

## THE PETRO-BIENNIAL COMPLEX

Growing concerns about impending environmental collapse have prompted increased attention to Indigenous relationships with the land and its multiple systems. These relationships stand in stark contrast to the extraction of oil and other resources from land and water—extraction that has been and remains a constitutive component of colonialism.

Today, the first waves of resource extraction in Indigenous lands, motivated by desires for precious metals, animal pelts, agricultural products, and soil to cultivate large crops of grain and herd cattle, have given way to the privatization of water, ongoing mining of natural and mineral resources, and, in particular, the extraction of oil. The extraction, transportation, and utilization of oil have each compromised Indigenous land, sustenance, and life itself, from the Amazon jungle to Standing Rock, North Dakota.

At the same time, the capital derived from oil extraction is transformed into philanthropy by funding cultural events like the Chicago Architecture Biennial. “Petro-philanthropy” thereby contributes to the social legitimacy of fossil fuel companies—a legitimization of their expanded operations, their contributions to climate crisis, and their damaging effects on communities that live within or nearby their destructive operations.

Biennials and museums are sponsored by compromised wealth. These compromises have inspired boycotts of biennials and museum exhibitions, but these boycotts, to the extent that they are aestheticized or symbolic gestures more than political acts, are themselves compromised. At the same time, some participants in biennials and museum exhibitions have sought to reveal the compromised wealth that supports their participation. What are the possibilities and limits of critical participation in cultural activities funded by petro-philanthropy? How can cultural agents leverage petro-capitalist wealth against petro-capitalism? How can cultural work sponsored by petro-philanthropy productively augment Indigenous activism against petro-colonialism? These are just some of the questions that emerge from the petro-biennial complex.

## BP: PETRO-COLONIALISM, PETRO-CAPITALISM, PETRO-PHILANTHROPY, PETRO-CULTURE

Oil money is not distributed based on where the arts are most in need, but on where the interests of the corporations can best be served. BP Or Not BP? “Do the arts need oil sponsorship?”

BP’s sponsorship of the Chicago Architecture Biennial and other artistic and architectural programming is part of a deliberate corporate strategy. This strategy deploys cultural sponsorship to counteract BP’s public status as a protagonist in global warming, environmental devastation, and ongoing violence against Indigenous peoples and lands across the planet. This strategy also leverages the vast fiscal discrepancy between petro-capitalism and petro-philanthropy; BP’s initial \$2.5 million contribution to the Chicago Architecture Biennial at once represented almost 50% of the biennial’s budget and 0.00001% of the company’s annual revenue.

In the words of Ian Conn, BP’s Chief Executive for Refining and Marketing, BP’s sponsorships aim at “brand protection and connection with customers and society,” along with the enhancement of the company’s “relationship with strategic commercial partners.”<sup>1</sup> These ambitions are increasingly necessary for BP as the necessity to move away from oil towards carbon neutrality becomes ever more urgent. The Chicago Architecture Biennial, as the largest and most prestigious architecture biennial in the United States, thereby offers an ideal platform for BP to pose itself as a contributor to architecture and culture and displace recognition of BP as a contributor to impending planetary ecocide—the destruction of environments and the human and non-human life that supports and is supported by them.

BP is one of the planet’s central protagonists in climate crisis. Along with Chevron, Exxon, and Shell, BP is responsible for more than 10% of the world’s carbon emissions since 1965.<sup>2</sup> While the prevention of climate catastrophe rests on keeping at least 80% of known fossil fuel reserves in the ground, BP continues to explore, extract, and profit from new fossil fuel sources.<sup>3</sup> But BP does not only profit from continued fossil fuel use; as “Europe’s strongest advocate of dirty energy,

opposing even mild measures to raise carbon trading prices,” BP also actively lobbies against policies that could mitigate climate crisis.<sup>4</sup> And so, even as the necessity to transition from fossil fuels to renewable energy sources and carbon neutrality intensifies, BP continues to impede this transition and to bring planetary climate crisis and ecocide ever closer as unavoidable futures.

In “... And Other Such Stories,” at the 2019 Chicago Architecture Biennial, the curators have sought to reveal the forces that have shaped the planet, which they summarize in their curatorial statement as “colonial expansion, mass migration, extraction economies, and rapid industrialization.” The interest in climatic and ecological concerns expressed here stands in stark contrast with BP, its main sponsor. Furthermore, in the past, BP’s sponsorship of cultural institutions has not been neutral, pointing to additional complications in the horizon.<sup>5</sup>

Arguments on compromised funding range from absolute acceptance (with the justification that all wealth is compromised) to absolute refusal.<sup>6</sup> Critics have pointed to the need to overturn larger systemic structures that lead to culture washing, rewarding corporations with tax breaks and favorable press in exchange for donations instead of taxing them and providing this income to cultural institutions as their due, rather than a favor.<sup>7</sup> While institutional critique has provided a place for politics in the museum, the art object can easily be reabsorbed into the exhibitionary complex—a return that must be resisted at all costs if the politics of the object are to remain operative.<sup>8</sup>

**The Settler Colonial City Project has decided to intervene both inside and outside the Chicago Architecture Biennial. We acknowledge that this is an imperfect solution but, in our view, it is preferable to inaction. Through the public discussion that is part of the biennial program, SCCP has embedded a critique of BP within the exhibition. Through this publication, which is not part of the biennial, SCCP actively resists appropriation by denouncing BP’s petro-colonialism and petro-philanthropy and by amplifying voices of Indigenous resistance speaking on behalf of decolonized futurities.**

shorship: A corrupting influence,” Art Not Oil Coalition, May 2016, <http://www.artnotoil.org.uk/sites/default/files/BPs%20Corrupting%20Influence.pdf.pdf>  
<sup>6</sup> See Hannah Black, Claran Finlayson, and Tobi Haslett, “The Tear Gas Biennial,” in *Artforum*, 17 July 2019, <https://www.artforum.com/slant/a-statement-from-hannah-black-claran-finlayson-and-tobi-haslett-on-warren-kanders-and-the-2019-whitney-biennial-80328>.  
<sup>7</sup> See Hal Foster, “Change at MoMA,” *London Review of Books*, 7 November 2019, <https://www.lrb.co.uk/v41/n21/hal-foster/change-at-moma>.  
<sup>8</sup> See Aruna D’Souza on the Hans Haacke retrospective at the New Museum, D’Souza, “What can we learn from institutional critique?” *Art in America*, 29 October 2019, <https://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-features/magazines/hans-haacke-new-museum-retrospective-institutional-critique/>.

<sup>1</sup> UK Tar Sands Network, “UK Tar Sands Network’s Questions to the 2012 BP AGM,” <https://no-tar-sands.org/2012/04/16/uk-tar-sands-networks-questions-to-the-2012-bp-agm/>.

<sup>2</sup> Matthew Taylor and Jonathan Watts in “Revealed: the 20 firms behind a third of all carbon emissions, in *The Guardian*, 9 October 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/oct/09/revealed-20-firms-third-carbon-emissions>  
<sup>3</sup> Christophe McGlade, “The Geographical Distribution of Fossil Fuels Unused When Limiting Global Warming to 2 °C,” *Nature* 517 (2015).

<sup>4</sup> Arthur Neslen “BP Tops the List of firms Obstructing Climate Action in Europe,” *The Guardian*, 21 September 2015.

<sup>5</sup> On the influence of BP on institutions it sponsors, see “BP’s cultural spon-

## INDIGENOUS RESISTANCE AND FUTURITY

### TAR SANDS

Tar sands are a mixture of sand, clay, and heavy crude oil. Deposits of tar sands in Alberta, Canada, currently comprise the second-largest source of oil on the planet. The primary method of extracting oil from tar sands consumes vast amounts of fresh water and leads to massive amounts of toxic waste, forest clear-cutting, and environmental destruction; it also produces 80% more greenhouse gases than processing other oil sources.<sup>14</sup>

Tar sands operations have had devastating effects on Indigenous communities. In Canada, 1,200 First Nation communities live within 200 km of mining operations nationally and an estimated 36% of all First Nation communities live within 50 km of mining developments and associated pollution zones. According to the Indigenous Environmental Network,

Pollution, boreal forest and ecosystem loss and habitat fragmentation is a direct threat to the cultural survival of ... First Nation peoples living within the tar sands sacrifice zone. People are simply too afraid to drink the water or harvest plants and animals. Some do so anyways, to ensure the preservation of knowledge, though the risks are great. In BC, pipeline projects would cross already devastated salmon aquatic habitat and ecologically sensitive landscapes with potential spills that would further decimate the cultural heritage of First Nations peoples.<sup>15</sup>

At the same time, Indigenous peoples are leading the resistance against tar sands projects that would destroy treaty reserve lands, along with the ecosystems, health, and heritage of Indigenous communities, for petro-capitalist profit.<sup>16</sup> The 2011 Mother Earth Accord, drafted by a number of U.S. and Canadian Indigenous leaders, has therefore called for a moratorium on all tar sands development.<sup>17</sup>

### OIL PIPELINES

In 2016, the Sacred Stones Camp, the Red Warrior Camp, and the Oceti Sakowin Camp resisted the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline through Great Sioux Nation Territory. Per the NYC Stands with Standing Rock Collective:

The Pipeline violates the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868 and 1851 signed by the United States, as well as recent United States environmental regulations. The potentially 1,200-mile pipeline presents the same environmental and human dangers as the Keystone XL pipeline, and would transport hydraulically fractured (fracked) crude oil from the Bakken Oil Fields in North Dakota to connect with existing pipelines in Illinois. While the pipeline was originally planned upriver from the predominantly white border town of Bismarck, North Dakota, the new route passes immediately above the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation, crossing Lake Oahe, tributaries of Lake Sakakawea, the Missouri River twice, and the Mississippi River once. Now is the time to stand in solidarity with Standing Rock against catastrophic environmental damage.<sup>18</sup>

In response to the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline, Indigenous resistance at Standing Rock argued: Mni Wiconi—“water is life.” Lower Brule Sioux historian Nick Estes explains the meaning of this phrase as an understanding of human and nonhuman relatives acting to protect each other:

For the Oceti Sakowin, Mni Sose, the Missouri River, is one such nonhuman relative who is alive, and who is also of the Mni Oyate, the Water Nation. Nothing owns her, and therefore she cannot be sold or alienated like a piece of property. (How do you sell a relative?) And protecting one’s relatives is part of enacting kinship and being a good relative, or Wotakuye, including from the threat of contamination by pipeline leak—in other words, death. This would also spell death for the Oceti Sakowin and its nonhuman relations. In this way, the rallying cry of Mni Wiconi—“water is life”—is also an affirmation that water is alive.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>18</sup> NYC Stands with Standing Rock Collective, 2016. “#StandingRockSyllabus.” <https://nycstandswithstandingrock.wordpress.com/standingrocksyllabus/>.

<sup>19</sup> Nick Estes, *Our History is the Future: Standing Rock versus the Dakota Access Pipeline*, and the Long History of Indigenous Resistance (London: Verso, 2019), 15.

# THE PETRO-BIENNIAL COMPLEX

Petro-Colonialism, Petro-Capitalism, Petro-Philanthropy, Petro-Culture, and Indigenous Resistance and Futurity

SETTLERCOLONIALCITYPROJECT.ORG

## THE PETRO-BIENNIAL COMPLEX

14 November 2019, 6–8pm  
Common Ground, Chicago Cultural Center

PARTICIPANTS

**Elsa Hoover (First Nations Anishinaabe/White)**  
Writer, Mapmaker, MArch Student, Harvard Graduate School of Design  
**Paulo Tavares**  
Curator, “...And Other Such Stories,” 2019 Chicago Architecture Biennial  
**Todd Palmer**  
Executive Director, Chicago Architecture Biennial  
**Nitasha Dhillon and Amin Husein**  
Decolonize This Place  
**Fawn Pochel (First Nations Oji-Cree)**  
Education Coordinator, American Indian Center, Chicago

Organized and moderated by Andrew Herscher and Ana María León, Settler Colonial City Project

This event is sponsored by the Chicago Architecture Biennial and the Temple Hoyne Buel Center for the Study of American Architecture at Columbia University

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### OIL EXTRACTION

One of the defining aspects of settler colonial states is their neglect of Indigenous claims to and relationships with land in order to facilitate the access of extractive industries. This dynamic leads to Indigenous peoples enduring the social, cultural, and environmental costs of resource extraction on the lands that they inhabit and sustain while, at the same time, obtaining little or none of the enormous wealth that extraction yields.<sup>9</sup>

In the last ten years, BP’s plans to and, in some cases, undertake drilling for oil in Alaska, Australia, Canada, Colombia, and West Papua have been vigorously opposed by the Indigenous communities that would be and are directly affected by those plans.<sup>10</sup> This opposition has itself been vigorously opposed by BP and the petro-states that BP’s oil sustains. And so, even as climate crisis becomes ever more likely, BP and other fossil fuel companies have continued to expand into lands inhabited by Indigenous peoples.<sup>11</sup>

Even BP’s “acquiescences” to Indigenous opposition are troubling. In 2017, for example, the Trump Administration opened up the Arctic Refuge coastal plain for oil and gas leasing. The Gwich’in Nation, already severely impacted by tar sands operations, mobilized against BP operations in the area, protesting outside BP’s Denver headquarters and speaking with senior executives from BP at the company’s Annual General Meeting in Aberdeen, Scotland. In August of 2019, BP announced it was selling all Alaska assets, which was initially interpreted as a victory for Indigenous resistance.<sup>12</sup> However, BP merely sold its Alaska operations and interests to Hilcorp, the largest private oil and gas operator in the state, transferring its operations to another company.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Ciaran O’Faircheallaigh, “Extractive Industries and Indigenous Peoples: A Changing Dynamic?” *Journal of Rural Studies* 30 (2013), 21.

<sup>10</sup> Kerry Smith, “Hundreds Unite Against Drilling in Great Australian Bight,” *Green Left Weekly*, 24 May 2018; Alfonso Cuéllar, “Oil and Peace in Colombia,” *Wilson Center Latin American Program*, [https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/colombia\\_cuellar.pdf](https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/colombia_cuellar.pdf); Connor Woodman, “Sacrifice Zone: BP, Freeport and the West Papuan Independence Struggle,” *New Internationalist*, 1 May 2017; Nic Meloney, “Mikmaq Voice Concerns Over Proposed Drilling as BP Canada Rig En Route to Nova Scotia,” *CBC News*, 13 April 2018, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/indigenous/mikmaq-unwelcoming-party-bp-canada-nova-scotia-14616072>.

<sup>11</sup> Matthew Bozigar, Clark L. Gray, and Richard E. Blisborrow, “Oil Extraction and Indigenous Livelihoods in the Northern Ecuadorian Amazon,” *World Development* 78 (2016), 126.

<sup>12</sup> “BP Leaving the Arctic Signals Oil Companies Need to Listen to the Gwich’in Nation,” *Last Real Indians*, 29 August 2019, <https://lastrealindians.com/news/2019/8/29/bp-leaving-the-arctic-signals-oil-companies-need-to-listen-to-the-gwichin-nation>.

<sup>13</sup> “BP to sell Alaska business to Hilcorp” *bp.com*, 8 November 2019, <https://www.bp.com/en/global/corporate/news-and-insights/press-releases/bp-to-sell-alaska-business-to-hilcorp.html>.

<sup>14</sup> Barry Saxifrage, “Ethical Oil? Why Stop There?” *Vancouver Observer*, 2 October 2011.

<sup>15</sup> Indigenous Environmental Network, “What Are the Tar Sands?” <https://www.ienearth.org/what-are-the-tar-sands/>.

<sup>16</sup> Indigenous Environmental Network, “What We Do,” <https://www.ienearth.org/what-we-do/tar-sands/>.

<sup>17</sup> Indigenous Environmental Network, “Mother Earth Accord,” <https://www.ienearth.org/mother-earth-accord/>.

