

# ANTHROPOCENE INSECURITIES: EXTRACTION, AESTHETICS, AND THE BAKKEN OILFIELDS

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**T**he arrival of the anthropocene in the humanities has unsettled some of the most dearly held concepts and assumptions of humanistic inquiry. There is considerable debate over its different uses as well as its periodization, but it most certainly names the epoch when the human species becomes a geologic force, altering Earth systems through the burning of fossil fuels, the expansions of industrial agriculture, and exponential population growth, among other factors.<sup>1</sup> As a range of literary and cultural critics, historians, philosophers, legal scholars, and others have noted, the mere fact that we can no longer speak of a division of human and nature has profound consequences for disciplines that have long foregrounded human history, thought, feeling, and cultural production.<sup>2</sup> If studying the anthropocene requires our methods to thread together human and nonhuman nature, Earth systems and world-system, security studies must now enfold environment-making, natural resources, and nonhuman natures into the more well-traveled areas of financial, geopolitical, and, on the whole, human security.

This essay turns to a single extraction zone, the oil and gas rich Bakken shale formation in North Dakota, Montana, and Saskatchewan, to offer a few ways to think through the anthropocene and to highlight the role aesthetics might play in such thinking. The questions that drive this essay emerged from the collective intellectual work of a group of scholars that participated in an Antipode workshop based in the Bakken region of North Dakota and Montana in 2015.<sup>3</sup> We wanted to locate the anthropocene, to ground it in a particular time and place and see what forms of knowledge we might generate by resisting the large, sweeping historical narratives associated with the anthropocene. For us, the temptation to think in terms of "species," a generalized "anthropos," or along vast temporal scales risked losing the complexities of historically and geographically located experiences. Since then, I have wondered about how to engage the enormous conceptual and philosophical challenges of the anthropocene without abandoning decades of humanities research and the political commitments that have animated and resulted from that research. I want to pursue two sets of questions that became important to me during my time in North Dakota. The first set is focused on aesthetics (how we look) and the second on sites (where we look). So, the first set: What aesthetic forms and practices emerge from a particular extraction zone and make it visible? How do artworks configure the drive for energy security with the harm extraction routinely brings to human life and nonhuman natures? Second, what happens when we locate the anthropocene in a specific time and place? By what means can

we develop concepts from a specific site and apply them elsewhere or, at the very least, initiate new comparisons between places near and far, times past and present? I approach these questions through cultural production from and about the Bakken. The small selection of material I address here simultaneously invites us to see the exceptionality of the Bakken and opens ways for us to think beyond the specific site.

What would it mean to see, hear, narrate, and generally experience the anthropocene?<sup>4</sup> How do anthropocene aesthetics structure relations between human and nonhuman natures? Jedediah Purdy and Jason W. Moore have both argued that the human domination of nature has produced various types of environmental imaginations throughout history. Such imaginations, or “ways of seeing” as Purdy and Moore both say, distill and direct how humans interact with the natural world.<sup>5</sup> Moore argues specifically that capitalism is an ecological regime, a way of organizing nature in the service of capitalist accumulation.<sup>6</sup> Our ways of seeing and knowing nature are part of that regime and that makes aesthetics and epistemology inescapably political. The political aesthetic we need now is one that casts our current epoch as the decisive result of political and economic choices made over the last few centuries, most of them made with some knowledge about the ecological consequences.<sup>7</sup> Yet, as Nicholas Mirzoeff argues, the anthropocene aesthetic that has developed over the last few hundred years paradoxically produces anesthetic effects: this aesthetic “allows us to move on, to see nothing and keep circulating commodities, despite the destruction to the biosphere.”<sup>8</sup> In his analysis of Monet’s *Impression: Sun Rising* (1873), Mirzoeff notes that this painting is heralded for Monet’s masterful and bewitching “handling of color and light,” even as it depicts coal powered steamers and yellow coal smoke mingling with the other colors of dawn’s slow approach.<sup>9</sup> What we have, then, is more than a thoroughly modern instance of beauty that weds aesthetic innovation to industrial modernity; Monet’s canvas “at once reveals and aestheticizes anthropogenic environmental destruction.”<sup>10</sup> We are so thoroughly accustomed to the idea of human domination of nature that Monet’s canvases only reinforce the idea of human mastery even as they display a world becoming less and less inhabitable. For Mirzoeff, the long history of this anthropocene aesthetic has produced a dangerous numbing effect: “the conquest of nature, having been aestheticized, leads to a loss of perception (*aisthesis*), which is to say, it becomes an anesthetic.”<sup>11</sup> The dilemma is not, and has never been, that we cannot see the relationship of human and nonhuman natures; rather, that relationship is so deeply embedded in our sensorium that our aesthetic perception of it is blunted. Mirzoeff proposes a counter-visibility, one that would not only expose the uneven distribution of the effects of climate change, but would defamiliarize our sensorium and force us to see our planetary insecurity as something wrought by human activity (and perhaps beyond the reach of human mastery to fix).

Mirzoeff’s argument pursues an aesthetic whose politics shift from normalization to critique. While I find myself in agreement with Mirzoeff’s diagnosis and prescriptions, I wonder if we might still make space for artworks that neither normalize nor critique. Alongside Mirzoeff’s counter-visibility I would like to outline another aesthetic: call it an aesthetic of configuration. Configuration draws materials into combinations and patterns that generate multiple

perceptions. In this way, works that are openly engaged with environment-making, resource extraction, or climate justice do not only critique; they are conceptual efforts to model dialectically the relationships of human and nonhuman nature. So, we return to the two-fold question with which I began: where do we look and how do we look? To be clear, these are not separate questions, but components of a dialectical procedure, which is to say they must be thought together and not considered as separate things to be brought into relation. In this way, specific sites become thinkable through aesthetic processes at the same moment that those processes attain legibility within and against their geographical and historical conditions of production.

So why the Bakken? The oil and gas boom in the Bakken region of North Dakota attracted a flood of investment, energy companies, and laborers during the Great Recession. It did not take long for what Michael Watts calls “petro-magic” to transform both North Dakota and American energy security.<sup>12</sup> In 2014, the Bakken accounted for 10% of U.S. oil production, making the U.S. a net producer of oil. The boom has had dramatic impacts on the state as well. Between 2000-2004 North Dakota’s outmigration was an astonishing 6.3%. By 2010 that trend had not just slowed, but reversed completely. North Dakota boasted the nation’s top population growth with a rate around 2.2%. The state’s per capita GDP climbed from 38th in 2001 to a remarkable 29% percent above the national average. According to the U.S. Bureau of Economy Analysis, North Dakota’s GDP increased by almost 11%, which is even more impressive when ranged against the national rate of 2% (and lower) and that of Texas, another petrostate which grew at 3.27%.<sup>13</sup> These numbers concretize oil’s magical ability to conjure economic opportunity even during the midst of the Great Recession, to offer wealth and financial security alongside the slow, ongoing dispossession that followed the 2008 crisis. Of course, these aren’t the only numbers and they skirt the grim realities that journalists and media outlets have referred to as the “dark side of the boom.”<sup>14</sup> Between 2005-2011, violent crime in North Dakota increased by 121%. Watford City, ND recorded 41 calls for police service in 2006 and 7414 in 2014. Comparable spikes in human and drug trafficking led state, federal, and tribal authorities to launch the multi-jurisdictional Project Safe Bakken in 2013; two years later, federal and state law enforcement agencies launched Organized Crime Strike Force, which was specifically “aimed at identifying, targeting and dismantling organized crime in the Bakken, including human trafficking, drug and weapons trafficking, as well as white collar crimes.”<sup>15</sup>

These statistics are not meant to tell the whole story of the boom, but they do reveal a version of what Frederick Buell identifies as the relationship of exuberance and catastrophe that cuts across oil cultures.<sup>16</sup> This contradiction, especially as it has taken shape in the Bakken, has replaced the temporality of boom and bust that structures so many narratives of extraction zones. That way of marking time suggests that loss follows gain; but the Bakken and the range of documentaries, reportage, and artworks that try to grapple with its oil culture capture something else. There is no timeline of boom and then bust. Here, desolation is produced alongside abundance, loss accumulates alongside gain, and the scramble for energy increases the harm to human bodies, built and natural environments, and nonhuman nature. In the Bakken, there are busts within the boom.

It is clear that the cities and organizations charged with managing the boom are uniquely aware of these dynamics. Take, for example, the Williston Economic Development Office's 2015 campaign entitled "The Last Great Place for Opportunity!" The campaign's video heralds Williston, ND as the newest site of American energy production and economic strength; the flow of oil has left the area awash in cash, attracted development in multiple sectors of the economy, and cultivated opportunities for both entrepreneurial success and personal redemption. The video tries to dispel any fears that the area will suffer the inevitable boom and bust cycle that follows virtually every discovery of oil and gas. In this sense, "the last" carries associations of settlement and permanence. A more recent video launched in January 2016 appears to answer the growing anxieties that plummeting oil prices will herald the end of all this opportunity. In this video, Williston touts its incredible population and area growth and its swollen tax revenues, which, they state, bests even those of the larger, more metropolitan North Dakota cities of Bismarck and Fargo. This is not just another frontier for resource extraction and short-term riches, but a site for permanent settlement, where one can witness a version of the American dream, which Morgan Adamson reads as not only "the renewal of the middle class but the renewal of white America itself."<sup>17</sup> The triumphant tone of "The Last Great Opportunity" and its successors still cannot manage to escape that other version of "last": fossil fuel extraction historically is not the safest bet for long-term economic security, but, it appears, this is the last chance for large swaths of the population who have been deemed disposable in our era of neoliberal capitalism.

It would be easy enough to cast these videos as naïve propaganda and to juxtapose these figurations of the Bakken with other accounts of daily life in the oil patch, especially those highly acclaimed and award-winning documentaries such as *Sweet Crude Man Camp* (2013), *The Overnights* (2014), and *White Earth* (2014). These films all cast into brutal relief the unseen toll of those great opportunities in the Bakken. They chronicle the desperate attempts by individuals to make ends meet, to lift themselves and their families out of mortgage and medical debt; we see workers sleeping in their cars and trucks during the unforgiving North Dakota winters; young children rarely see their fathers who spend endless hours toiling away at oil jobs; and many of those who chased the promise of financial security to North Dakota find themselves in more precarious situations than the ones they fled. My point is not to separate these figurations of the Bakken into state-sponsored, industry-friendly propaganda and rugged Orwellian truth-telling. While these films all critique the triumphant visualizations of an extraction zone, they assume that security is a largely human affair and not part of a broader, more intricate political ecology. In the final analysis, the Bakken is only the most recent location where neoliberal capitalism's promises mutate into disappointment and dispossession.

By contrast, some of the visual art emerging from the Bakken configures a more dialectical version of insecurity that figures nonhuman nature as more than setting or context. Susanne Williams' stirring installation *Bakken Bride* bundles together human form, nonhuman matter, and broader questions of economy, land, and extraction [Figure 1]. *Bakken Bride* was part of the wide-ranging, provocative *Bakken Boom! Artists Respond to the North Dakota Oil Rush* exhibition at the Plains Art Museum in Fargo, ND that ran from January



Figure 1: Bakken Bride, Susanne Williams, 2015. Used by permission of the artist.

29-August 15, 2015.<sup>18</sup> In the gallery space, the dress hangs ghost-like, eerily disembodied, evoking the human form that might wear this dress as well as the absent partner awaiting the bride. The bridal gown is made of heated and reformed plastic garbage bags. On one level, the dress metaphorizes the relationship between the land with its deeply buried natural resources and the extraction industry as a marriage. The metaphorization of this relationship works in two ways. In the first instance, “marriage” points to the legal status and recognition of this relation: the landscape and the geological formations below its surface are legally bound to the oil and gas industry. That legal contract has enriched the oil industry and done little to protect or secure the Bakken. Although offered up here in virginal white, the Bakken has been subjected to multiple forms of ecological violence: blowouts, saline spills that have ruined acres of farmland, oil spills, including the largest onshore spill in American history, and pipeline leaks, all of which should constitute a breach of contract.<sup>19</sup> Yet, the “slick alliance” of energy companies and local and state governments typically means that

fines are dramatically reduced and punishment is rarely meted out.<sup>20</sup> This abusive, asymmetrical relation also is tied to another extra-legal, transcendent notion of marriage: love, eternal unions, and theological forms of recognition whose legitimacy exceeds any secular grounding. This latter figuration evokes the providential vision of nature as a storehouse of resources awaiting human cultivation.

At first glance, *Bakken Bride* might appear to anaestheticize our sensibilities by transforming extractive violence into pristine beauty. However, we cannot think of these metaphorical workings without being confronted by the artwork's materiality, which, I suggest, short-circuits any possibility that *Bakken Bride* beautifies and conceals the brutal injustices of extraction. This object is composed of transfigured plastic garbage bags, a petroleum byproduct. The materiality produces its own figural effects and conjures the various forms of waste that extraction produces: the mangled bodies of injured workers, the rise in human trafficking, environmental despoliation, and an atmosphere forced to absorb millions of tons of carbon dioxide and methane from natural gas flaring. Artworks like *Bakken Bride* configure the present contradictions of the anthropocene—beauty and waste, human form and nonhuman nature, metaphor and materiality—and keep them in motion. One item never sublates its opposite and their combination makes it impossible to look upon the dress without seeing the double character of extraction. In its own way, this piece suggests that living now requires another environmental imagination, another aesthetic that allows us to see the potentialities and damages of the anthropocene as it is lived in space and time.

Finally, I would suggest that the raw material of the dress, its existence as a plastic object and a byproduct of extraction, allows us to transition from the spatio-temporal specificity of 21st-century Bakken to some speculation about an anthropocene future. As part of the evolving and expanding lexicon for the anthropocene, the sheer abundance of plastic has led researchers from the sciences and the editorial board of *The New York Times* to hypothesize that we exist in the Plasticene.<sup>22</sup> Jan Zalasiewicz points out that “the cumulative amount produced as of 2015 is of the order of 5 billion tons, which is enough to wrap the Earth in a layer of cling film, or plastic wrap.”<sup>23</sup> Because of the ubiquity of plastics across terrestrial and marine realms, plastics may very well constitute a stratigraphic marker of the anthropocene. Plastics piling up in landfills could fossilize; microplastic fibers have been found in Arctic sea ice and “macroplastic fragments are already visible in beachrock deposits, as in the Basque coast.”<sup>24</sup> Plastic debris in the ocean has even given rise to new ecologies, a “Plastisphere” composed of microbes. And, perhaps in one of the strangest ironies, plastics may very well become fossil fuels in a distant future.<sup>25</sup>

This byproduct of petroleum extraction not only engenders ecological change; it also becomes a sign by which geologists in a very distant future will interpret human activity, seeing this particular signature of contemporary humans in the stratigraphic record. However, we need not only speculate about the interpretive dilemmas of future geologists. We can instead ask what role art and its interpretive dilemmas—indeed its challenges—play in our thinking of the anthropocene. It can help us construe the contradictory, dialectically intertwined relationship of historical and geological time, capitalism and ecology, and human

and nonhuman natures. Rather than numbing us to ecological crisis or tempting us with new universalisms, the work of art engages with politics by making us reconsider how we see and think in this new, precarious epoch.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Most of the debates turn on whether the passage into the anthropocene occurs during the industrial revolution or during the Great Acceleration that follows the Second World War. See Paul Crutzen and W. Steffen. "How Long Have We Been in the Anthropocene Era?" *Climatic Change* 61, no. 3 (2003): 251–57; Steffen, W., J. Grinevald, P. Crutzen, and J. McNeill. "The Anthropocene: Conceptual and Historical Perspectives." *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society A: Mathematical, Physical and Engineering Sciences* 369, no. 1938 (2011): 842–67. Will Steffen, Wendy Broadgate, Lisa Deutsch, Owen Gaffney, and Cornelia Ludwig. "The Trajectory of the Anthropocene: The Great Acceleration." *The Anthropocene Review* 2, no. 1 (January 16, 2015), 81–98. For a critical take on the anthropocene as a historical narrative, see Christophe Bonneuil and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz, *The Shock of the Anthropocene: The Earth, History, and Us* (NY: Verso Books, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> In addition to Bonneuil and Fressoz, see Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History: Four Theses," *Critical Inquiry* 35:2 (2009): 197–222. Jedediah Purdy *After Nature: A Politics for the Anthropocene* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2015); Roy Scranton *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene: Reflections on the End of a Civilization* (San Francisco: City Lights Publishers, 2015); Adam Trexler, *Anthropocene Fictions: The Novel in a Time of Climate Change* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2015); Kathryn Yusoff, "Anthropogenesis: Origins and Endings in the Anthropocene," *Theory, Culture, & Society* 33:2 (March 2016): 3–28. It should also be noted that many working in ecocriticism and the environmental humanities more broadly have long queried the relationship of humans and nonhuman nature.

<sup>3</sup> A report and discussion of our work in the Bakken can be found here: <https://antipodefoundation.org/2015/11/03/grounding-the-anthropocene/>

<sup>4</sup> For more on aesthetics and the anthropocene, see Allison Carruth and Robert P. Marzec, "Environmental Visualization in the Anthropocene: Technologies, Aesthetics, Ethics," *Public Culture* 26:2 (2015): 205–211; Nicholas Mirzoeff, "Visualizing the Anthropocene," *Public Culture* 26:2 (2015): 213–232; Heather Davis and Etienne Turpin (eds.), *Art in the Anthropocene: Encounters Among Aesthetics, Politics, Environments and Epistemologies* (London: Open Humanities Press, 2015). Also see Kate Marshall and Tobias Boes' co-edited section "Writing the Anthropocene" in *minnesota review* 83 (2014).

<sup>5</sup> Jason W. Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital* (NY: Verso Books, 2015); Jedediah Purdy, *After Nature: A Politics for the Anthropocene* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2015).

<sup>6</sup> See especially Chapter 5, "The Capitalization of Nature, or the Limits of Historical Nature," in Moore's *Capitalism in the Web of Life*.

<sup>7</sup> Bonneuil and Fressoz, *The Shock of the Anthropocene*, 258.

<sup>8</sup> Mirzoeff, "Visualizing the Anthropocene," 217.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 221.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 221.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 220.

<sup>12</sup> Michael Watts, "Petro-Violence: Community, Extraction, and Political Ecology of a Mythic Commodity," in *Violent Environments*, ed. Nancy Less Peluso and Michael Watts (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2001): 189-212.

<sup>13</sup> See "North Dakota sees increase in real GDP per capita following Bakken production," *U.S. Energy Information Administration*. <http://www.eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.cfm?id=12071>. Accessed February 28, 2016.

<sup>14</sup> See "Dark Side of the Boom," Sari Horwitz, *The Washington Post*, September 28, 2014; "The Dark Side of the Oil Boom: Human Trafficking in the Heartland," Aaron Ernst, *Al Jazeera America* April 28, 2014: <http://america.aljazeera.com/watch/shows/america-tonight/articles/2014/4/28/the-dark-side-of-the-oil-boom-human-trafficking-in-the-heartland.html>; "The Dark Side of the Boom: What Makes North Dakota Oil and Gas So Dangerous?," Emily Guerin, *Inside Energy*, September 16, 2014: <http://insideenergy.org/2014/09/16/dark-side-of-the-boom-what-makes-north-dakota-oil-and-gas-so-dangerous/>. For more on the Tesoro onshore oil spill, see "Oil Spill in North Dakota Raises Detection Concerns," Dan Frosch, *The New York Times*, October 23, 2013: <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/24/us/oil-spill-in-north-dakota-raises-detection-concerns.html>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.fbi.gov/saltlakecity/press-releases/2015/montana-and-north-dakota-u.s.-attorneys-announce-creation-of-bakken-organized-crime-strike-force-in-oil-patch>

<sup>16</sup> Frederick Buell, "A Short History of Oil Cultures; or, the Marriage of Catastrophe and Exuberance," in *Oil Culture*, ed. Daniel Worden and Barrett Ross (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014): 69-88.

<sup>17</sup> Morgan Adamson, "Anthropocene Realism," *The New Inquiry* (November 30, 2015) <http://thenewinquiry.com/essays/anthropocene-realism/>. Last accessed April 1, 2016.

<sup>18</sup> For more on this exhibition, see Becky Dunham, "Bakken Boom! Artists Respond to the North Dakota Oil Rush," in *The Bakken Goes Boom: Oil and the Changing Geographies of North Dakota*, ed. William Caraher and Kyle Conway (The Digital Press at the University of North Dakota, 2016): 293-356.

<sup>19</sup> For more on the Tesoro onshore oil spill, see "Oil Spill in North Dakota Raises Detection Concerns," Dan Frosch, *The New York Times*, October 23, 2013: <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/24/us/oil-spill-in-north-dakota-raises-detection-concerns.html>. Last accessed April 1, 2016.

<sup>20</sup> Ken Saro-Wiwa coined the term "slick alliance." On the slick relationship between energy companies and the state, see "The Downside of the Boom," Deborah Sontag and Robert Gebeloff, *The New York Times*, November 22, 2014: <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2014/11/23/us/north-dakota-oil-boom-downside.html>; "North Dakota Regulators Directed to Start Explaining Oil Spill Fine Reductions in Writing," Mike Nowitzki, *The Bismarck Tribune*, January 11, 2016: [http://bismarcktribune.com/bakken/north-dakota-regulators-directed-to-start-explaining-oil-spill-fine/article\\_50ef7623-359e-589e-b157-c9dfcaa35c52.html](http://bismarcktribune.com/bakken/north-dakota-regulators-directed-to-start-explaining-oil-spill-fine/article_50ef7623-359e-589e-b157-c9dfcaa35c52.html); "North Dakota's Oil Boom Brings Damage Along With Prosperity," Nicholas Kusnetz, *ProPublica* June 13, 2012: <https://www.propublica.org/article/the-other-fracking-north-dakotas-oil-boom-brings-damage-along-with-prosperity>

<sup>21</sup> On providential visions of nature, see Purdy, *After Nature: A Politics for the Anthropocene*, especially Chapter 2 "God's Avid Gardeners."

<sup>22</sup> "Notes from the Plasticene Epoch: From Ocean to Beach, Tons of Plastic Pollution," *The New York Times*: [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/15/opinion/sunday/from-ocean-to-beach-tons-of-plastic-pollution.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/15/opinion/sunday/from-ocean-to-beach-tons-of-plastic-pollution.html?_r=1); Patricia Corcoran, Charles J. Moore, and Kelly Jazvac, "An Anthropogenic Marker Horizon in the Future Rock Record," *GSA Today* 24:6 (June 2014): 4-8. Jan Zalasiewicz, Colin N. Waters, Juliana A. Ivar do Sul, Patricia L. Corcoran, et al., "The Geological Cycle of Plastics and Their Use as a Stratigraphic Indicator of the Anthropocene," *Anthropocene* online January 18, 2016.

<sup>23</sup> Zalasiewicz, et al., "The Geological Cycle of Plastics," 2.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.