Mystifying Oil Today

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Since the use of divination methods to locate oil deposits in the nineteenth-century United States, a sense of the mystical has remained enmeshed with this fuel of modernity [1]. The deep mystification of fossil fuels like oil is partly a consequence of the material capacities that burning it enables. Some view this as transcending the limits of nature. For example, as historian Bob Johnson reminds us, “[b]y permitting us to move beyond the forest—to circumvent the earth’s nitrogen cycle and soil constraints and to escalate our labor productivity beyond the capacity of physical bodies—fossilized carbon rapidly became the foundation for more than a century of optimism about the future” [2]. In other words, fossil fuels gave us the energetic means to increase productive capacities beyond the material constraints of nature as such.

Perhaps like many others, my first encounter with the mystical relations of oil was, in Paul Thomas Anderson’s 2007 film *There Will Be Blood*. As literary and cultural theorist Peter Hitchcock describes, the film is an oil-drunk spectacle that dramatizes the conflict between frontier capitalism and frontier evangelism [3]. In this account, the pursuit of oil might be read as a displacement of evangelical pursuit, but the film also arguably analogizes the two, both historically and conceptually. More recently, Oakland-based artist and curator Elia Vargas has explored these mystical histories in an exhibition titled *Lubricated Substrates*, hosted at the Oakland artist-run gallery B4BEL4B from June 30 to July 29, 2017. As the artist’s statement reads, *Lubricated Substrates*, “reconnects the materiality of oil—specifically the hydrocarbon paraffin—with its early history steeped in mysticism, mythology, and medicine.” Vargas sees in oil the contraction and expansion of these histories of light. It is the material condensation of solar energy in itself, which was later mobilized as a source of light. These conditions materially and symbolically associate oil with abstract properties that exceed its immediate use-value. Historically,

as in the present, oil is an agent of mystification—an object *of* and subject steeped *in* mystification.

My own research examines how Canadian oil is mythologized in media produced out of the pro-oil movement – a movement that aims to garner social and political support for Canada's oil and gas industry from grassroots positions. These media tend to mythologize oil in terms structurally similar to earlier mystical, light-infused incantations, but they do so by intentionally imbuing oil—particularly Canadian oil—with properties or principles that have served as latent metonyms of fossil fuel society: freedom, democracy, wealth, upward mobility, and more. I've called these expressions attempts to shape "energy consciousness." A trove of work over the past decade or so in the field of the Energy Humanities has studied what is called the "energy unconscious"—subterranean energy imaginaries buried in cultural production that, when unearthed, offer deep insights into our collective relationship to energy [4]. But energy is not only mediated below the surface; it's also shaped above the surface in explicit, conscious ways. As contestation over the future of oil intensifies, efforts to shape Canadian energy consciousness in favour of oil and gas abound.

Above ground, for instance, Ezra Levant's 2010 book *Ethical Oil: The Case for Canada's Oil Sands* carved out the discursive and rhetorical space to frame Canadian oil as socially, economically, and ecologically progressive. Levant's book was penned in direct response to activist efforts to brand Canadian oil as "dirty," including journalist Andrew Nikiforuk's 2008 book *Tar Sands: Dirty Oil and the Future of a Continent*. Energy consciousness, then, is one dimension of our collective energy imaginaries that challenge or reproduce dominant oil imaginaries.

Figure 1: Modern Miracle Network homepage

At times, modes of mystification that reproduce dominant oil imaginaries manifest more directly than at others. The Modern Miracle Network is a recently formed group of "citizens concerned about Canada's future prosperity, who want to have an adult conversation about energy choices." On the organization's Facebook page, they describe hydrocarbons as "the modern miracle of our time," which, through the language of miracles, creates a conceptual link between oil's modernity and its early spiritual affects. Using stock images of medical professionals and a slick aesthetic of interlinking hexagonal shapes that invoke molecular relations, the Modern Miracle Network presents oil as a panacea vis-à-vis its material role in medical applications and instruments, as well as in its economic role in funding public institutions such as hospitals. "From the combustion engines that transport people and goods across the globe, to many of the medicines that have extended the human lifespan," the Network's homepage reads, "these tiny molecules are the backbone of so many advances we take for granted every day."

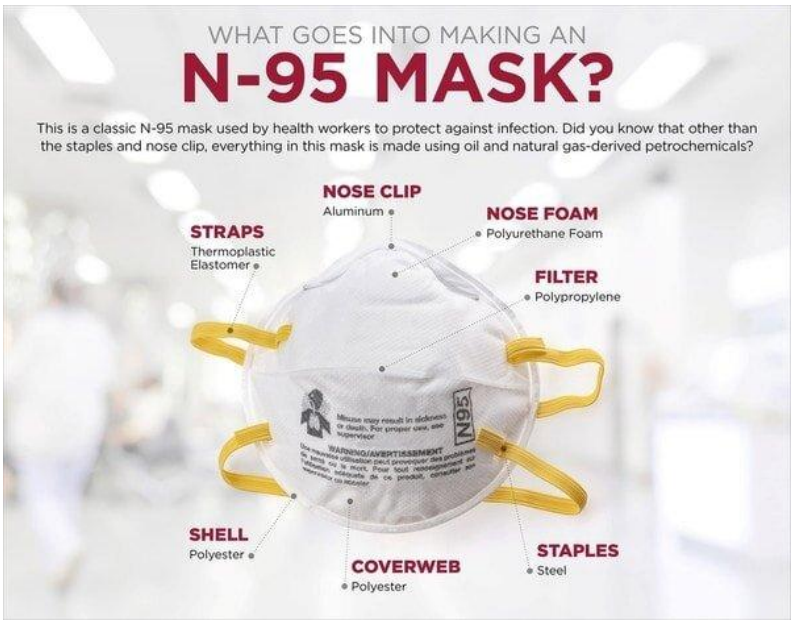

Figure 2: CAPP Context Magazine infographic on N-95 masks

The Canadian Association for Petroleum Producers (CAPP) presents oil similarly in a series of blog posts on the website for its industry-focused magazine, *Context: Energy Examined*, titled "Petroleum in Real Life." In a post on petroleum and pills, writer Agnes Zalewski details all of the roles that petroleum – and natural-gas-derived hydrocarbons play in medicine, from time-release capsules to pharmaceutical grade plastics used for hospital bags, disposable syringes, and more. Roughly one month into the global COVID-19 pandemic, and as frontline workers were confronted with a global shortage of personal protective equipment, writer Holly Quan took to the blog to remind us that N-95 masks are "made possible using petrochemicals derived from oil and natural gas." Quan

elaborates on this point: “Virtually all the components of an N-95 mask are made from petroleum products, and even the non-petroleum parts—steel and aluminum—require oil or natural gas as part of their manufacturing process.” Reminders such as these make sure that we don’t forget exactly what it is that oil provides us in our daily lives.

In *Lifeblood: Oil, Freedom, and the Forces of Capital* (2013), critical geographer Matt Huber describes a concept he calls “oil fetishism”. “Oil fetishism” names “[t]hingified discourses around oil as the cause of wealth, poverty, democracy, authoritarianism, war, and peace” [5]. It’s easy to see an expression of such fetishism in the hydrocarbon imaginaries of the Modern Miracle Network and CAPP’s series on “Petroleum in Real Life”. It’s much more difficult, I think, to confront the consequences of this fetishism. After all, neither the Modern Miracle Network nor CAPP are being disingenuous outside of excessive rhetorical flourishes —oil really does provide the material foundation for a staggering number of commodities in the twenty-first century. But such processes of mystification obscure as much as they reveal about oil’s place in everyday life. Amidst a global pandemic whose impacts are of the most deeply felt by labourers—from those laid off to the frontline medical workers risking their own health, day in and day out—this mystification should raise our collective eyebrows. Oil, as Huber reminds us, is a social relation. This means that oil requires human intervention and mediation to become the versatile substance that we have come to rely on and, according to CAPP, take for granted. By mystifying oil and natural gas as primary agents in these ways, the Modern Miracle Network and CAPP shift the focus from the frontlines to the pipelines at a time when, more than ever, those on the frontlines need our collective support. How might we collectively *de*mystify oil in ways that support transition to more just energy futures?

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1. For a thorough and compelling investigation of the relationship between oil and US spiritualism, see Rochelle Raineri Zuck, “The Wizard of Oil: Abraham James, the Harmonial Wells, and the Psychometric History of Oil,” in *Oil Culture*, edited by Ross Barrett and Daniel Worden (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press), 19-42.

2. Bob Johnson, *Mineral Rites: An Archaeology of the Fossil Economy* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins UP, 2019), 4.

3. Peter Hitchcock, “Oil in an American Imaginary,” *New Formations*, no. 69 (2010): 95.

4. See Laurie Shannon, Vin Nardizzi, Ken Hiltner, Saree Makdisi, Michael Ziser, Imre Szeman, and Patricia Yaeger, “Editor’s Column: Literature in the Ages of Wood, Tallow, Coal, Whale Oil, Gasoline, Atomic Power, and Other Energy Sources,” *PMLA* 126, no. 2 (2011): 305–326.

5. Matt Huber, *Lifeblood: Oil, Freedom, and the Forces of Capital* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 4.

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