

## Plotting Against Oil in American and Canadian Non-fiction

Marta Wójcik-Czerwińska

Maria Curie-Skłodowska University, Lublin, Poland

[martawojcikrzyszow@gmail.com](mailto:martawojcikrzyszow@gmail.com)



### Abstract

Stephanie LeMenager, literature professor and author of *Living Oil: Petroleum Culture in the American Century* (2014), opens her study of America's relationship with the resource by asserting that reports of its death have been exaggerated. Oil not only continues to drive American modernity, but also to inspire writers to explore it, in both fiction and non-fiction. While "petrofiction," fiction with oil at its core, has received critical attention, certain new developments in non-fictional writing centred on petroleum call for more consideration. This article, therefore, probes representations of oil in contemporary American and Canadian non-fiction. It analyses William L. Fox's essay "A Pipeline Runs through It" (2011), which is based on a trip along the Trans-Alaska Pipeline, and Andrew Nikiforuk's article "Canadian Democracy: Death by Pipeline" (2012), which discusses the impact of the proposed Northern Gateway Pipeline from Alberta to British Columbia. Adopting an ecocritical perspective, the article puts to the test LeMenager's thesis that journalists are "expert plotters against oil" and "conservationists." To this end, it analyses the specific means by which the two journalists expose the presence of oil and highlight its micro and macro implications, from its impact on the landscape and the lives of people whose livelihoods and cultures have been shaped by the natural world, to that on democracy and our minds.

**Keywords:** Literature, non-fiction, oil, Stephanie LeMenager, Andrew Nikiforuk, William L. Fox.

### Resumen

Stephanie LeMenager, profesora de literatura y autora de *Living Oil: Petroleum Culture in the American Century* (2014), abre su estudio sobre la relación de los Estados Unidos con el petróleo como recurso natural, mediante la afirmación de que los informes de su muerte han sido exagerados. El petróleo no sólo impulsa la modernidad americana sino también inspira a los escritores para explorarlo tanto en la ficción como en la no-ficción. Mientras que la "petroficción," ficción centrada en el petróleo, ha sido objeto de atención crítica, algunos nuevos desarrollos en la escritura de no-ficción centrada en el petróleo causan mayor interés. Este artículo trata de representar al petróleo en la no-ficción contemporánea americana y canadiense. Analiza el ensayo de William L. Fox "A Pipeline Runs through It" (2011), basado en un viaje a lo largo del sistema de oleoducto Trans-Alaska, y el artículo de Andrew Nikiforuk "Canadian Democracy: Death by Pipeline" (2012), discutiendo el impacto de la propuesta del oleoducto del Norte desde Alberta hasta la Columbia Británica. Adoptando una perspectiva ecocrítica, el artículo pone a prueba las tesis de LeMenager de que los periodistas como "expertos conspiradores contra el petróleo" y "conservacionistas". Para ello, analiza los medios específicos por los cuales los dos periodistas exponen la presencia de petróleo y destacan sus macro y micro implicaciones, desde su impacto en el paisaje y en las vidas de las personas cuyos medios de vida y culturas han sido moldeadas por el mundo natural, hasta su impacto en la democracia y en nuestras mentes.

**Palabras clave:** Literatura, no-ficción, petróleo, Stephanie LeMenager, Andrew Nikiforuk, William L. Fox.

How do journalists critique people's relationship with oil? The approach with which the following article is concerned has been described by Stephanie LeMenager as "plotting against oil," in *Living Oil: Petroleum Culture in the American Century* (2014). LeMenager writes of herself and of the purpose of her study in the following way:

As a literature professor, I'm aware that that the narrative of petroleum is an unstable one, constantly shifting. I am not a political scientist, economist, or engineer, and my point is not to prophesy the future of fossil fuels, but rather to consider how the story of petroleum has come to play a fundamental role in the American imagination and therefore in the future of life on earth (4).

At the very beginning of the book she states that "[r]eports of oil's death have been exaggerated" (3). Both the United States and Canada boast sizable remaining oil deposits. Our current era, though, is what has been named "Tough Oil World" (3). She explains that "tough oil," as opposed to "easy oil," comes from unconventional oil resources. Alaskan oil extracted from Prudhoe Bay oil fields is an example of "easy oil." "Tough oil" must be extracted ultradeep in the oceans, in oil or tar sands and shale gas formations on land (3). The United States is exploiting ultradeep oil deposits in the South Atlantic and the Arctic, and shale gas formations in Montana and Dakota, while Canada has the 'tar sands' in northern Alberta and shale gas formations in Saskatchewan (3). Releasing oil from these deposits involves highly devastating techniques and risk of ecological destruction (3). LeMenager proposes that since "tough oil" extraction is extremely risky, complex, cumbersome, time-consuming, and expensive, working with it "implies an unprecedented devotion, even love" (4). The need to fuel modernity is what instills this devotion and love, not only in residents of the United States, but also in "people identified with the idea of America, its ideological, stylistic, military, and economic expression of modernity for the past century or so" (4). LeMenager notes, however, that America's relationship with oil is anything but one-dimensional. Oil spills in particular have complicated this relationship, by wreaking havoc on people, nature, and the economy. She discusses massive oil spills in California (1969), Alaska (1989) and the Gulf of Mexico (2010) that have traumatised Americans and turned even petroleum culture lovers against the oil industry. The Santa Barbara spill, the first major oil spill in the United States, sparked what she coins "an ecological awakening":

The Santa Barbara spill occurred in waters only six miles off the coast, so a majority of affected animals washed up on local beaches. Birds, whose oil damaged feathers inhibited flight, fell dead into the town. Privileged people, conscious of their happiness, witnessed the violence of the cheap energy that made it possible. They were traumatized (25).

LeMenager therefore argues that America's relationship with oil is a love-hate one.

These contradictory emotions arising from living with oil have been reflected in literature. In the 1990s, Amitav Ghosh identified the genre of "petrofiction," fiction with oil at its core (11). LeMenager notes that petrofiction "provides one route to understanding our entanglement" with oil (11). She calls Amitav Ghosh and his successors, most notably Imre Szeman, "petrocritics," who "have begun to archive potential candidates for the best, most representationally astute oil novel," including Upton Sinclair's *Oil*, Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* and Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (11).

LeMenager quotes Szeman, lamenting that novelists have tended to “balk at the oil encounter” and that fiction “hasn’t dismantled our self-subjection to oil capital,” even though certain novels, most notably *Oil*, can hardly be seen as celebrating oil (11). But she identifies a number of novels such as Helon Habila’s *Oil on Water* and Attica Locke’s *Black Water Rising* as works critically “plotting against oil” (124), drawing on Peter Brooks’ definition of plotting “as the interpretative activity that constructs ‘a story of the crime’ otherwise unavailable to the reader,” while at the same time playing on the everyday meaning of “plotting” as hatching a plot, or scheming for someone’s or something’s downfall (124).

However, not only fiction writers broach the topic of oil, or plot against it. Analysing Habila’s *Oil on Water*, whose main character is a journalist, LeMenager recognises the journalist as “ideally an expert plotter,” who “assists the culture in creating comprehensible and transmissible narratives, hence cultural memory” (125). Moreover, she claims that “Helon Habila’s fictions emphasize the significance of journalists as ‘conservationists,’ by which he means creators and archivists of occluded histories, including ecological ones” (126). This prompts one to ask how oil is represented in contemporary American *journalism*. In the following, I ask what similarities with and differences from petrofiction are encountered in two journalistic essays, William L. Fox’s “A Pipeline Runs through It” (2011) and Andrew Nikiforuk’s “Canadian Democracy: Death by Pipeline” (2012). My questions include: What does journalism’s capacity for “plotting against oil” stem from? What are the specific means by which Fox’s and Nikiforuk’s journalistic writing accomplishes this goal? How are these means similar to or different from those employed by fiction writers? Are the two journalists “conservationists” in LeMenager’s sense of the word, and how do they create or archive “occluded histories, including ecological ones”? This article aims to answer these questions by adopting an ecocritical perspective corresponding to that outlined by the editors of *The Ecocriticism Reader* in 1996. Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm specified the tasks of ecocriticism by enumerating questions posed by ecocritics:

How is nature represented in this sonnet? What role does the physical setting play in the plot of this novel? Are the values expressed in this play consistent with ecological wisdom? How do our metaphors of the land influence the way we treat it? How can we characterize nature writing as a genre? In addition to race, class, and gender, should place become a new critical category? Do men write about nature differently than women do? In what ways has literacy itself affected humankind’s relationship to the natural world? How has the concept of wilderness changed over time? In what ways and to what effect is the environmental crisis seeping into contemporary literature and popular culture? What view of nature informs U.S. Government reports, corporate advertising, and televised nature documentaries, and to what rhetorical effect? What bearing might the science of ecology have on literary studies? How is science itself open to literary analysis? What cross-fertilization is possible between literary studies and environmental discourse in related disciplines such as history, philosophy, psychology, art history, and ethics? (xviii-xix).

While ecocritical analysis of a literary text usually includes genre-specific matters such as reflection on the author’s stance vis-à-vis the attitudes expressed in the text, many of

these broad questions can also be approached by studying journalism as well as literary fiction and non-fiction. Ecocritics are interested in whether the text expresses a biocentric or an anthropocentric perspective, embodies any form of eco-aesthetics (for instance whether it presents formal equivalents of natural forms), decentres the human, or redefines beauty. The ecocritic views literature as a form of art depicting the material world and contributing to it, rather than as an autonomous linguistic phenomenon (as a postmodern critic would). Any text may be analysed ecocritically, using at least some of the questions listed above, since all texts give insight into what Lawrence Buell has called the “environmental unconscious” (*Writing for an Endangered World* 24). The term, coined in analogy with Frederic Jameson’s concept of the “political unconscious,” implies, as Julia Fiedorczuk has observed, that all texts, consciously or not, comment upon humankind’s relationship with the natural world (10). To Fiedorczuk, the way a text is silent about nature can also prove as revealing as texts approaching the topic directly, in which the reader is provided with ready answers (10). The ecocritical approach can therefore be used to interpret a wide variety of texts, and not only works from the literary canon.

William L. Fox is receiving growing recognition as a non-fiction writer and journalist in the United States, and Andrew Nikiforuk is known as one of Canada’s leading non-fiction writers and journalists. Their work provides a basis for investigation of LeMenager’s conception of the journalist as a “plotter against oil,” because the topic of oil extraction and its complexities is the primary concern of both authors. However, their backgrounds and perspectives differ considerably. Fox is an American writer whose work has been described as a “sustained inquiry into how human cognition transforms land into landscape” (“William L. Fox”). He has published poems, articles, reviews, essays, and non-fictional books. The essay “A Pipeline Runs through It,” published in *Orion Magazine* in 2011, chronicles a trip on which he embarked with the founding director of the Centre for Land Use Interpretation in Los Angeles, Matt Coolidge, to trace the “anthrogeomorphology” of the Trans-Alaska Pipeline. “Anthrogeomorphology” is a term coined by Coolidge that stands for “human effects on the surface of the Earth” (Fox). The Centre for Land Use Interpretation is a non-profit organization tracing and documenting land usage especially for military and industrial purposes in the American West. One of Coolidge’s projects involved organising an exhibition of photographs presenting the oil infrastructure in America, and the trip was planned to provide photographic material for the exhibition. The essay is therefore an outsider’s account of the impact of one of the biggest structures connected with the oil industry in the world.

The Canadian journalist Andrew Nikiforuk’s current work focuses on oil development, with special emphasis on Alberta’s tar sands project (“Bio”). He has published articles, essays, and non-fiction books. In an article titled “Canadian Democracy: Death by Pipeline,” published in *On Earth* magazine in 2012, Nikiforuk raised the issue of the tar sands. Enbridge, a company responsible for the 2010 toxic

bitumen spill into the Kalamazoo River in Michigan, planned to build two pipelines.<sup>1</sup> One of them, known as Northern Gateway, largely funded by Chinese companies, would have brought over 200 tankers to the marine terminal in Hartley Bay every year. It would have transported Alberta's oil to Hartley Bay and then to Asia. Enbridge planned to build the pipeline through the Great Bear Rainforest, a unique and vulnerable ecosystem, disrespecting the fact that such projects needed to be accepted by First Nations inhabiting the area. Nikiforuk's text thus presents the potential consequences of a pipeline which has not been constructed, unlike Fox's article, which explores the impact of a pipeline built in the 1970s. It is interesting, therefore, to compare the authors' responses to pipelines functioning in different kinds of reality: the Trans-Alaska Pipeline is very much incorporated into the Alaskan landscape, whereas Northern Gateway was only a possibility when Nikiforuk was writing his text, and remains unbuilt.

Before the aforementioned proposition—that journalists play an important role by telling stories which draw the public's attention to the hidden presence of oil in contemporary society—is put to the test with the specific instances of environmental journalism by Fox and Nikiforuk, journalism's capacity for "plotting against oil" needs further consideration. The argument in the following hinges on LeMenager's conception of "plotting" as "an act of detection that reconstructs the object it pursues, in this case an energy resource that seeks to hide itself, to dematerialize as capital" (124). She notes examples of literary plotting against oil in both fiction and non-fiction. As for fiction, the genre of the detective novel is the perfect vehicle for the task due to the fact that it attempts to resolve a mystery. However, when discussing Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*, LeMenager writes that Habila presents journalism "as a means of imposing narrative coherence on ecological and social conditions so chaotic as to be illegible even to those who ordinarily live with them" (LeMenager 125). Habila's journalist, Rufus, reminds LeMenager of a detective, who creates "an interpretative map (a plot) that generates a larger story" (126). Rufus is incapable of plotting in the Conan Doyle manner, that is coming up with a diagnosis and, in conclusion, exorcising the crime (LeMenager 126). He is forced by the complexity of the issue of the devastating oil exploration in the Niger Delta to make difficult choices. In addition, in order for the plot to be the carrier of cultural memory, it must "be of length to be taken in by the memory" (Aristotle, qtd. in LeMenager 126).

Journalistic writing performs the task of "plotting" oil in ways which both resemble and complement those of fiction. LeMenager argues that non-fiction may in fact manifest itself "almost in the guise of the detective narrative" (125), citing the journalistic piece *Black Tide: The Devastating Impact of the Gulf Oil Spill*, in which Antonia Juhasz exposes the tragic consequences of the 2010 BP blowout and the inefficient remediation in the aftermath of the catastrophe. *Black Tide* contains investigative reporting which "elicits material evidence that exists largely at the molecular level, so far out of sight as to be 'disappeared' by politically motivated rhetoric" (LeMenager 125). Journalistic writing has the capacity to highlight "the

---

<sup>1</sup> While Stephen Harper's administration approved the project in 2014, the decision was reversed by Justin Trudeau's government in 2016 (Illyckyj).

microscale victims” of ecodegradation, to borrow LeMenager’s phrase, at the same time as raising broader political, cultural, philosophical, and other issues concerning modernity’s relationship with oil. Non-fiction writers are equipped to provide “plots” which ensure the transmission of ecological awareness as well as cultural memory. Reliance on facts, use of a variety of sources, and presentation of a mass of detail, combined with the ideal “length to be taken in by memory” which the genre of the essay-article adheres to, are examples of ways in which journalists seek to accomplish the task of plotting (for or against) oil. LeMenager comments that although plotting does not necessarily offer a solution, it constitutes “a subsistence practice, a means of making *some* meaning, of getting by” (127). But while it is arguably not the primary aim of fiction (exemplified by Habila’s novel) to seek to make a difference in the real world, journalism aspires more often than not to do so (127). Journalism strives to look ‘beneath the surface,’ and it does so by performing “an inquest, a plot, upon historical truisms such as ‘oil brings prosperity’” (LeMenager 136). How, therefore, do the two journalists “plot against oil”?

William L. Fox does so in ways that both resemble and differ from petrofiction. Firstly, he moves “continually between the backgrounds and the foregrounds, using the microscale to materialize macro-scale experience,” thereby “negotiat[ing] the workings of oil in place” (LeMenager 134). He constantly changes the spatial perspective on the pipeline, never losing sight of its micro and macro implications. He starts with a general overview of the Trans-Alaska Pipeline, which he does in a rather matter-of-fact and encyclopaedia-like manner. He explains that the pipeline boasts a length of 800 miles, running from the Prudhoe Bay oil fields to Valdez, and “cuts a geomorphological cross section on an almost continental scale” (Fox). But also at the very beginning of the article he highlights the fact that the pipeline intervenes in the landscape in all ways imaginable, from bridges to pump stations. This perspective is, however, too broad to expose the full presence of oil effectively.

Fox comes closer to accomplishing his task when he depicts the subsequent steps of the journey that he and his companions start in Valdez. As LeMenager’s comments in her interpretation of Matt Coolidge’s boat tours for Houstonians, which were aimed at making them realise the enormity of Houston’s oil infrastructure, Fox uses his journalistic writing “as a means of intelligence, a way to get inside an oil economy whose scale edges are inconceivable” (138). He provides the reader with what can be seen as literary equivalents of photographic shots of the traces of the anthropogenic impact on the Alaskan landscape, including ones which are kept hidden from the public. For instance, he describes, using the massive details technique, one of the five pump stations in operation alongside the pipeline at Mile 735, the pipeline running above the ground, an oil-spill response station, a secondary pipeline which supplies the U.S. Army’s Black Rapids Training Site, Alaskan towns, the enormous Eielson Air Force Base south of Fairbanks, the Alyeska company’s visitor centre and, finally, Prudhoe Bay Oil Field. Fox notes that when he and his companions reach Atigun Pass in the Brooks Range, where the oil slows down, they notice a helicopter over their heads, which may be linked to the

fact that the Alyeska traces the actions of those who show too much interest in their pipeline.

It is Fox's aim to counter the company's efforts to "dematerialize" oil "as capital," by documenting the pipeline and making it real for the reader. The author's close-up perspective on particular elements of the convoluted web of Alaskan petroleum infrastructure is, to recall LeMenager's phrase, "live plotting, inviting the imposition of interpretative will upon a story that will become legible through the interpretative frame and yet appear to extend beyond it" (38). Focusing the reader's attention on each item in the landscape in turn, Fox exposes their multifaceted implications. For example, describing the oil-spill response station, he notes that what he and his companions see there is one of the three spots where the pipeline is buried in permafrost to go under the road to allow animal migrations and avoid avalanches. At these three points, the pipeline is refrigerated to keep the ground frozen. He does not state it directly, but it is unproblematic to infer that despite these costly precautions the construction of the pipeline alters animal migration patterns and increases avalanche hazards.

Fox moves once again "between the backgrounds and the foregrounds" in his description of the sensual and the philosophical aspects of his pipeline experience. Firstly, looking at the pipeline, he finds it difficult to believe that something looking so innocent may carry a substance capable of wreaking deadly, smelly havoc. In this way, not only does he expose petroleum as a material presence otherwise escaping the reader's attention, but he also creates sense memory by employing strong evocations of sight (LeMenager 129). He compares the Trans-Alaska Pipeline to "an alien artifact worming through the planet" and draws a contrast between the man-made pipeline and the wild flowers blooming under it:

If the Great Walls of China are massive works of antiquity that from afar look like a zipper upon the earth, and Australia's Dog Fence is a set of wires threaded through the narratives of a country, then the Trans-Alaska Pipeline looks like an alien artifact worming through the planet. You look straight at it, turn your head left and right to see how far it goes, and it makes very little sense at first. It might as well be a flying saucer; it's just too big, too weird, too resistant to opinion. It does, however, invite wonder. People stood under the four-and-a-half-foot-wide tube, their heads tilted back to look at the structure that was elevated several feet above their heads, while the guide rattled off statistics. It was a warm sunny day, thunderstorms towering in the distance toward Valdez, and under the pipeline bloomed hundreds of yellow, orange, and blue wildflowers. When I put my hand on the galvanized steel it was cool, silent, massive, and without a hint of the millions of gallons of oil traveling inside.

This striking juxtaposition of the snake-like artificial construct with the rolling Northern landscape is an act of journalistic resistance to the destructive potential of such energy projects, while acknowledging the wonder that the Trans-Alaska pipeline arouses in Fox and his companions. It is left to the reader to decide, however, whether this wonder softens Fox's resistance (the pipeline is an imposing work of human genius) or rather strengthens it (the pipeline is imposing and hence even more perilous). While the above description reveals a somewhat ambiguous response to the pipeline, Fox's discussion of the meaning of "lines" in human experience in general and in the landscape in particular

establishes him as a writer plotting *against* oil. Upon entering the North Slope Borough, Fox muses:

The borough line runs east to west, as does the Brooks Range, and extends from the Yukon Territory in Canada to the western shore at the Bering Sea. These enormous left-to-right lines on the land are crossed at right angles by the pipeline. This simple fact reminded me how persistently we insist on making lines across the land that run counter to the nature of the world and the unimpeded flow of water and people, goods and ideas (Fox).

Fox also notices a sign marking the northernmost spruce tree. However, fifty feet to the north, a younger tree grows. The tree line has clearly advanced as the Earth has warmed. Fossil fuels are composed of dead trees and vegetation which converted energy from the sun into matter millions of years ago, storing it. Extracting oil or gas from the ground, we draw upon this energy from the past. In the process, the CO<sub>2</sub> content of the atmosphere is increased, thereby trapping more of the heat from the sun, and resulting in global warming. As a result, spruce is moving northward every year. Fox notices that the pipeline, the tree line, and the borough line are all related to the human perception of the world through the prism of lines:

Eighty percent of human perception is based on what we see, and the fundament of human vision is boundary contrast, the line between light and dark shaping every object in our minds. We see lines everywhere, even if they don't exist, our mind assembling random points along lines in an attempt to order everything around us. The condition is called pareidolia, and it's what led Percival Lowell to claim the existence of canals on Mars as he was peering through his telescope in the 1890s (Fox).

For centuries, people have assumed that by forming a construct such as a line we may exercise control over the land. But while man-made lines, including pipelines, are fixed in place, lines in nature are not. The human-made lines constitute boundaries to the spread of genes and migrations of herds and contribute to climate change by moving such natural lines as isotherms and tree lines. As Fox points out, "[a] line seems so simple, but make a mark and you reorder the world around it" (Fox). What we deem a way to energy security is a burden on the natural world. The pipeline becomes in Fox's piece a reminder of industrial modernity, an era in which we have excelled at imposing lines upon the Earth so as to ensure the continuation of the mode of living we have chosen. In focusing attention on lines in the landscape, Fox becomes a plotter against oil. He exposes oil and oil infrastructures, highlights their devastating effects on the natural world, manages to capture the enormity of the Trans-Alaska Pipeline by first depicting it, then examining fragments of it in order to make it available to the reader, evoking in the process the senses of touch and sight, and finally ascribing some broader, cultural, and philosophical sense to it.

In "A Pipeline Runs through It" Fox makes visible the occluded ecological history of Alaska, exposing oil where it appears invisible and zooming in on the micro implications of the American North's petroleum infrastructure, as well as moving beyond the local context to raise global climate change issues. He also archives the tragic *Exxon Valdez* oil spill, which took place off the Gulf of Alaska in 1989. He may therefore



be classed as what LeMenager calls a “journalist-conservationist.” Andrew Nikiforuk also recounts the story of the *Exxon Valdez* spill in his article:

Although the ship’s owners blamed the 257,100-barrel spill on an alcoholic captain, the disaster, as noted by Steve Coll in his book *Private Empire: ExxonMobil and American Power*, was “abetted by inadequate regulations and corporate safety systems.” The tanker didn’t have a large enough crew to navigate the hazards of Prince William Sound, and the Port of Valdez didn’t have enough equipment to respond to the spill. As a consequence, the oil contaminated 3,200 miles of shoreline and spread almost 1,200 miles from the accident scene. It caused the collapse of the herring industry, badly damaged the pink salmon fishery, and halved seafood harvests for aboriginal groups. It killed more than 100,000 seabirds and 3,500 sea otters. Communities sank into alcohol and despair (46).

Nikiforuk stresses the fact that the spill affected the livelihoods of the coastal residents of Prince William Sound in the Gulf of Alaska, traumatising them and causing a variety of social pathologies. Like Fox, in archiving this grave ecological catastrophe he becomes a “journalist-conservationist.” But while Fox thematises the human intervention in the Alaskan landscape of a pipeline that has existed for some forty years, Nikiforuk predicts what will befall the Canadian environment if the two proposed tar sands pipelines in British Columbia are constructed. This prediction or projection may be called an “archive” in which Nikiforuk stores not an occluded ecological history, but rather a warning for the future. His conservationist effort is particularly discernible in his discussion of the likely environmental impact of the pipeline, which would have traversed the Great Bear Rainforest. His non-fictional treatment of the proposed project is clearly based on a variety of sources, from local people and tribal elders, to scientists and political activists. For instance, Nikiforuk recounts in his article his conversation with Riki Ott, a marine toxicologist and former commercial fisher, who claims that an accident off the Great Bear Rainforest, which supports different species of bears, numerous eagles, and salmon, could be more devastating than the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill, due to the more difficult navigating conditions and the fact that oil sand sinks rather than evaporates once it comes into contact with water. Moreover, it is more toxic and more harmful both for people and wildlife. Ott does not believe that an accident may be prevented, and his final message is straightforward: “As long as we drill it, we are going to spill it” (Fox).

Nikiforuk “conceives a plot to remake neoliberal policies and the systems that sustain them back into public knowledge,” which brings to mind another fictional character examined by LeMenager in her study, Attica Locke’s lawyer-detective (132). What Nikiforuk means by the term “democracy” in the title of his essay is primarily the right of all citizens to express their opinion about the projects affecting their surroundings. His plot and his resistance to the destructive effects of energy projects are exemplified by his detailed description of the undemocratic, in his view, implications of the Canadian tar sands development. He recounts that the Great Bear Rainforest is home to twenty-eight First Nations groups, who “manage the rainforest under a plan that [has called for] ecotourism, renewable energy, sustainable forest products, shellfish aquaculture, and the restoration of First Nations’ access to fisheries” (44). Coastal First

Nations, an alliance of 10 nations and 20,000 people, have vehemently opposed Enbridge's project, fearing that their food supply may be put at risk. Nikiforuk structures his resistance to oil drawing on legal principles. He points out that under the Canadian constitution, the federal government and private corporations must obtain consent from First Nations peoples. Initially, Enbridge announced that they would respect the wishes of Coastal First Nations, but they changed their minds and decided to pursue their original idea.

Nikiforuk exposes in his article the covert connections between industry and politics, bringing them into public knowledge, and plotting against oil in this way. In his view, the Conservative Party, which was in power at the time, strongly believed in the need to utilise Canada's tar sands, in order to transform the country into an energy superpower, "akin to Saudi Arabia" (44). They hoped that thanks to the pipelines the export of oil would increase threefold by 2035. However, it could not happen without bringing the oil from the tar sands to Canada's tidewater ports. Nikiforuk points out that when Coastal First Nations opposed the pipeline in 2009, the Harper government launched an offensive by introducing numerous changes to pipeline-threatening environmental laws. For instance, the only laws that were left in Canada's Fisheries Act concern fish important from a commercial point of view. Moreover, the Navigable Waters Protection Act was amended so that pipelines were no longer subject to its provisions, putting numerous endangered species at risk. Furthermore, the Environmental Assessment Act was rewritten, reducing the number of projects to review, limiting public involvement and narrowing the definition of "environmental effects." Also, the government started investigating the activities, and the foreign funding, of registered charities such as environmental NGOs and Tides Canada. Finally, funding for critical environmental research programmes was drastically reduced. These moves on the part of the government led Nikiforuk to the conclusion that Canadian democracy was under threat of "death by pipeline."

Nikiforuk's plotting against oil "for the sake of democracy" makes the essay an example of environmental justice advocacy. Lawrence Buell has described environmental justice initiatives as "movements to address the unequal distribution of environmental benefits and hazards across population groups, especially by race and/or class" (419). In *The Environmental Justice Reader: Politics, Poetics, and Pedagogy* (edited by Joni Adamson, Mei Mei Evans, and Rachel Stein in 2002), the beginnings of the environmental justice movement are traced back to the 1980s and associated with the south-eastern United States, a notorious site of toxic waste dumping in the areas inhabited by people of colour. A crucial moment in the formation of the movement on an international scale was the First National People of Colour Environmental Leadership Summit in Washington, D.C. in 1991, which produced "Principles of Environmental Justice." According to Adamson, Evans and Stein, environmental justice is "the right of all people to share equally in the benefits bestowed by a healthy environment" (4), where the environment is understood as "the places in which we live, work, play, and worship" (4). Although environmental justice has been repeatedly discussed in connection with urban life, the authors claim that rural as well as land and water rights issues are also

concerned (12-13). The purpose of environmental justice initiatives is to “redress the disproportionate incidence of environmental contamination in communities of the poor and/or communities of color, to secure for those affected the right to live unthreatened by the risks posed by environmental degradation and contamination, and to afford equal access to natural resources that sustain life and culture” (4). Several of the novelists discussed by LeMenager in *Living Oil* are concerned with environmental justice in their problematization of oil development: Attica Locke, for instance, depicts the implications for the local communities of Houston, a city whose economy depends almost entirely upon oil-related activities.

Nikiforuk writes of the aboriginal population of Gitga’at from British Columbia’s Great Bear Rainforest. He introduces them in the following passage:

They dance and sing like spirited Maori warriors. The women speak softly to living cedar trees when they harvest a single strip of bark for basket or hat making. Every summer the Gitga’at greet returning schools of pink and chum salmon with smiles and shouts of “Ayoo, ayoo.” Each member of the Gitga’at nation possesses a traditional name -- Gu thlaag, for example, means “the very instant that lightning hits a tree and the tree splits apart.” For the past 10,000 years the Gitga’at have set their dinner tables with bounty from the sea, including salmon, cockles, crab, and halibut. In recent years they have struggled as commercial fisheries have declined in the region, yet the Pacific Ocean still defines them (42).

This description provides the reader with information about cultural practices and traditions of the Gitga’at. It is not only factual but also intimate. Nikiforuk characterises the nature of their connection with the natural world by pointing out their speaking “softly” to the trees, and greeting the returning salmon with “smiles,” as well as stating directly that “the Pacific Ocean defines them.” This almost pastoral depiction contrasts strikingly with the part of the essay which follows, in which Nikiforuk discusses Enbridge’s plans. He writes of the Coastal First Nations’ attitude towards the most feared pipeline:

The twin pipeline proposal, known as Northern Gateway and funded largely by Chinese state-owned oil companies, would bring about 220 tankers to Hartley Bay’s doorstep every year. But for the past six years the Gitga’at community and its coastal neighbors have politely but steadfastly informed Enbridge executives that they have no intention of putting their food supply at risk from tanker spills, just so that tar-sands developers can put more cars on the road in smoggy Shanghai. Nor are they willing to exchange their views of rising humpback whales for supertankers eight times larger than the *Exxon Valdez* (43).

The image of the impact of the proposed pipeline on the coast, the water and the rainforest projected by Nikiforuk is a grim one. The Gitga’at and their coastal neighbours would need to sacrifice a great deal, getting little in return. Like Fox, Nikiforuk admits that oil exploration may contribute to creating more employment opportunities, but he doubts that oil boom towns are likely to positively impact the local populations overall. The proposed project endangers the coast and the rainforest, which for the aboriginal communities of British Columbia constitute not only homelands but also sources of livelihoods and bearers of cultural tradition. He deems oil exploration and the resultant

increased automobility (in China, not in Canada) unworthy of risking ecodegradation and loss of culture. Reporting all the facts he gathered in his multifaceted research, Nikiforuk plots against oil. He brings to the reader's attention aspects of the oil industry which people do not realise while living the life enabled by this industry. Energy projects provide jobs and allow us to drive cars, but they also destabilise communities who happen to inhabit areas of interest to petroleum-related companies, not only causing environmental injustice but also threatening democracy.

Thus, while both texts confirm Stephanie LeMenager's theses of the journalist acting as an "ideally expert plotter" against oil and as a "conservationist," there are some significant differences between the two authors' responses to the pipelines they depict. First of all, the two pipelines function in the texts on different cognitive levels. The Trans-Alaska Pipeline is an actual pipeline, incorporated into the Alaskan landscape. Therefore, it can be experienced, observed, and connected to as an existing object. On the other hand, Northern Gateway is a projected possibility, and thus cannot be experienced in the same manner. Fox experiences, observes, and connects to the Trans-Alaska pipeline and attempts to pass his knowledge to the reader, constantly shifting perspective between the whole physical object, details of it, and the less tangible matter of its meaning for the people whose lives are affected by it. Nikiforuk researches the history, the legal aspects, and the ecological implications of the Northern Gateway Pipeline without actually experiencing it first-hand. He relies on a variety of sources, most notably local people, and tribal elders, who entrust him with their fear and anger about the future. These emotions are then mediated to the reader, and enriched by Nikiforuk's own, calmer response.

Secondly, Fox revises his attitude towards the Trans-Alaska Pipeline. But Nikiforuk does not follow him. Fox recounts his attitudinal change in the following passage:

We mistakenly conflate a mental construct such as a line with a measure of control over the planet, as if the line were more than a temporary description of our relationship to that body in space. Not only are lines impermanent upon the Earth, they are hardly fixed in our minds. A line of thought is less a ruled measurement than a complexly braided meander that changes to accommodate every experience. Which explains, in part, why we started out driving the pipeline with an adversarial point of view, but then became accustomed to it, and by the time we began to approach the end of the line, we had grown fond of it (Fox).

He admits that he and his companions started the trip with a hostile approach towards the pipeline. Yet, he explains that like the shifting lines in nature, lines in our minds are not made forever. He uses the concept of "lines" to account for the fact that he and his companions grew to accept and even perceive the pipeline as a comforting presence, and a stunning masterpiece of human engineering. When they see the pipeline running above the ground, they are perplexed and spellbound by it. Near the Alaska Range and its highest point, the Denali, they witness what Fox calls "a trick," with the pipeline disappearing under the river and then re-emerging mysteriously. Observing the pipeline from a hill, one of the participants of the trip describes it as "godlike" (Fox). Nikiforuk,

on the other hand, does not marvel at the human brilliance behind the pipeline construction project he discusses. Instead, he focuses solely on the negative impact of the proposed Northern Gateway Pipeline on people, the natural environment, and Canadian democracy.

While both authors emphasise the complexities of living in the age of oil, the issue thus raises a different kind of reflection in them and makes them use different means to express their conclusions. The Trans-Alaska Pipeline inspires Fox to a philosophical examination of the meaning of lines in human experience, whereas the Northern Gateway Pipeline project raises more predictable doubts of a political nature in Nikiforuk. While Fox uses factual language (and statistics), comparisons (the pipeline as “an artifact worming through the planet”) and metaphors (“lines” as a means of measuring human control of the Earth), Nikiforuk relies mostly on facts (e.g. historical and legal) and anecdotes (referring to the numerous conversations he had with his interlocutors).

In conclusion, what the two texts have in common is that they both address treat people’s agreement to sacrifice the well-being of natural enclaves, climate, and indeed, cultures “for the rotten promises of modernization,” to quote Stephanie LeMenager (129). And although the two journalists ‘plot’ their critiques of environmentally damaging actions, the problem of modern civilization’s overdependence upon oil remains unresolved. Nikiforuk points out in his article that Enbridge representatives wonder why people are so opposed to the project, “while saying yes to lights, cooked food, school buses, warm homes, and diesel-powered trains? It’s a glaring disconnect in society” (48). Nikiforuk does not venture to resolve this paradox, despite LeMenager’s claim of journalism’s aspiration to offer a solution. Fox’s discussion of the rhetoric of lines demonstrates that attitudes, like lines, are not fixed. Unlike Nikiforuk, Fox acknowledges the benefits we derive from oil as a driver of modernity, and petroculture as a human achievement. Celebrating the pleasures afforded by oil is surely a legitimate aim of writers, and Fox attempts to do justice to this aspect of oil engineering. He ends his journey along the Trans-Alaska Pipeline with a milder attitude towards it, leaving the reader with the impression that petroleum infrastructure may in fact be conceived as benign. People are capable of getting used to everything, even to something destructive. This reflection, however, is far from optimistic, as it implies human ability to become desensitised to potentially perilous phenomena. Fox’s and Nikiforuk’s aim is, however, to “plot” oil so as to make the reader aware of its micro and macro implications. Fox’s appreciation of the brilliance of human genius symbolised by the pipeline is powerfully counterbalanced by the myriad ways both writers suggest petroleum impacts nature and people, including the way it affects our perception. The strength of these essayistic pieces read side by side is that even though they do not offer a simple solution to our civilisation’s dependence on oil, they make petroleum available to the reader and render it real, exposing it where it would wish to remain hidden.

Submission received 28 August 2016

Revised version accepted 28 September 2017

## Works Cited

- Adamson, Joni, Mei Mei E., and Rachel Stein, editors. *The Environmental Justice Reader: Politics, Poetics and Pedagogy*. Univ. of Arizona Press, 2002.
- "Bio." Andrew Nikiforuk, 2008, [andrewnikiforuk.com/bio/bio.html](http://andrewnikiforuk.com/bio/bio.html). Accessed 28 February 2017.
- Buell, Lawrence. *Writing for an Endangered World: Literature, Culture, and Environment in the U.S. and Beyond*. Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, 2001.
- Buell, Lawrence, Heise, U.K., and Karen Thornber. "Literature and Environment." *Annual Review of Environment and Resources*, vol. 36, no. 1, 2011, pp. 417-440, [www.annualreviews.org/doi/abs/10.1146/annurev-environ-111109-144855](http://www.annualreviews.org/doi/abs/10.1146/annurev-environ-111109-144855). Accessed 28 February 2017.
- Fiedorczuk, Julia. "Ekokrytyka: Bardzo Krótkie Wprowadzenie." *Fragile*, vol. 3, no. 9, 2011, pp. 9-10.
- Fox, William L. "A Pipeline Runs Through It." *Orion*, vol. 30, no. 2, March/April 2011, [orionmagazine.org/issue/march-april-2011/](http://orionmagazine.org/issue/march-april-2011/). Accessed 28 February 2017.
- Glotfelty, Cheryll, and Harold Fromm. *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. Univ. of Georgia Press, 1996.
- Illyckyj, Milan. "Networks and Frames in Pipeline Resistance." Canadian Political Science Association (CPSA) Conference, Ryerson University Toronto, Ontario, 30 May-1 June 2017, [cpsa-acsp.ca/documents/conference/2017/Illyckyj.pdf](http://cpsa-acsp.ca/documents/conference/2017/Illyckyj.pdf). Accessed 13 August 2017.
- LeMenager, Stephanie. *Living Oil: Petroleum Culture in the American Century*. Oxford UP, 2014.
- Nikiforuk, Andrew. "Canada's Highway to Hell." *OnEarth*. Natural Resources Defence Council, 1 September 2007, [archive.onearth.org/article/canadas-highway-to-hell](http://archive.onearth.org/article/canadas-highway-to-hell). Accessed 28 February 2017.
- . "Canadian Democracy: Death by Pipeline." *OnEarth*. Natural Resources Defence Council, Fall 2012, pp. 42-48, [issuu.com/onearth/docs/fall2012](http://issuu.com/onearth/docs/fall2012). Accessed 28 February 2017.
- "William L. Fox." *Orion*, [orionmagazine.org/contributor/William-l-fox](http://orionmagazine.org/contributor/William-l-fox). Accessed February 2017.