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## Oceanic irrationalism. Danish petrofiction below the surface

**Résumé**

This article ventures seaward to examine how two contemporary Danish novels paradoxically uses irrationalist features to make visible the existent opacity and mythology of oil. Respectively, the novel *På ryggen af en tyr* (2014; *On the Back of a Bull*) by Kristina Stoltz employs gothic sentiments to reveal a 'realer, if darker,' oil reality, while *Aftenstjerne* (2019; *Night Star*) by Aske Juul Christiansen uses Nordic seafarer and explorer mythology to display and displace a dialectic of oil invisibility and materiality at sea. Thus, this article concludes that these novels contribute to a regionally specific critique of the modern world-system of fossil capitalism. I suggest designating this corpus of oceanic irrationalism as Danish North Sea World Literature.

**Plan de l'article**

- Oceanic blankness and offshore petroleumscapes
- Oceanic frontierism in *Aftenstjerne*
- Oil materiality
- Oceanic ecocriticism\$ and gothic sentiments
- The poltergeist of extractivism
- Conclusion: North Sea world literature

## ROSENBAEK | OCEANIC IRREALISM. DANISH PETROFICTION BELOW THE SURFACE

Whatever the future genres of oil fiction, we need to keep looking to the waters that carry some of oil's worst external costs.

Stephanie LeMenager, *Living Oil*

- 1 This article examines how offshore extraction is disclosed in two contemporary works of irrealist petrofiction from Denmark. Stephanie LeMenager's lucid call to "keep looking to the waters"<sup>1</sup> guides my venture offshore as water often accentuates what Frederick Buell famously has called the culture of oil's "marriage of catastrophe and exuberance."<sup>2</sup> In the ocean deposits there are an exorbitant amount of fossil fuels, but the waterways are also "the sites where the destructive capacity of oil is made visible."<sup>3</sup> Oil and water do not mix. Curiously, the two texts at hand register this fact of uneasy relationality between the two substances by way of their employment of irreal features.

Bag dine øjne flyder det sorte hav. Du ser havfuglene der ikke kan lette. De hvide fjer smurt ind i det sorte. Fiskene der vender bugen mod himlen, som om de tager solbad. Men skyerne ovenover er allerede på vej videre.

(Behind your eyes the black sea flows. You see seabirds unable to take off. The white feathers greased in blackness. The fish turning belly up against the sky as if they are sunbathing. But the clouds are already heading onwards.)<sup>4</sup>

- 2 These are the first lines of Danish author Kristina Stoltz' novel *På ryggen af en tyr* (2014; *On the Back of a Bull*). The novel is an odd, irreal tale

about a young girl, Fanny, who travels with her mother to a summer resort near a beach. An old seaside hotel – "almost resembling a castle"<sup>5</sup> – sits rather gothically on top of a cliff and behind it the roaring ocean lies. These are the eerie narrative coordinates of the novel: the beach, the hotel, and the ocean where the supertanker North Oil constantly appears on the horizon. As it figures from the quotation, a strange chorus opens the novel with an ominous address. Fittingly, the genre description printed on the front of the novel is "a tragedy." However, deviating from its Greek heritage, this address is aimed directly at the protagonist Fanny – "*this you see, Fanny, as soon as you open your eyes*"<sup>6</sup> – rather than the reader. The mystical aura of prophecy or premonition, the sombre tone, and the double layer of figurative and literal speech – for example "*open your eyes*" – is however intact. The central position of a recurrent choir in the narrative as well as the description of the work as a tragedy point towards a certain genre orientation while the gothic features work to expose a "'realer,' if darker, reality."<sup>7</sup>

3 A similar instance of retrofitting or innovating a genre convention is present in the peculiar logbook oilnovel *Aftenstjerne* (2019; *Night Star*) by Aske Juul Christiansen. This novel revolves around different geographical sites of oil and gas frontierism but in this analysis I explicitly focus on the scenes taking place offshore. The novel is polyphonic and without a progressing plot. Instead, the reader is introduced to scenarios played out at a number of different nodal points in the global network of oil: from the Greenland Sea to Doha and the Ross Ice Shelf and several sites in between. While it takes on the shape of a logbook, the entries are not written by a single subject but by a collective of oil workers in different occupations. The logbook feature of the book employs the cultural

<sup>1</sup> Stephanie LeMenager, *Living Oil: Petroleum Culture in the American Century*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 137.

<sup>2</sup> Frederick Buell, "A Short History of Oil Cultures: Or, the Marriage of Catastrophe and Exuberance", *Journal of American Studies*, vol. 46, n° 2, 2012.

<sup>3</sup> Kirsty Robertson, "Oil Futures/Petrotextiles", in Sheena Wilson, Adam Carlson and Imre Szeman (eds.), *Petrocultures: Oil, Politics, Culture* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017), 242.

<sup>4</sup> Kristina Stoltz, *På ryggen af en tyr* (Copenhagen: Rosinante, 2014), 7. This and all the following quotations of the novel are in my translation. Original italics.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 7. Original italics.

<sup>7</sup> Justin D. Edwards, Rune Graulund, Johan Höglund, "Introduction: Gothic in the Anthropocene," in Justin D. Edwards, Rune Graulund and Johan Höglund (eds.), *Dark Scenes from Damaged Earth: The Gothic Anthropocene*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2022), ix.

heritage of explorer narratives – a form with a long tradition in the Nordic countries – as it resembles journal logbooks of expeditions like naturalist Charles Darwin’s *The Voyage of the Beagle* (1839) or the works by the Danish polar explorer Knud Rasmussen (1879–1933). Mixing the form as well as the sentiments of Darwin’s geological and Rasmussen’s anthropological surveys, Christiansen’s novel however twist the logbook form towards an irrealist register as the novel direct its attention around the curious case of oil: rather than an explorer character, the main character of the novel is oil itself as oil has a fundamental effect on the workers oriented towards it.

4 Since its advent as a school of thought, petroculture scholars have studied the ‘out of sight, out of mind’-paradigm of modern fossil dependency.<sup>8</sup> The two novels here, I argue, contribute to this current discussion of exposing the estrangement of oil. They do so by way of redressing the gothic genre fiction as well as through an aesthetic re-enactment of centuries old features of explorer mythology. Thus, both novels make use of a curious mixture of explorer mythology, gothic sentiments, and material megastructures to display and displace a dialectic of oil invisibility and materiality at sea.

5 Irrealism, the Warwick Research Collective (WReC) argues in their proposal for a new theory of world literature, is a formal feature defined by its “anti-linear plot lines, meta-narratorial devices, un-rounded characters, unreliable narrators, contradictory points of view, and so on.” Therefore, they go on, this form cannot solely be classified as a “Euro-American literary formation typically addressed under the name of

<sup>8</sup> E.g. Patricia Yaeger’s inaugural concept ‘Energy Unconscious’ in Patricia Yaeger *et al.*, “Editor’s Column: Literature in the Ages of Wood, Tallow, Coal, Whale Oil, Gasoline, Atomic Power, and Other Energy Sources,” *PMLA*, vol. 126, n° 2, 2011; Bob Johnson’s ‘Janus-face’-variant, Bob Johnson, *Mineral Rites: An Archaeology of the Fossil Economy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019), and Macdonald’s ‘world-ecological’ examination of ‘the pipeline imaginary’ in Graeme Macdonald, “Containing Oil: The Pipeline in Petroculture,” in Wilson, Carlson and Szeman (eds.), *Petrocultures: Oil, Politics, Culture*.

‘modernism.’”<sup>9</sup> Irrealism is rather to be understood as a particular aesthetic registration and reaction to the structural organisations of capitalism. More precisely, they argue that irrealism is a genre that allegorically depicts the resource frontierism that has and still continues to result in human and ecologically destructive instances of colonialism, imperialism, and world capitalism. Thus, for the WReC, instances of irrealism are “discernible wherever literary works are composed that mediate the lived experience of capitalism’s bewildering creative destruction (or destructive creation).”<sup>10</sup> Of importance for the Nordic region in question here, Graeme Macdonald moreover argues that the cultural representation of North Sea oil has always been inclined to the speculative register.<sup>11</sup>

As will become clear shortly, in the offshore petrofiction by Stoltz and Christiansen this is also the case as the waterways contain unreal elements such as folkloric creatures and fanciful mystique. Concerning the literary registration of North Sea oil and offshore oil in general, it is however fair to say that Danish authors have been less engaged than writers from other North Sea nations such as the United Kingdom and Norway.<sup>12</sup> Stoltz and Christiansen’s novels are Danish exceptions to the lacking engagement with offshore oil. Moreover, while both novels have a global or transregional scope, the content is formed by a combination of a distinctive Nordic maritime heritage of shipbuilding and

<sup>9</sup> WReC: Warwick Research Collective, *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World Literature* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015), 51.

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

<sup>11</sup> Graeme Macdonald, “Dynamic Positioning: North Sea Petroculture’s Backwash,” in Fiona Polack and Danine Farquharson (eds.), *Cold Water Oil: Offshore Petroleum Cultures*, (London: Routledge, 2022), 67.

<sup>12</sup> E.g., John McGrath (UK), *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil* (1973); Robert Alan Jamieson (UK), *Thin Wealth* (1986); China Miéville (UK), “Covehithe” (2011); Sidsel Mørck (NO), *Stumtjenere* (1978); Kjartan Fløgstad (NO), *Fyr og flame* (1980) and *Kron og mynt* (1998); and Øyvind Rimbereid (NO), *Solaris korrigert* (2004) and *Jimmen* (2011). Crime fiction novels, though, are an exception to this Danish reluctance to register the offshore head-on. Peter Høeg’s *Miss Smilla’s Feeling for Snow* (1992) is an example of this.

seafaring – of industrial production and pre-modern mythologically guided explorations at sea. In their effort to approach the inexplicable oil they thereby confirm WReC's world-literature argument that regional particularities shape the specific approach applied to grasp this very trans-regional matter. That is, the novels utilise "relevant formal properties of adjacent forms (often non-literary) within their local or regional cultural ecology."<sup>13</sup>

### OCEANIC BLANKNESS AND OFFSHORE PETROLEUMSCAPES

7 According to Nancy Couling and Carola Hein, throughout the second half of the twentieth century, the oceans increasingly turned into petroleumscapes and the North Sea become "one of the most industrialised seas in the world."<sup>14</sup> However, they write, this intense amount of oceanic "energy logistics" is partially concealed by a "conceptual void" in Western societies that goes back to the Scientific Revolution in Europe in the 1600s.<sup>15</sup> They write: "Maritime cartography up to the sixteenth century had incorporated narrative features, expressing both real and imagined experiences at sea, but by the seventeenth century, the sea [...] had become largely empty." This development of emptying the oceans furthermore reflect the growing colonial and mercantile idea in Europe of "the sea as a place to exert and consolidate [...] political and economic strength." The sea itself was understood as a "non-developable void" only to be kept open for passages in order to secure "unhindered sea-borne trade" to the benefit of European states.<sup>16</sup> Then, in the 20<sup>th</sup> C., fossil extraction rushed to the oceans:<sup>17</sup> new deep sea discoveries sparked

instances of subsurface frontierism as "[f]igures of the boundless sea or the oceanic sublime encourage[d] humans to treat it as an inexhaustible storehouse of goods."<sup>18</sup> The understanding of oceanic blankness fostered by the ambition of unhindered seaward commerce, however, lingers on today in the shape of obscurity as "corporations and nations control the spaces of oil and gas in secrecy and concealment, making it extremely difficult to *site* as well as *sight*."<sup>19</sup>

8 Rather than sustaining an understanding of the ocean as non-developable, oceanic blankness can therefore be said to serve another purpose today, namely that of concealing the deed of exploitation: "Since the 1940's, the majority of offshore platforms have been built out of sight of land. [...] This invisibility is a function of where oil and gas deposits are located but also of political, economic, and aesthetic considerations," Fiona Polack and Danine Farquharson write.<sup>20</sup> Couling and Hein concur as they write that when a "commodity is kept at a distance and its materiality negated, its cultural dimension becomes equally challenging to excavate."<sup>21</sup> The media exposure of spectacular events such as the blowout on the offshore oil platform Deepwater Horizon in the Mexican Gulf in 2010 or the six-day obstruction of the Suez Canal by a container ship that ran aground in March, 2021 do however dent this narrative of seaside invisibility. Not to mention the damage the increasing display of plastic waste shoring or gathering in

<sup>13</sup> See WReC: Warwick Research Collective, *Combined and Uneven Development*, 52 (cf. note 9).

<sup>14</sup> Nancy Couling, Carola Hein, "Blankness: The Architectural Void of North Sea Energy Logistics," *Footprint*, vol.12, n° 23, 2018, 90.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

<sup>16</sup> *Id.* See also Nancy Couling, "The Offshore Petroleumscape: Grids, Gods, and Giants of the North Sea," in Carola Hein (ed.), *Oil Spaces: Exploring the Global Petroleumscape* (New York: Routledge, 2021), 110-112.

<sup>17</sup> According to the National Ocean Industries Association (NOIA), offshore drilling tentatively took off in the 1890s,

modern seismology was developed in 1926 and in 1947 the first "out-off-sight of land" platform was built "mark[ing] the beginning of the modern offshore industry as it is known today." Url: <https://web.archive.org/web/20100806100254/http://www.noia.org/website/article.asp?id=123> (accessed 27/07/2023)

<sup>18</sup> Patricia Yaeger, "Editor's Column: Sea Trash, Dark Pools, and the Tragedy of the Commons," *PMLA*, vol. 125, n° 3, 2010, 535.

<sup>19</sup> Couling, Hein, "Blankness," 90 (cf. note 14). Original italics.

<sup>20</sup> Fiona Polack, Danine Farquharson, "Offshore Rig," in Imre Szeman, Jennifer Wenzel and Patricia Yaeger (eds.), *Fueling Culture: 101 Words for Energy and Environment* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), 253.

<sup>21</sup> Couling, Hein, "Blankness," 90 (cf. note 14).



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The Great Pacific Garbage Patch has done to the idea of oceanic blankness and serenity.<sup>22</sup>

- 9 Apart from media exposures, Carola Hein's concept of the petroleumscape also works to counter the ingrained narrative of oceanic blankness with a focus on the sheer physicality of petroleum. In *Oil Spaces* (2021), she describes the concept like this: "the concept of the petroleumscape starts from the understanding that petroleum is a physical material with a pervasive impact on physical space in terms of architecture, cities, and landscapes, and is not a magic fluid that fuels economies without a spatial imprint."<sup>23</sup> Moreover, she writes that the concept illuminates how "the diverse spatial emanations of oil – including refineries, storage sites, office buildings, and gas stations – are connected through their relation to this single commodity and its group of industrial players."<sup>24</sup>
- 10 With their insistent representation of offshore oil structures, the novels at question here likewise disrupt the 'magic' understanding of oil

<sup>22</sup> For more on these destructive and/or obstructive oceanic event, see, for instance, EPA – United States Environmental Protection Agency, "Deepwater Horizon – BP Gulf of Mexico Oil Spill", EPA – United States Environmental Protection Agency (latest update: 14 January 2022). Url: <https://www.epa.gov/enforcement/deepwater-horizon-bp-gulf-mexico-oil-spill> (accessed 27/07/2023); Mary-Ann Russon, "The Cost of the Suez Canal Blockage," BBC, 30 March 2021. Url: <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-56559073> (accessed 27/07/2023); Laura Parker, "The Great Pacific Garbage Patch Isn't What You Think It Is," *National Geographic*, 22/03/ 2018. Url: <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/science/article/great-pacific-garbage-patch-plastics-environment> (accessed 27/07/2023). On oceanic waste, see also Yaeger, "Editor's Column: Sea Trash, Dark Pools, and the Tragedy of the Commons" (cf. note 18).

<sup>23</sup> Carola Hein, "Space, Time, and Oil: The Global Petroleumscape," in Carola Hein (ed.), *Oil Spaces: Exploring the Global Petroleumscape* (New York: Routledge, 2021), 4. See also Carola Hein, "Between Oil and Water. The Logistical Petroleumscape," in Neeraj Bhatia and Mary Casper (eds.), *The Petropolis of Tomorrow*, (New York: Actar Publishers, 2013); Carola Hein, "Oil Spaces: The Global Petroleumscape in the Rotterdam/The Hague Area," *Journal of Urban History*, vol. 44, n° 5, 2018; Carola Hein, "'Old Refineries Rarely Die': Port City Refineries as Key Nodes in the Global Petroleumscape," *Canadian Journal of History*, vol. 53, n° 3, 2018.

<sup>24</sup> Hein, "Space, Time, and Oil," 7 (cf. note 23).

as a seemingly immaterial energy source. In their effort to invoke the omnipresent but often obscure petroleumscapes, the novels consequently revert to what Couling and Hein describe as pre-1600s 'narrative features' such as mythical creatures and *unheimlich* mystique. As Graeme Macdonald writes, "to understand oil as cultural and material substance with fundamental ecological import means realizing its mystification in the societies of the Global North."<sup>25</sup> In Denmark, a North Sea nation of the Global North, this entails faring offshore where oil extraction started and still prevails. The novels, I propose, exactly use unreal features to register the mystification of oil, and hereby they expose what Bart Welling describes as the naturalised 'myth of Energy':

When the idea of hydrocarbons as Energy is incorporated into larger narrative structures, it helps mythmakers such as fossil fuel advertisers and government propagandists enact what Roland Barthes, in his classic study *Mythologies*, calls the 'very principle of myth': namely, that it 'transforms history into nature'. In other words, myth obscures the myriad human choices that have been involved in the production of a given phenomenon, making the development of the thing seem inevitable, and making the thing itself seem unchangeable. The myth of Energy naturalizes petroculture by persuading consumers [...] that fossil energy [...] is virtually as indispensable to our survival as the blood pumping through our cardiovascular systems.<sup>26</sup>

The myth of Energy has, according to Welling, 11 naturalised and thereby also immaterialised oil and other fossil fuels. This, he goes on, has transformed the social history of exploitation, industrialisation, and fossil capital guided by the owners of the means of production into a tale of naturally determined development.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Macdonald, "Containing Oil," 61 (cf. note 8).

<sup>26</sup> Bart H. Welling, "Petronarratology: A Bioregional Approach to Oil Stories," *English Studies*, vol. 99, n° 4, 2018, 446.

<sup>27</sup> On 'fossil capital,' see Andreas Malm's seminal book *Fossil Capital: The Rise of Steam Power and the Roots of Global Warming* (London: Verso, 2016). A further elaboration on the tale of fossil fuel as a naturally determined

Correspondingly, I read these novels as examples of literary subversion, contributing to the contemporary critical theory of petroculture in their effort to denaturalise oil and thereby return it to the realm of social history and materiality.

### OCEANIC FRONTIERISM IN *AFTENSTJERNE*

12 As mentioned, Aske Juul Christiansen's novel *Aftenstjerne* from 2019 takes on the shape of a logbook written by a collective of oil workers in different occupations. As such, each portrayed site in the global oil network has its own narrator which gives the novel a distinctive choir-effect. Reading the novel, one experiences the different but same relation to oil as the widespread existence and world-wide dependence on fossil fuel is portrayed through site-specific prisms exposing inequalities of working conditions and rights.<sup>28</sup> This register of voices, however, also identifies a common ground in terms of a mythological superstructure built around oil. Likewise, throughout the sites oil seems to perform a conversion of the workers both physically and linguistic just as their cultural and empathetic attitude towards environmental damage is affected by their primary objective: to find and extract oil.

13 In this article, focus will be on the fragments of the novel that touches on offshore exploration and drilling predominantly in the North Sea and further North. Echoing the frontier ethos of ancient seafarers, these offshore entries of the novel lucidly confirm what Polack and Farquharson write about subsurface drilling: "In their use of overdetermined language of the frontier, and their emphasis on human ingenuity and technological prowess, accounts of drilling

in deep water and offshore Arctic locations resonate with Hegel's comment that 'the sea invites man to conquest.'<sup>29</sup> Moreover, the offshore frontierism expressed in the novel hinges on an irrealist feature of sea creature mythology that creates a curious dialog with the practice of naming oil fields in the North Sea. In this area, according to the Norwegian linguist Botolv Helleland, 45 percent of all oil and gas fields take their name after the Norse mythology while Nordic sagas and fairy tales take up their fair share of the rest.<sup>30</sup> This type of mythological naming – e.g. *Frøy, Odin, Frigg, Loke, Tyra, Freja, Gorm, Kraka* – Helleland goes on, reflects how the early "activities in the North Sea were surrounded by a certain atmosphere of pioneering." And, he says, the "sense of adventure is still strong."<sup>31</sup>

14 While the religious aspect of the mythology is replaced by a more worldly variant in *Aftenstjerne*, the mystical aura of inexplicability is intact. In a log from the Norwegian Sea, the reader for instance is confronted with this reflection of the ocean:

Vi kender overfladen, vi kan se bølgerne der slår mod skibet og mod kysten, og vi kan se vandet, der spreder sig glimtende ud imellem. Vi kan dykke ned, og se vandet som vi ikke ser luften, og så kan vi røre overfladen. Vi stopper der. Derunder er alt gået, derunder borer vi os til svar.

(We know the surface, we can see the waves striking the ship and against the shore, and we can see the water glisteningly spreading between. We can dive down and see the water as we can't see the air, and then we can touch

development are elegantly connected to the ubiquitous concept 'anthropocene' here; Andreas Malm and Alf Hornborg, "The Geology of Mankind? A Critique of the Anthropocene Narrative," *The Anthropocene Review*, vol. 1, n° 1, 2014.

<sup>28</sup> This is the case particularly in entries from Global South petroleum sites. The entries from Shaybah (Saudi Arabia), Doha (Qatar) and Ordos (China) especially revolve around this theme.

<sup>29</sup> Polack and Farquharson, "Offshore Rig," 252 (cf. note 20).

<sup>30</sup> See Couling, "The Offshore Petroleumscape," 118 (cf. note 16). See also Botolv Helleland, "Place-Names (Geographical Names) on and off the Coast of Western Norway: Names of Oil Fields Compared to Traditional Place-Names" (Sixth International Seminar on the Naming of Seas: Special Emphasis Concerning the East Sea, Seoul: Society for East Sea, 2000).

<sup>31</sup> Helleland, "Short Place-Names (Geographical Names) on and off the Coast of Western Norway," 16 (cf. note 30).

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the surface. There we stop. Below everything is speculation, below we drill for answers.)<sup>32</sup>

- 15 Here we can see how a sort of oceanic blankness guides the perception of the oil workers exploring the ocean floor for fossil fuel deposits. They only know the surface. To know anything down below they must, “shoot pressured sound down in the hope of a meaningful answer. The answer is meaningful when the algorithms in Salvador has interpreted them and sent them back. Then they must correspond to reality.”<sup>33</sup> Another entry confirms this schism between surface and unknown underground: “I look into the control room and see new combinations of colour on the screen, so below us it moves, but not here, it’s the same surface over another deep and I smile still in the assumption that I know what is under us.”<sup>34</sup> To retain a feeling of value – or perhaps more important of irreplaceability – the narrator of the Norwegian Sea entries seems to tell himself that he can also sense what the semi-mythical computer in Salvador relays. More than anything, however, this entry is a registration of automation angst, of knowing that it is only a matter of time before your job is replaced by a robotic thingamabob.
- 16 The back cover of the novel fittingly describes the novel as “a book about oil, a compendium, a myth circle, and cartography; an intense poetic survey of the oil industry’s last days.” But whereas the maritime cartographies prior to the Scientific Revolution incorporated creatures and critters to provide dubious answers to the subsurface mystique, here the role of soothsayer befalls a technological creature – the algorithms in Salvador. For the oil workers in the Northern waters, one sense that the Brazilian city name of Salvador is uttered with a mythological tenor. One part admiration, one part anxiety. Moreover, the oil workers’ techno-mediated relation to the

seabed are echoed in Patricia Yaeger’s conceptualisation of contemporary human’s relationship to the sea. For although Yaeger argues that, historically, “our relation to the sea is always already technological,” she also writes that “late-capitalist seas are becoming more techno than ocean.” The perception of the massive bodies of water are in fact mediated to such an extent that they are best understood as “techno-oceans.”<sup>35</sup> In this light, it is unsurprising that an unfathomable techno-mythology guides the oil workers’ offshore passages. Victim to the digital machinery, reality at the techno-ocean is dictated in a binary fashion for the oil workers: fossil fuels or not is the only meaningful answer below the surface. At one point the narrator even thinks to himself that he has learned to read the data only to admit that he is lying to himself:

Jeg begynder at forstå de skrattede plamager på skærmene, det flade billede, et udsnit af undergrunden der er tyndt som papir, tyndere, det er todimensionelt. [...] Jeg tror jeg begynder at kunne se det uden dem [i Salvador], men jeg ved at jeg lyver for mig selv, for de andre, når jeg siger det i kantinen.

Jeg begynder at forstå dem.

De griner og vi kigger ud over havet sammen.

(I am beginning to understand the distorted blotches on the screens, the flat image, a slice of the underground as thin as paper, thinner, it is two-dimensional. [...] I think I am starting to be able to see it without them [in Salvador], but I know that I am lying to myself, to the others, when I say it in the canteen.

I am beginning to understand them.

They laugh and we look out at the ocean together.)<sup>36</sup>

This experience of subsurface unintelligibility often lead the workers to succumb to the cultural legacy of seafarer mythology and folklore when describing the technical equipment: “The great yellow drums stand in a row. 24 lines

<sup>32</sup> Aske Juul Christiansen, *Aftenstjerne* (Copenhagen: Arena, 2019), “10 / 6 / 16 Norskehavet”. This and all the following quotations of the novel are in my translation. The novel is not paginated, I therefore refer to the entries’ ‘date stamp.’

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., “10 / 6 / 16 Norskehavet”.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., “3 / 7 / 16 Grønlandshavet”.

<sup>35</sup> Yaeger, “Editor’s Column: Sea Trash, Dark Pools, and the Tragedy of the Commons,” 526–527 (cf. note 18).

<sup>36</sup> Christiansen, *Aftenstjerne*, “10 / 6 / 16 Norskehavet” (cf. note 32).

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stretching from them, one and a half kilometre behind us like the dragged tentacular of a jellyfish. To avoid stressing them as much as possible we must turn slowly, preferably we must let ourselves be led.”<sup>37</sup> The massive instruments like the lines designed to receive soundwaves retuning from the ocean floor are treated like sea creatures that must not be disturbed. Almost resembling the kraken, these giant squid-like tentacular keeps the oil workers at sea awake and working:

Sidevinden har oprørt bølgerne og rodet bøjernes liner sammen. Vi tager ud i små bade og fastgør linerne på siden og hører formandens leg med ledningerne skratte i radioen. Vi sejler bag hinanden, jeg står strukket over mig selv med linen i armene og løfter den til mit yderste punkt så den anden båd kan sejle under. Jon står med bådshagen og trykker linen under os så den ikke rammer skruen. Vi danser langsomt over hinandens tråde og indfinder os på vores rækker, sikker adskilte, vores hver især. Vi fortsætter i dagevis.

(The sidewind has upset the waves and messed up the lines of the buoys. We travel out in small boats and attach the lines to the side and hear the foreman’s play with the cords scratch over the radio. We sail behind each other, I stand stretched over myself with the line in my arms lifting it as far as possible so the other boat can sail under. Jon is standing with the boat hook pressing the line under us so it doesn’t hit the propeller. We slowly dance by each other’s lines and find our row, safely separated, each one our own.

We continue for days.)<sup>38</sup>

18 It is a constant hassle appeasing this techno-jellyfish. The technological development is in no way a final domestication of the great and at times inhospitable ocean. Rather, the logs from the North Sea and the Norwegian Sea relays how the modern cartography of the oil corporations’ unrestrained appraisal of technology has not

erased the sea monsters. Even when the wind finally settles and the days with unleashing and rewinding the lines just replace each other, there is still a noir sense of something uncanny lurking and spoiling the break. In June, in the Arctic region the sun never sets. So the narrator of the Norwegian Sea logs is lacking sleep and the absence of rest plays tricks on his mind: “I have a hard time sleeping when the sun doesn’t settle and I ask the others if it is the same for them, or, I think I ask as nobody answers and I start to doubt, somewhere over the waves I hover like a great, weak figure imitating my movements, I sit there in the window./Data comes crashing again.”<sup>39</sup> For all its technological development, delirium and other dangerous elements still lurks in the treacherous waters. The techno-ocean is but an extension of the age-old erroneous “ideal of mastering the ocean for economic gains.”<sup>40</sup>

19 Unsurprising, there is also a lurking doubt about the data-deity present when the workers talk among themselves about the fixation and worship of the algorithms from Salvador: “[W]e meet and discuss data/if there is data everywhere/we create information and gather around it as a warm fire. Are we better? Do we build anew?/We make changes, I say/Bjarke, with his dark mouthhole; we are prolonging.”<sup>41</sup> With his thought of prolonging, this Bjarke-character dryly criticise how data is used to carry the oil enterprise into what Michael T. Klare calls “the third great carbon era, the Age of Unconventional Oil and Gas.”<sup>42</sup> Through technical innovation and datafication, processes like hydrofracking, tar sands extraction, and deep-sea drilling in Arctic and other places with “previously inaccessible reserves of energy,” the fossil fuel business is kept very much alive. As LeMenager writes: “reports of oil’s death have been exaggerated.”<sup>43</sup> In many ways then, *Aftenstjerne* is a portrait of

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., “24 / 6 / 16 Norskehavet”.

<sup>40</sup> Polack and Farquharson, “Offshore Rig,” 252 (cf. note 20).

<sup>41</sup> Christiansen, *Aftenstjerne*, “21 / 6 / 16 Norskehavet” (cf. note 32).

<sup>42</sup> Michael T. Klare, “The Third Carbon Age,” *The Nation*, August 8, 2013, Url: <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/third-carbon-age/> (accessed 27/07/2023)

<sup>43</sup> Both quotations, LeMenager, *Living Oil*, 3 (cf. note 1).

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., “4 / 6 / 16 Nordsøen”.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., “8 / 6 / 16 Norskehavet”.



oil's *prolonged* existence. And therefore, if anything the novel actually displays how "the oil industry's last days," as the back cover mentions, is itself a sort of phantasmagoria.

### OIL MATERIALITY

20 The representation of offshore petroleumscapes in *Aftenstjerne* is often in line with how Nancy Couling describes it as "a mythological space." Couling goes on to explain how the petroleum-landscape thus constitutes "a legendary space of everyday culture."<sup>44</sup> In *Aftenstjerne*, the everyday aspect is most notably represented by a continuous focus on the work culture in the "artificial urban archipelagos"<sup>45</sup> constituted by massive materialities like offshore platforms, oil tankers, drill ships, seismic vessels and more. On the one hand, Christiansen show how a relation to the imperceptible aspect of oil itself is achieved through a mythological superstructure. This is especially present in the offshore entries. Here, the oil is lurking in the underground and only by appeasing other sea creatures and the data-deity in Salvador can it be lured out. On the other hand, the novel also emphasises the sheer materiality of oil-structures throughout the book as a sort of myth-busting endeavour. Oil energy is not a God-given phenomenon, the novel lets us know. It is a historical event that is materially and culturally maintained.

21 On the formal level, the entries in the book are all written in a disrupted and simplistic syntax that seems to filter the sentences of all non-oil related matters. In that way, the entries relay a sort of multicultural or migrant workforce language processed by the oil resource that they work with. The workers' language has been refined only to accommodate the life of oil. As the offshore entries in *Aftenstjerne* illustrate, the workers are confronted with a certain illiteracy concerning the subsurface: "We know the surface [...]. There we stop." To make sense they therefore often retort to the historically familiar realm of seafarer mythology. Equally

important, the interconnection of the Norwegian Sea with other petroleum sites is seldom mentioned as anything but the somewhat aetheric and mythical computational calculus in Salvador. But materially, the oil-tuned language is also a clear registration of how the oil industry shapes and synchronises the oil workers' entire bodies to the drill work. In an entry from the onshore shale oil field in the Ordos Basin at the north-western China, we for instance hear how the oil work supplants itself in the body of the worker:

Vibrationerne fra boret planter sig i mine arme, videre ud i hele min krop. Mine muskler dirrer om knoglerne, så det kilder indefra mens jeg kilder klippen med boret, eller jeg ved ikke om det er som en nål eller som en kløe, jeg laver en cylinder nedad.

Boret stopper og jeg får lov, et øjeblik, at mærke sveden på min pande som den følelse der bryder frem i stedet. Borets lyd mod hullets sider mens jeg hiver det op er grov, måske sliber jeg klippens årer. Jeg skifter til et længere bor og sveden forsvinder, tankerne med den tror jeg, i en dybere vibration, en ufrivillig bevægelse af overkroppen, styret af maskinen der er kraftigere end mig.

[...] Jeg er et fikspunkt og kun det, en forankring for boringen.

(The vibrations from the drill supplant itself in my arms, onwards to my entire body. My muscles shiver around the bones, it tickles from the inside as I tickle the rock with the drill, or I don't know if it is like a needle or an itch, I am making a downwards cylinder.

The drill stops and I'm allowed, for a moment, to feel the sweet on my forehead as the erupting feeling instead. The sound of the drill against the sides as I pull it out is rough, maybe I am grinding the veins of the rock. I switch to a larger drill and the sweat disappears, the thoughts with it I think, in a deeper vibration, an involuntary movement of the upper body, controlled by the machine that is more powerful than I.

[...] I am a fixed point and nothing else, an anchor for the drill.)<sup>46</sup>

<sup>44</sup> Couling, "The Offshore Petroleum-landscape," 110 (cf. note 16).

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>46</sup> Christiansen, *Aftenstjerne*, "4 / 9 / 16 Ordos" (cf. note 32).

22 In this quote we see how the oil workers' language as well as their physical composition are adapted to the task at hand: exploring, drilling, extracting, refining. In the office rooms of energy companies, the desire of oil might consume its host's thoughts, but on the ground the dark substrate's consummation of its host is purely material as the handling of the drill commands the user completely. The workers are reduced to impersonal instruments for the extraction of oil – they are “imperative to the ongoing reinforcement of the [...] petroleumsscape,” but only as an undifferentiated work force, never as individuals.<sup>47</sup>

23 Heidi C. M. Scott has argued that the energy unconscious of today is based on a general absence of materiality: “we live in an era in which fuel is ubiquitous in our lives, but our experience of it is largely immaterial.”<sup>48</sup> It is fair to assume that Scott's argument is true for the majority of the population in the Global North, and the affluent residents of the Global South as well, just as the oil workers in the novel are perceptively distanced from the oil via the algorithmic mediation. But *Aftenstjerne* shows that while the cultural concepts of oceanic blankness and the near-mythological superstructure of oil often obscure the oil industry's “pervasive impact on physical space,”<sup>49</sup> the conceptual ruse is fragile. The oil industry cannot uphold the illusion that this “invisible commodity”<sup>50</sup> is also immaterial. We see this in terms of how the novel shows the constant leaks and sudden spills in the industry exposing the otherwise concealed oil: “We barely see the oil. [...] It is only when the oil escapes, when someone messes up, that we see it. Then it attacks, explodes, and shows a local personality,”<sup>51</sup> and “a concentration of oil, as long as it's kept in our barrels everything is good, as long as it leaks as usual.”<sup>52</sup> Leaks is nothing out of the usual.

Concerning oil *spills*, another entry describes such accidents in a rather bittersweet fashion: “We barely see the oil. [...] It is only when the oil escapes, when someone messes up, that we see it. Then it attacks, explodes, and shows a local personality.”<sup>53</sup> Here we sense that the sight of oil is dreadful but also somewhat titillating. It attacks and explodes, but it also reveals itself. Thus, an oil spill is described in the novel as a way for the oil to let itself be seen as something more than simply an immaterial source of energy. You therefore also sense a certain amount of yearn in this quote; that sometimes it is perhaps even desirable to experience the full might of the energy source that you work with but rarely get to see properly. With entries like these, *Aftenstjerne* suggests that working with a material like oil also influence the way you look at it and how you feel about it, just as it shapes the material body of the worker by way of the physical labour needed to extract it.

Oil workers are however far from the only ones 24 experiencing the material consequences of oil. In the techno-oceans, “the only ones frightened by our technology are the fish,” Yaeger quotes a crass seabed-mapping brochure for saying.<sup>54</sup> This type of careless irony regarding material, environmental hazard is also evident in a log from the Greenlandic Sea in *Aftenstjerne*. Here the narrator is at one point called on deck to see a whale flee due to their seismological surveys of the seabed. As such, this instance illustrates how the natural environment is to bear the immediate consequences of oil extraction as this “fundamentally capitalist-driven operation relies on expansion to secure the ongoing accumulation of capital.”<sup>55</sup>

Jakub har fået øje på en hvals sprøjt langt ude, og jeg når at se dens hale rejse sig mens vi alle sammen løber op til dækket for at kigge. Den flygter fra vores lyde, det er den eneste vi har set, og kun dens antydninger. Lydene er ufarlige, men de forstyrrer deres fred, eller deres

<sup>47</sup> Couling, “The Offshore Petroleumscape,” 112 (cf. note 16).

<sup>48</sup> Heidi C.M. Scott, *Fuel: An Ecocritical History* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 5.

<sup>49</sup> Hein, “Space, Time, and Oil,” 4 (cf. note 23).

<sup>50</sup> Couling and Hein, “Blankness,” 91 (cf. note 14).

<sup>51</sup> Christiansen, *Aftenstjerne*, “19 / 6 / 16 Shaybah”.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, “10 / 11 / 15 Galveston Bay”.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, “19 / 6 / 16 Shaybah”.

<sup>54</sup> See Yaeger, “Editor's Column: Sea Trash, Dark Pools, and the Tragedy of the Commons,” 528 (cf. note 18).

<sup>55</sup> Couling, “The Offshore Petroleumscape,” 112 (cf. note 16).

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evige hyl der kan sprede sig over det meste af havet. Vi hugger dem over med rytmer. Jeg elsker maskinens brum, heroppefra.

(Jakub has spotted the blow from a whale far out and just in time I see its tail rise as we all run on deck to look. It is fleeing our sounds, it is the only one we have seen, and only its contours. The sounds are harmless but they disturb their peace, or their constant howls spreading across most of the ocean. We chop them up with rhythms. I love the humming of the machinery, from up here.)<sup>56</sup>

- 25 As the quote suggest, technical enterprise is celebrated while the environmental disturbance is brushed aside – “the sounds are harmless.” The workers are eager to spot the fascinating creatures, but they show no remorse towards them. The whales’ living space and their underwater communication are interrupted with nothing but affection for the “humming of the machinery.” In clear alliance with the trope of oceanic mastering, we also hear how “it is no longer a question of the depth of the sea, the platform, the drillings flow, unfolds the drill and sucks like a mosquito, extends its reach. The depth of the sea does not matter”<sup>57</sup> – note the simplistic syntax here again. The physical space of the oceanic seabed is thus ripe for taking as the “oceans are [simply] places for stealing resources, dumping trash, and making money through shipping, oil drilling, and so on.”<sup>58</sup> Unapologetic, the log’s different narrators’ reflection of the social order of contemporary oil extraction here seems to confirm that the “challenges of ultradeepwater oil are rapidly being met, but without much consideration for external costs,” as LeMenager puts it.<sup>59</sup>

<sup>56</sup> Christiansen, *Aftenstjerne*, “3 / 7 / 16 Grønlandshavet” (cf. note 32).

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., “7 / 6 / 16 Shaybah”.

<sup>58</sup> Yaeger, “Editor’s Column: Sea Trash, Dark Pools, and the Tragedy of the Commons,” 533 (cf. note 18).

<sup>59</sup> LeMenager, *Living Oil*, 3 (cf. note 1). “To drill ‘ultradeep,’” LeMenager explains on the same page, “is to go down 5,000 feet or more, an extension of the once space-age ambition of deepwater drilling: to go as far as 1,000 feet.”

Throughout, *Aftenstjerne* reads as a registration of the capitalist world-system’s insatiable appetite for fossil fuel. No material consequence – whether on the workers’ own bodies or the natural environment – can put an end to the drill bit of fossil capitalism. In a peculiar summarising statement on a page of its own, the oil extractivist ethos even seems speak for itself in a rather unsentimental tone:

Jo flere ting jeg gør, jo flere ting kommer der til at ville ske. Der er ingen der tror på at stoppe kunne være et mål.

imitation

gentagelse

udvikling

måske leder jeg bare efter døden i forskellige ord

(The more I do, the more is going to happen. Nobody believes that ending could be a goal.

imitation

repetition

development

maybe I am just looking for death in different words.)<sup>60</sup>

- 27 These examples from *Aftenstjerne*, I hope, demonstrates how immaterial subsurface oil is mediated by way of irrealist features of mystique and mythology. ‘Below, everything is speculation,’ we hear, and the workers therefore turn to mythological imagery to make sense of their local oil world. Most explicitly, this is the case in the offshore entries of the novel. Importantly, the novel also registers the massive oil structures involved in the business of extracting oil, both onshore and offshore. The oil itself is cloaked in a veil of mystique, but the enormous seismic vessels, the pipelines, and the oil platforms record the material underpinning of world oil. In her article, Nancy Couling writes that the “North Sea petroleumscape is a sprawling and unfamiliar agglomeration of grids, gods, and giant machines.”<sup>61</sup> Grids here refer to the practice of licensing subdivided blocks of the North Sea out for exploration and subsequent

<sup>60</sup> Christiansen, *Aftenstjerne*, “27 / 08 / 16 Doha” (cf. note 32).

<sup>61</sup> Couling, “The Offshore Petroleumscape,” 123 (cf. note 16).

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drilling, while the gods and giant machines illustrate the dual existence of culture and matter – mythology and materiality. This dual existence of myth and matter is exactly what *Aftenstjerne* registers by way of its irrealist features.

- 28 Where Christiansen's petrofiction employ seafarer folklore and mythology as irrealist features to describe the reality of offshore oil work, Kristina Stoltz's novel *På ryggen af en tyr* is adamant in highlighting the obscurity of offshore drilling through gothic sentiments. To extract this point further, I first turn to Yaeger's concept of oceanic ecocriticism\$.

### OCEANIC ECOCRITICISM\$ AND GOTHIC SENTIMENTS

- 29 Ecocriticism\$ is Yaeger's tentative suggestion for a critical update of the study of literature and the environment. She writes that "although ecocriticism supports many debates, it is so contaminated with nature as perfection or with a quest for organic truth that operating in its name is hard."<sup>62</sup> A similar critique of a lingering idea of equilibrium in 'classic' ecocriticism, is present in Greg Garrard's *Ecocriticism* where he writes that "notions of nature's essential harmony [...] are still prevalent in environmental discourse today."<sup>63</sup> In contrast to this romantic vision of purity in nature, Yaeger proposes the concept ecocriticism\$ "as a prosthetic term that insists on the imbroglio of markets and nature." As such, Yaeger implicitly positions herself in the growing post-millennial 'world-ecological' interest in "the way in which the production of nature under capital becomes fundamentally world-historical, with the connections between local socio-ecologies increasingly determined by the vectors of the market."<sup>64</sup> In the words of Matthew Huber,

this dialectic of nature and the social structure of capitalism is also very much to be considered when it comes to oil:

Oil is better understood as a social relation. This is not the same as saying that oil is a cultural construction or that nature is simply a cultural product of human discourse. Rather, it is a simple assertion that oil's biophysical capacities only come to be mobilized in specific historical circumstances and through particular social relations. Thus from a dialectical perspective that refuses nature–society binaries, oil is more concretely a socioecological relation that requires taking seriously both the materiality of petroleum and the social projects that channel its biophysical capacities in particular ways.<sup>65</sup>

"Oil is better understood as a social relation,"<sup>30</sup> Huber insists. Oil is not simply a natural occurrence, it is an energy-intense material that is meticulously planned, thoroughly protected, and heavily propagated around the world. The cultural productions that try to excavate the reality of oil must consider these elements. Therefore, in relation to water, Yaeger proposes that oceanic ecocriticism\$ "draws on narratives about the ocean in a state of emergency, a crisis that demands unnatural histories written by unnaturalists who limn the fleshy entanglement of sea creatures, sea trash, and machines. These histories try to motivate readers with their own brand of personification."<sup>66</sup> The novels by Stoltz and Christiansen can be read as fictional renditions of these two complexes – oil and water. Although chemically incompatible, Stoltz and Christiansen show that they are equally impossible to separate in the reality of world-economy/world-ecology entanglement. The offshore workers in Christiansen's novel, as shown, revisits seafarer mythology to make some sort of sense of the oceanic subsurface. Stoltz turns to another irreal realm in her mobilisation of gothic effects and affects.

<sup>62</sup> Yaeger, "Editor's Column: Sea Trash, Dark Pools, and the Tragedy of the Commons," 529 (cf. note 18).

<sup>63</sup> Greg Garrard, *Ecocriticism*, (London: Routledge, 2012 [2004]), 38.

<sup>64</sup> Michael Niblett, "World-Economy, World-Ecology, World Literature," *Green Letters*, vol. 16, n° 1, 2012, 17. For a further elaboration and conceptualisation of 'world-ecology,' see Jason Moore's seminal book, *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital* (London: Verso, 2015).

<sup>65</sup> Matthew T. Huber, *Lifeflood: Oil, Freedom, and the Forces of Capital* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 4. Original italics.

<sup>66</sup> Yaeger, "Editor's Column: Sea Trash, Dark Pools, and the Tragedy of the Commons": 529 (cf. note 18).



31 In *På ryggen af en tyr* the imbroglia of markets and nature is especially evident with the gothic character simply called ‘the boy’ by his own request – “you can call me the boy.”<sup>67</sup> The novel begins with the protagonist Fanny going on a summer vacation with her mother to visit her mother’s lover at his holiday home. Upon arrival Fanny quickly goes to the nearby beach where she spots something bobbing in the water. It turns out it is a naked boy, approximately ten years of age, falling in and out of consciousness. She quickly dives into the sea to save him from drowning. Back on the beach, the boy comes back to life only to scold her for “ruining everything.”<sup>68</sup> He then turns her attention to the supertanker out in the bay: “Do you see the supertanker out there?” He points. ‘It’s the largest tanker I have ever seen. It rises like a mountain.’<sup>69</sup> They talk for a bit, and he tells her that he lives with his father in the house behind them, a house that Fanny in a haunted-house fashion assumed was empty. This dialog then unfolds where Fanny asks him about his mother before the boy quickly diverts the attention on to his connection to and environmental obsession of the oil tanker:

’Og din mor?’

Han smiler, men svarer ikke, spørger i stedet, om ikke hun vil vide hvorfor han er så interesseret i supertankeren derude.

’Det er fordi min mor synes det er den smukkeste opfindelse, at man kan have store skibe til at fragte flydende energi hen over verdenshavene på den måde. Det var fuldmåne den nat jeg blev født, og det lækkede fra et af olieskibene. Olien skinnede som sølv på havoverfladen. Den største miljøkatastrofe i Europa nogensinde. Mange millioner fisk og fugle døde. Og så er der mine øjne.’  
 ’De skinner som sølv, dine øjne. Ja, det kan jeg se de gør. Som sølvmonter.

(‘And your mother?’)

He smiles, but he doesn’t answer, instead he asks if she wants to know why he is so interested in the supertanker out there.

‘It is because my mother thinks it’s the most beautiful invention, that it is possible to ship liquid energy across the world oceans in large vessels like that. It was a full moon the night I was born, and it was leaking from one of the oil ships. The oil shone like silver on the surface of the water. The greatest environmental disaster in Europe ever. Many millions of fish and birds died. And then there is my eyes.’

‘They shine like silver, your eyes. Yes, I can see that’s what they do. Like coins of silver.’<sup>70</sup>

Throughout the book, the boy functions in different ways as a sort of gothic omen alerting the reader of oceanic oil’s destructive interference. His eyes, as this quote highlights, resembles the surface of an oil spill, and a few pages later, adding to the gothic darkness surrounding him, we even hear that he possibly died during birth: “The boy died shortly after he was born but they succeeded in resurrecting him, but still, he didn’t live, or did he? The oil flowed. The sea was black.”<sup>71</sup> Again, some pages on, the chorus chips in, saying “he came from the sea.”<sup>72</sup>

Strangely connected to the supertanker North Oil, the boy goes about burying washed up animals on the beach all day while his father tries to figure out “how he can save the world, how all this can end.”<sup>73</sup> In a doppelgänger fashion he moreover resembles a ten-year older waiter/male prostitute that Fanny as well as the oil workers on the supertanker are involved with.<sup>74</sup> Mysterious, ominous, and yet strangely alluring, the boy represents and conveys connections that Fanny has never considered:

Fanny læser drengens lister. Han har skrevet alting ned. Meget mere end hun vidste. Hun anede ikke, at det var så godt som hele verden der indgik i hans system; at han tydeligvis ser en sammenhæng mellem det hele; hendes bikini og de døde dyr, antallet af cigaretter i hendes pakke og antallet af dage hans mor har

<sup>67</sup> Stoltz, *På ryggen af en tyr*, 16 (cf. note 4).

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 15-16.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 31, 43, 58, 77-78.

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været væk; at moren, malerierne, dyrene, skibet, hendes egen stråhat og supertankeren hænger sammen.

(Fanny reads the boy's lists. He has written everything down. Much more than she knew. She had no idea that the entire world, almost, was included in his system; he clearly sees a relation between it all; her bikini and the dead animals, the number of cigarettes in her pack and the number of days his mother has been gone; that the mother, the paintings, the animals, the ship, her own straw hat, and the supertanker are connected.)<sup>75</sup>

34 His systematised order of the world's relations is far-fetched and rather opaque to Fanny. How is Fanny's bikini related to the dead animals? What has her cigarettes to do with the absence of his mother? Rather than explaining these dense relations the boy embodies a sort of general resentment towards atomism. As such, his presence and his function are not to be a stable onshore signifier of the fossil economy 'out there,' but rather to constantly challenge the entire idea of compartmentalisation and stableness. Even his own material existence and circumstance is questioned, is he dead or alive, did Fanny rescue him and help him bury animals or not?

'Nu er det ikke bare noget der foregår inde i mit hoved,' siger han, da hun spørger. 'Dyrene er der i virkeligheden. De ligger dernede på stranden på rad og række. Fuldstændig indsmurte i olie: fisk, fugle, tilmed sæler. [...]'

Fanny medgiver, at der er langt flere døde dyr i området nu end der var tidligere.

'Men dyrene før var altså ikke bare noget som foregik inde i dit hoved,' siger hun. 'Alle dem i sækken, dem vi begravede sammen – de var da virkelige.'

[...]

'Det var noget vi fandt på, Fanny. Det ved du også godt. Alt det der med, at jeg druknede, og du reddede mig. Du ved jo godt, at det ikke passer. Det er dét derude, som er virkeligheden.' Han peger ud på North Oil's sølvglinsende skrog,

('Now is it no longer just something in my mind,' he says when she asks. 'The animals are really dead. They are placed in a row on the beach, completely covered in oil: fish, birds, even seals. [...]'

Fanny admits that there are way more animals in the area now than before.

'But it wasn't just something in your mind, the animals before,' she says. "All those in the bags, those we buried together – they were real, right.' [...]

'It was just something we made up, Fanny. You know this. All that about me drowning and you saving me. You know it isn't true. It's what's out there, that's real.' He points at North Oil's silvery hull.)<sup>76</sup>

As the quote illustrates, the offshore supertanker 35 is real. The boy himself, perhaps, is not.

### THE POLTERGEIST OF EXTRACTIVISM

In gothic fashion, the boy is to be understood 36 as a spectral presence "from the sea," as we hear, born during a massive oil spill on a night of full moon. Like the dead animals, he symbolises the recurrent *onshoring* of offshore oil. His eyes resemble coins of silver referencing Charon's Obol, the ancient Greek mythological ritual of placing coins on the eyelids to pay ferry passage into the Underworld. In the grand scheme of things, however, whether he is real or not does not seem to matter that much. In the resource capitalist world-system: "It's what's out there, that's real," as he says in the quote. From this point of view, he is nothing more than an undesirable signifier of fossil fuel ruin, reduced to the status of oil covered seabirds and other innocent animals often used to display the environmental damage of oceanic oil spills. "The sea is already a morgue,"<sup>77</sup> he poignantly says at one point.

'The sea is already a morgue,' can be said to 37 hold a universal truth in relation to offshore oil spills. However, the statement can also be read in a local Danish context. In 2008 The Danish

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 170.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 117-118.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 109.

Environmental Protection Agency released a guide on beach cleaning in relation to the emergency management of oil spills in Danish waters. In it, there is a rather laconic if brutal description of bird contamination:

Tilsøling af søfugle med olie efter et oliespild er ofte den mest iøjnefaldende skade, der forvoldes af olieforurening.

Fjerene beskytter fuglene mod varmetab, men olie på fjerene ødelægger denne beskyttende virkning. [...] For at en olieindsmurt fugl kan kompensere for det store varmetab, øges stofskiftet, hvilket kan betyde, at fuglen må indtage måske 2-3 gange så stor fødemængde som normalt. Dette er kun sjældent muligt, idet olie-skadede fugles almentilstand sædvanligvis er stærkt svækket p.g.a. kulde og den forgiftning, der opstår, når fuglen med næbbet forsøger at rense olien af sig. [...]

Dødeligheden blandt olieskadede fugle er næsten 100 procent under vinterforhold. En olieplet med en diameter på 3-4 cm kan være nok til at gøre det af med en fugl.

(Contamination of seabirds after an oil spill is often the most conspicuous damage caused by the oil pollution.

The feathers protect the birds against heat loss but the oil on the feathers destroy this ability. [...] If a bird covered in oil is to compensate for its massive loss of heat, its metabolism is increased which means that the bird must ingest 2-3 times the normal amount of food. This is only rarely possible as the oil covered bird's condition most likely is severely impaired due to heat loss and the poisoning that occur when the bird uses its beak to try and remove oil from its body. [...]

The fatality rate among oil covered birds is almost 100 percent during the period of winter. A patch of oil with a diameter of 3-4 cm can be enough to kill a bird.<sup>78</sup>

Underneath the sombre description here there is a lurking fact of spill culture. Oil spills are inevitable, it seems, and as contamination of seabirds is the most conspicuous effect of these spills, it is crucial to reduce this consequence. As a principle of beach cleaning, the sentiment is that the visible effects of a spill must be amended. What's 'out there' must preferably be kept 'out there.' In the words of LeMenager: "Terminating a spill is often synonymous with making it less visible."<sup>79</sup>

The boy in *På ryggen af en tyr*, however, manifestly illustrates that 'out there' is a mirage. He is a sort of offshore extraction poltergeist roaming the beach. And, as a comment on societal self-denial, he even tries to clean up the beach even though he is nothing but a clear product of the 'extraction ecology,' as Elizabeth Carolyn Miller names this capitalist world-system. More precisely, he stands out as the sheer incarnation of 'extractivism,' described by Miller as "a complex of cultural, discursive, economic, environmental, and ideological factors related to the extraction of underground resources on a large, industrial scale."<sup>80</sup> Ontological categories like here and there, real and unreal, are constantly questioned in the boy's presence. Even his own list, his system of the world, breaks down upon inspection. The connections are simply too abundant, too complex, to be systematised. In order to adequately represent the instable "fleshy entanglements" that Yaeger talks about, conventions from the unreal gothic genre fiction are applied in Kristina Stoltz' novel *På ryggen af en tyr*. As a genre, "[m]ost contemporary critics agree that Gothic is a continuously productive, transhistorical genre characterised by a certain affect or effect of terror or horror, by a dark and often uncanny atmosphere, and by a specific ideological endeavour: the interrogation of enlightenment rationality as a potentially destructive patriarchal, colonial

<sup>78</sup> Miljøstyrelsen, *Vejledning om strandrensning – februar 2008* (Odense: Miljøstyrelsen, 2008), 50-51, Url: <https://www2.mst.dk/udgiv/publikationer/2008/978-87-7052-719-4/pdf/978-87-7052-720-0.pdf> (accessed 27/07/2023), my translation.

<sup>79</sup> LeMenager, *Living Oil*, 23 (cf. note 1).

<sup>80</sup> Elizabeth Carolyn Miller, *Extraction Ecologies – and the Literature of the Long Exhaustion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021), 6.

and anthropocentric, yet anti-human force.”<sup>81</sup> The boy’s constant interrogation of established, rational categories, the novel’s eerie atmosphere both concerning scenery (the old hotel, the haunted house, the ominous presence of the supertanker) and plot, and the obvious exposé of the ideology of extractivism’s consequences surely establishes Stoltz’ novel as a gothic off-shore imaginary.<sup>82</sup>

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### CONCLUSION: NORTH SEA WORLD LITERATURE

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40 Based in a Global North setting, Kristina Stoltz’ novel also follows the claim by gothic and post-colonial scholar Johan Höglund. He writes that whereas narratives from the sacrifice zones in the Global South often portray the direct, immediate environmental *horror* of the capitalist world-system, affluent communities of the Global North are only recently becoming acquainted with these atrocities as a dark and looming if still unrealised *terror*.<sup>83</sup> There is, in other words, a discrepancy in the effects as well as the world literary responses of fossil fuelled capitalism. Although the Global South/Global North divide is not absolute as most nations are multiscalar with centre/periphery-divisions within them as well, on the global, structural scale, affluence and all its benefits are still overwhelmingly distributed according to this overall – colonial – scheme. So while climate change still “remains a prophecy, a promise of future violence, and thus a ghostly, haunting presence, for most inhabitants of the affluent Global North,” to the overwhelming majority of the Global South, “[d]eforestation, desertification, flooding,

overfishing, and pollution are [already] making life impossible.”<sup>84</sup> With a clear Marxist reference, Andreas Malm and Alf Hornborg refer to this as the “uneven and combined” realisation of apocalyptic climate change.<sup>85</sup>

A clear illustration of this unevenness is present in the media response to oil spills around the world. Going back to Christiansen’s novel, his mentioning of leaks per “usual”<sup>86</sup> can easily be connected to the Global South everyday-*horror*. To put this a bit in perspective, in Nigeria, for instance, a constant leak of oil the size of the *Exxon Valdez* spill in 1989 (approx. 37.000 tonnes) has occurred annually over the past 50 years.<sup>87</sup> As a government official from Eket, Nigeria says: “We don’t have an international media to cover us, so nobody cares about it [...]. Whatever cry we cry is not heard outside of here.”<sup>88</sup> Horror, then, is the dreadful everyday experience of ‘living on a damaged planet.’<sup>89</sup> Unevenly distributed, the experiences of climate change so far most intensely affect countries of the Global South who are less responsible for the acceleration of greenhouse gas emissions. And this moreover, according to Höglund’s salient gothic and world literary analysis, has formal consequences for the literature written from such locales. Terror on the contrary, Höglund, along with Justin Edwards and Rune Graulund, suggests, is a gothic inclination connected to a thrilling faculty, a sudden awakening and the adrenaline

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<sup>81</sup> Maria Holmgren Troy et al., *Nordic Gothic* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020), 1-2.

<sup>82</sup> For more on gothic sentiments and sea literature, see Emily Alder, “Through Oceans Darkly: Sea Literature and the Nautical Gothic,” *Gothic Studies* 19, n° 2 (2017). See also Sharae Deckard’s conceptualisation of ‘extractive gothic’ in Rebecca Duncan (ed.), *The Edinburgh Companion to Global Gothic* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023 (Fortcoming)).

<sup>83</sup> Johan Höglund, “Alligators in the Living Room: Terror and Horror in the Capitalocene,” in Sladja Blazan (ed.), *Haunted Nature: Entanglements of the Human and the Nonhuman* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021).

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<sup>84</sup> Edwards, Graulund, and Höglund, “Introduction: Gothic in the Anthropocene,” xx (cf. note 7). See also Rob Nixon’s influential analysis of how poor communities experience the planetary emergency compared to affluent communities. Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013).

<sup>85</sup> Malm and Hornborg, “The Geology of Mankind?,” 66-67 (cf. note 27).

<sup>86</sup> Christiansen, *Aftenstjerne*, “10 / 11 / 15 Galveston Bay” (cf. note 32).

<sup>87</sup> Adam Nossiter, “Far From Gulf, a Spill Scourge 5 Decades Old,” *The New York Times*, June 16, 2010, Url: <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/17/world/africa/17nigeria.html> (accessed 27/07/2023).

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> This phrasing is a tribute to the book by Anna Tsing et al., (eds.), *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).



rush of shocking surprises.<sup>90</sup> A specific set of *terrifying* sentiments that originated in the genre fiction of gothic are thus related to the affective impact of climate change-to-come in the affluent and still insulated Global North, they go on: “It can be argued that affluent communities, most located in the Global North, encounter the Anthropocene not as physical violence but as a haunting, uncanny presence, a ghost that rises out of the global landscape.”<sup>91</sup> Enter the boy in *På ryggen af en tyr*. This sensorial awakening to the facts of planetary emergency, they further argue, illustrates that gothic “has the potential to present us with a ‘realer,’ if darker, reality.”<sup>92</sup> As such, the gothic sentiments that challenge ontological categories and conceptions of reality in *På ryggen af en tyr* confronts the reader with a more real, but by no means clearer, depiction of the world-ecology.

42 Both novels, I have attempted to show, employ irrealism to depict extractivism, and more specifically, the materiality of offshore oil. Both *På ryggen af en tyr* and *Aftenstjerne* are adamant in making visible local figurations of the world phenomena of oil. In using irrealism as the formal device, they depict the existing opacity and mythology of oil rather than trying to construct a strictly realist representation of oil. According to Amitav Ghosh, the realist novel is a form predicated on vision – that which can be observed – and the “detailed descriptions of everyday life.”<sup>93</sup> As already mentioned, the energy unconscious is by contrast based on a general absence of materiality, meaning that everyday life in the Global North is shielded from a clear

visualisation of oil. As such, the employment of irrealism to depict oil in these two Nordic petrofictional works can be read as an accentuation of realism’s inadequacy to grasp the realities of oil.

Kristina Stoltz and Aske Juul Christiansen are 43 both from the oil producing country of Denmark. Thus, speaking from a Danish context, they connect culture traits from the Nordic region with the global world of oil. *Aftenstjerne* specifically use the irreal register of Nordic mythology and the seafarer/explorer form to discuss the im/materiality of offshore oil. In this novel, Nordic oil is clearly world oil but in its form the novel still retains a regional tonality. In Stoltz’s novel, it is unclear where – in the Global North – the story exactly unfolds. The sunny, coastal and mountainous setting suggests the southern parts of Europe, though, a common travel destination for Danes on summer vacation. The supertanker’s name – North Oil – of course explicitly refers to the North. Moreover, in the cultural history of Denmark, the designator ‘supertanker’ is synonymous with the Danish shipping firm Maersk – just as the Danish history of North Sea oil extraction is: the CEO at Maersk, A. P. Møller, spearheaded the push to explore the seabed in the mid-century, and in 1962 the subdivision Maersk Oil was granted the exclusive right to explore and extract oil and gas from the Danish sector of the North Sea.<sup>94</sup> In that way, *Aftenstjerne* and *På ryggen af en tyr* carry clear traces of a specific region’s cultural and industrial history in their registration of world oil. They are, I suggest, specific irrealist Danish North Sea petrofiction contributions to the world literature of the modern capitalist world-system.

<sup>90</sup> See Edwards, Graulund, and Höglund, “Introduction: Gothic in the Anthropocene,” (cf. note 7).

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, XIX.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, IX.

<sup>93</sup> See Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2017), 19.

<sup>94</sup> See Morten Hahn-Pedersen, *Maersk Oil: From Danish to International Operations* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 2017). In 2018, the subdivision Maersk Oil became a part of French oil firm Total thus ending the Danish shipping firm’s oil drilling engagement in the North Sea.

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