack Obama puts on offshore oil drilling:

> Mr President, please don't do it. We need to keep drilling. We need to keep drilling for the country. We don't want to keep buying all our oil from the Middle East. We don't want to make them rich. I don't. I want it to come from right here in America. Create more jobs. And I know my son Jason would want that too. [. . .] My son died, so the American people could have their way of life. (1:12:35–1:13:02)

7 Scholars such as Dipesh Chakrabarty, Kathryn Yussof, and Rob Nixon (among others) have written extensively about the necessity to analyze closely who comes to figure as the representative *anthropos* in the new era of the Anthropocene and to heed the fraught history of the category "human."

As Osofsky et. al observe, despite the fact that BP (itself a multinational company) is "legally responsible for the spill," eleven more companies with ties to multiple countries were involved in the Macondo drilling site, and the oil rig itself was registered under a Marshall Islands flag (109–110). Nationalist framings of kinship, which frequently amount to "us" vs "them," reveal themselves therefore as at once absurd and unquestionably powerful. The central focus on environmental catastrophe in *Spill* might risk appearing as what Chantal Bilodeau has called "disaster porn" (34), meaning works that draw audiences in with sensationalism, voyeurism, and the lure of exceptional crisis. However, considering the play in conjunction with *Oil* makes clear that disasters like the Deepwater Horizon blowout are not to be seen as singular anomalies but as part of an ongoing legacy of oil and of petro-culture's "ways of life" that create expendable bodies, exploit nongrievable lives, and thrive on and proliferate toxic narratives. *Spill* and *Oil* highlight people's individual motivations and perspectives as complicit with the same mechanisms, the same infrastructures by which "ideas about the dominance and importance and supremacy of humans circulate" (James 209), narratives which allow them to "keep the lights on all day [. . . without having] the decency to sit under them" (94) as Aminah rebukes Amy in part 4 of *Oil*. Remarks such as this one then suddenly include the audience and the viewers' own deep entanglement with oil, creating moments of what Morton calls "dark ecology" – or "ecognosis" – "a dark depressing knowing" – "a weird knowing" (5) which signifies the realization that even though individual actions might be statistically meaningless, "scaled up to Earth magnitude," these actions do translate directly into massive environmental destruction (35). Such shifts where the audience is prompted to distance themselves from the characters' perspective and subsequently recognize their own embeddedness in petro-culture and attendant complicity in the discourses they have likely been judging critically form part of the double vision that the plays create.

This double vision, however, also frequently entails that the audience shares the characters' sense of awe and fascination, which can maybe best be summed up as what Gerry Canavan has described as "the ideology of ecstatic technological progress," because oil is "a tremendous physical marvel" that "allows for a tremendous amplification of human powers" (334). In *Oil*, this marvel is played out early on, in the first part, when William Whitcomb, a sales representative who wants to buy the farmland from May's family, demonstrates a kerosene lamp to the family. The young May (twenty years old and pregnant), who has been wishing to escape the miserable life on the farm, is completely fascinated. When Whitcomb lights his kerosene lamp, he announces: "This here miracle is kerosene – it comes right out of the ground – just like the birds and the bees, the trees and the rivers – it's natural" (18). The stage directions indicate that May is "*mesmerised*"

(17) from the beginning and her eyes "*alight with wonder*" (18) at his demonstration. Whitcomb's description of the kerosene as "natural" recalls Sullivan's description of petroleum as "the tarry brown-black vegetative energy that was originally green, but then is transformed repeatedly from photosynthesized sunlight into plant sugar, rotting organics into fossil fuel, and then into petroleum" (152). In fact, the same origin narrative is included in the scene in *Oil*. When a drop of kerosene spills on May's finger, the stage directions read: "*she lifts it to her nose and inhales deeply – she loves the smell*" (18). This prompts Whitcomb to explain further, "It was made when the earth started," which makes it sound like he is telling a fairy tale. May answers him dreamily: "Imagine being there, then?" and the stage directions indicate that "*She turns to him, smiles, transfixed*." Whitcomb continues, "There are millions of years, right there on the end of your finger," to which May answers, still dreamily: "How can a million years fit on one person's finger? Magic?" – and he answers: "Near enough" (18). The three alliterative terms *miracle – mesmerised – magic* contour the intoxicating power of oil and oil narratives, as well as the ease with which oil becomes "synonymous with progress, even with the future itself" (Canavan 334).

Spill plays with the toxicity/intoxication of petro-culture in slightly different ways. The scene in which Danos describes his participation in the clean-up work on the "vessels of opportunity" illustrates a dangerous conflation of toxicity and beauty. Danos describes the way in which the dispersant sparkles in the water: "it was beautiful" (1:23:49). But the smell gives away the substance's true toxic nature as dispersants mixed with oil create a substance more toxic than untreated oil ("Dispersants"), and the dispersant itself is carcinogenic. This deceptive beauty highlights the intoxication of petro-culture in a different way from May's fascination with oil's power itself in *Oil*. *Spill* also illuminates the flipside of oil's intoxication as human hubris – in another reference to magic:

> In Gabriel García Márquez's novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, the people in the City of Macondo believed that they could control the forces of nature – the natural world – through magic; magical thinking. The rise and fall of the city of Macondo. No one knew for certain where the limits of reality lay. Well [*laughs*], when they named this well "Macondo," they had no idea how prophetic that name would be. (50:53–51:27)

The recurring reference to magic[8] in both plays thus encompasses the intoxicating effect of petro-culture, which makes people believe that they can enjoy "progress"

8 On the one hand, magical thinking is often defined as an "irrational" way of thinking that sees causal connections between events that are not connected or even correlated. By some definitions, any "thought process that is not logical, systematic, or scientific might be characterized as magical" (Rosengren and French 43). However, as Karl Rosengren and Jason A. French observe, such defini-

and "even the future itself" without cost, as well as marking this intoxication as part and parcel of the toxic narratives of human supremacy and mastery it inspires, including those of nationalist Othering and the logics of colonialism/imperialism. In the face of Farouk's argument in part 3 of *Oil* that Libya should be in charge of their own oil industry because "Oil is the product of our land" (72), May interrupts him to ask: "When has land ever belonged to anyone for any other reason than someone marching in and taking it? [. . .] taking national boundaries too seriously in the distribution of global resources is short-sighted" (72). May's reasoning reveals the close kinship between the extractive logics of imperialism and global capitalism, and this is further reinforced when her husband Tom admonishes her "What did you think you were going to do, start a war?" and she counters: "War started the day we decided we had a right to be warm even when the sun isn't shining" (74). The intoxication with oil is also an intoxication with a (presumed) position of power. Ultimately, "magical thinking" also translates into the assumption that one has a power to influence and control, for example, natural forces and events that are clearly beyond one's control.

Especially via May's statements, the audience is induced to distance themselves and recognize the neocolonial thinking that sustains such intoxication. At the same time, the audience members' position can be compared to moments of realization which LeMenager observes in *Living Oil* with regard to people who witnessed the Santa Barbara oil spill in 1969: "Privileged people, conscious of their happiness, witness the violence of the cheap energy that made it possible" (25). Similarly, the scene in *Oil* prompts the audience to recognize their own complicity in such intoxication.

Thus, *Spill* illustrates the widespread damage to both humans and the more-than-human world in the aftermath of the BP oil spill as a result of the hubristic assumption of being in control even though the spill's containment was beyond the expertise of anyone involved. Meanwhile, *Oil* also strongly emphasizes in part 5 and the last "Interscene,"[9] which ends the play, that power dynamics change. At the end of the play, in the year 2051, May and Amy are living in poor conditions without enough oil to run their generator. Fan Wang, a sales representative from the Nangto corporation, who comes by to sell them new energy tech-

tions frequently use "magical thinking" as a "pejorative label for thinking that differs either from that of educated adults in technologically advanced societies or the majority of societies in general" (43), and thus it becomes an element of practices of cultural Othering. In *Spill*, it rather serves to highlight the hubris of thinking that Western science and engineering give humanity near-magical control of nature.

9 The different parts of *Oil* are connected via short, dreamlike sequences that are each entitled "Interscene."

nology (a nuclear fusion device), is exasperated to find they only speak English in a world in which Mandarin has become the dominant language (113–115). The last "Interscene" then reveals the previous scene to be nothing more than a part of an historical museum exhibit. An audio recording accompanying the scene which Fan Wang is watching disinterestedly provides a frame narrative: "As the Age of Oil came to a close so this Western Empire fell into decline. The Western Empire, like the Roman Empire that had come before, made the false assumption that their version of modernity was modernity itself" (124). While *Spill* only alludes to the demise of oil, via the "rise and fall of the city of Macondo," *Oil* portrays the Petrocene as finite. And yet *Oil* also follows the logic of what Canavan calls "the ideology of ecstatic technological progress" which assumes that "in due time oil itself will eventually be superseded by a new form of energy – something even more excessive and miraculous, allowing for even greater marvels and wonders" (334). This is precisely what happens at the end of *Oil*: Fan Wang's demonstration of the new Toroid elicits a reaction in Amy that mirrors May's reaction to seeing the kerosene lamp in part 1: "*it's glorious – she's spellbound*" (115). The parallel reactions make it clear that the new energy source might not be oil, but the mechanisms of creating expendable bodies and populations, and the logics of extraction (Helium 3, which is needed for the Toroid to run, is harvested on the moon) remain firmly in place.

Conclusion: Playing the Petrocene

Both plays open up visions for the audience that illuminate "our dependency on vegetal power in its many phases" (Sullivan 152), but they achieve more than simply to pile on further dystopian narratives that might have been put in scene more dramatically as a blockbuster film.[10] One of the strategies of "ecodramaturgy" that May explains in the introduction to *Earth Matters on Stage* is "using theater as methodology to approach contemporary environmental problems" (4). In *Spill* and *Oil*, the very form in which the plays present their narratives *as* plays (rather than as novels or movies, for example) becomes a central element of their function as ecocritical plays. They create a true Petrocene because in their respective worlds, oil is not only present through the structures of petro-culture, it also truly forms the core of their narratives around which everything else revolves. This is all the more impressive because both plays explicitly draw attention to the dimen-

10 Which in fact has been done with the Deepwater Horizon disaster. An eponymous action thriller came out in 2016, starring Mark Wahlberg, Kurt Russell, and John Malkovich.

sions of oil that are beyond human reach or control. Simultaneously, however, they condense and intensify a world in which "The expectation that haunts the future is not the end of capital, but that, despite everything, oil capital will not end until every last drop of oil (or atom of fossil fuels) is burned and released into the atmosphere" (Szeman 820).

In *Spill*, the double visions of toxicity and intoxication, the violence and the thrill of the oil industry are transported by the vast amount of voices and perspectives that reinforce but also juxtapose each other. By simultaneously reiterating myths of the American Dream and giving voice to witness accounts of the damage done to human and nonhuman life-worlds, they bring together optimistic narratives of progress and dire outlooks on the unsustainability of these optimistic beliefs. Along with statistics, numbers, and news reports on the oil leaking unimpeded into the ocean for several months, *Spill* presents interviews[11] with family members of the Deepwater Horizon crew arguing that "none of us can survive without oil," and venting their anger:

> Look, get your eye on the ball. Before you ever get to the oil spill you need to remember that eleven people got killed. I don't wanna hear another word about Dawn dishwashing liquid cleaning those ducks up and you put 'em back in the water. The environment will survive; we can't get our guys back. They're gone. It was an explosion, not a spill. (1:15:18–1:15:42)

Via its polyvocality, *Spill* creates a mosaic of viewpoints and relations to the oil spill that coexist. Because none of the voices can be simply dismissed, even if one disagrees with a given position, the audience is prompted to face and to try to grasp some of the complexities of the Petrocene.

Oil on the other hand has a very limited cast, and the same figures appear in slightly different constellations in its five parts. However, it spans over 160 years including "leap[s] in time and place" (Poore 30). The toxicity of extractive logics and the intoxication of mesmerized awe at the possibilities of "progress" are illuminated particularly through the ways in which characters in different parts mirror each other and dialogues are reiterated with a difference, echoing earlier statements but with changed power dynamics. Hickson herself has argued: "if you are writing a play that's about our moment in time and this moment in time in relation to a resource that has been around 150 million years, it makes sense to choose an artform that is only going to exist for three months and then disappear off the face of the planet" ("Hickson on Writing *Oil*"). And it is this sense of ephemerality that is at once maintained through the frequent changes in scene

11 Overall, Fondakowski collected over 200 hours of interview material (Ensemble Studio Theatre).

and time in the play, but that is also countered by the deep time of oil itself. In part 3, Amy rebukes May: "Every drop of oil that you drag out of the ground contains billions of tiny sea creatures and took one hundred and fifty million years to make – and you get to decide how it's used, do you? Out of six million generations – you know best?" (59).

Through the worlds *Oil* and *Spill* create on stage, they demonstrate how profoundly oil mediates our relationships "to other humans, to other life, and to things" (LeMenager 6). Reading them in conjunction also reveals that part of the quest to decenter the human in eco-drama might be served best by rendering tangible the deeply engrained and unmarked narratives of human supremacy that fuel the ideology of "ecstatic technological progress." Both plays make use of showcasing oil's toxicity and intoxication to reveal how narratives of human supremacy feed on and simultaneously enable a hubristic vision of the "boundaries of skin and kin" that depends on extractive logics and the ready sacrifice of lives (both human and nonhuman) deemed expendable.

While both plays highlight the cost of such "magical thinking" that reveals itself as willful ignorance and neocolonialist smugness, *Oil*'s ending in particular highlights the false security of believing that in the Petrocene – or its futuristic successors – anyone can be safe from becoming "expendable," or that further progress will offer an escape from current forms of toxicity.

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