PROJECT MUSE®

The Bonneville Power Administration Film Archives: Ecologies
of Infrastructural Media from 1939 to the Present

Adam Diller

JCMS: Journal of Cinema and Media Studies, Volume 60, Issue 5, 2021,
pp. 174-196 (Article)

Published by Michigan Publishing

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/cj.2021.0058>

➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/805723>

The Bonneville Power Administration Film Archives: Ecologies of Infrastructural Media from 1939 to the Present

ABSTRACT

The Bonneville Power Administration (BPA) is a federally operated power utility tasked with managing and distributing the electricity produced by a series of dams on the Columbia River in the northwestern United States. The BPA began producing films in 1939 and continues to the present. Although overlooked by film studies, these sponsored films produce affective, narrative, and political structures integral to the BPA's mission and the region's broader settler colonial process. This article traces shifts in this infrastructural media over time to consider the potential for public infrastructure to serve as a lever for change.

The Bonneville Power Administration (BPA) is a federally operated power utility tasked with managing and distributing the electricity produced by a series of dams on the Columbia River in the northwestern United States.¹ As outlined

1 Throughout this article, unless addressing a settler usage, I opt for “river” or “region” over settler names such as “Columbia,” “Northwest,” or “American.” This usage is an acknowledgment of the more than 12,000-year history of Indigenous peoples, place names, and river names, recognizing that their ongoing existence extends beyond the spatial and temporal bounds of settler nation-states.

Adam Diller, “The Bonneville Power Administration Film Archives: Ecologies of Infrastructural Media from 1939 to the Present,” *JCMS* 60, no. 5 (2020–2021): 174–196.

in Richard White's environmental history of the river, the BPA began as part of the broader nationalistic and progressive agendas of the 1930s, with the goal of "reclaiming" large sections of the region through irrigation projects while generating cheap electricity to foster industrial development and rural electrification.² As elsewhere in the American West, this progressive vision produced significant impacts on Indigenous peoples and alterations to the river and land integral to the ongoing settler colonial process.

Inspired by the success of Farm Security Administration (FSA) films such as *The Plow That Broke the Plains* (Pare Lorentz, 1936) and *The River* (Pare Lorentz, 1937), the BPA incorporated film production into its mission in 1939.³ While FSA films serve as an inflection point for American documentary film, the BPA's film production is ongoing and provides a different potential.⁴ From 1939 to the present, through films such as *Hydro: Power to Make the American Dream Come True* (Gunther von Fritsch, 1939), *Stringing and Sagging a High-Voltage Transmission Line* (Henry Alderman, 1950), *Look to the River: Columbia River Opens New Opportunities for Enterprise* (Erven Jourdan, 1954), *The World Behind Your Light Switch* (Harry Paget and Russ Holt, 1966), *Intertie* (Robert Charlton, 1969), *River of Power* (Alfred Hillmann and Michal Carr, 1987), and *Helicopters Place Wood in Yakima Basin Streams—Improving Fish Habitat* (BPA, 2018), BPA films trace imbrications of dams, progressive ideology, and media.

These films were shown in theaters and classrooms, at public lectures, and to community groups to promote hydroelectricity and public power.⁵ The information currently available regarding the initial distribution of these films is sparse, consisting of occasional documentation of print circulation, screening venues, and audience responses.⁶ In 1953, the BPA film archive was destroyed by the secretary of the interior, Douglas McKay, who opposed the early films' progressive ideology.⁷ The early films of the BPA were not seen again until 1973, when Elmer Buehler, the BPA projectionist assigned to destroy the films, delivered prints that he had secretly preserved to the National Archives.⁸ Until recently, the films were difficult to access. In 2012, BPA archivist Libby Burke organized a series of screenings for BPA employees at their headquarters in Portland, Oregon. Due to the popularity and positive responses to these screenings, Burke began making digital transfers of existing prints, releasing free DVDs to the public, and uploading the films to the BPA's YouTube page.⁹

2 Richard White, *The Organic Machine* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995), 59–88.

3 Libby Burke, *BPA Film Collection, Volume One, 1939–1954* (Portland, OR: Bonneville Power Administration, 2014), DVD.

4 For a discussion of this inflection in American documentary, see Paul Arthur, "Jargons of Authenticity (Three American Moments)," in *The Documentary Film Reader: History, Theory, Criticism*, ed. Jonathan Kahana (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 889–909.

5 Libby Burke (film and media archivist, Bonneville Power Administration), personal correspondence with the author, January 2020.

6 Burke, personal correspondence.

7 Harry Menig, "Woody Guthrie: *The Columbia* and the B.P.A. Documentary: *Hydro*," *Film and History* 5, no. 2 (May 1975): 24–33.

8 Menig, 9.

9 Libby Burke, a film and media archivist at the Bonneville Power Administration, is

While little detailed information is available about the initial distribution and reception of these films, their utility becomes legible as part of the infrastructural process of the BPA. BPA films and videos are not only “useful cinema” but also infrastructural media—media that produce affect, narratives, relations, and ontologies integral to a larger infrastructural process.¹⁰ This theorization connects Susan Leigh Star and Geoffrey Bowker’s processual and relational definition of infrastructure with John Durham Peters’s theorization of media “not as passive vessels for content, but ontological shifters.”¹¹ The BPA’s infrastructural media shifts ontologies of the river, land, and the region’s geology as part of the ongoing maintenance and expansion of the administration’s system of dams.

BPA films were produced to explain, dramatize, and promote the administration’s system of hydroelectric dams.¹² Due to their co-constitutive entanglements with the dams—the dams finance the films, and the films promote subsequent damming projects—it is productive to consider the bold claim that the films’ effects on the river and land are as important as the dams’ and power grid’s effects on the region. As Vinzenz Hediger and Patrick Vonderau explain, sponsored films can be understood through the work they perform, “the situation or constellation that the film produces.”¹³ BPA films produce conceptions of space, assertions of sovereignty, infrastructural relationships, and ontologies of the river and land that are critical to the ongoing damming of the river.

While current scholarship has not addressed BPA films and videos, a parallel body of films produced by international oil corporations has received recent attention. Rudmer Canjels, Mona Damluji, and Brian Jacobson each consider the contributions of “petrofilms” to the extractive and colonial logics of the oil industry.¹⁴ Canjels’s study traces the international reach of Royal Dutch Shell’s film production and its work to support specific regional

---

largely responsible for researching, restoring, and circulating these films. She has contributed to this article by supplying primary documents, access to production materials for the films, and her account of institutional knowledge regarding the films and their distribution.

- 10 For a collection of studies of non-theatrical, “useful” cinema, see Charles R. Acland and Haidee Wasson, eds., *Useful Cinema* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).
- 11 Geoffrey C. Bowker and Susan Leigh Star, *Sorting Things Out: Classification and Its Consequences* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 5–16, 33–50. See also John Durham Peters, in reference to the theories of Friedrich Kittler, in *The Marvelous Clouds: Toward a Philosophy of Elemental Media* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 25.
- 12 Gene Tollefson, *BPA and the Struggle for Power at Cost* (Portland, OR: Bonneville Power Administration, 1987).
- 13 Vinzenz Hediger and Patrick Vonderau, introduction to *Films That Work: Industrial Film and the Productivity of Media*, ed. Vinzenz Hediger and Patrick Vonderau (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2009), 11.
- 14 Rudmer Canjels, “Films from Beyond the Well: A Historical Overview of Shell Films,” in Hediger and Vonderau, *Films That Work*, 243–255; Mona Damluji, “The Oil City in Focus: The Cinematic Spaces of Abadan in the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company’s *Persian Story*,” in *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 33, no. 1 (2013): 75–88, <https://doi.org/10.1215/1089201X-2072730>; Mona Damluji, “The Image World of Middle Eastern Oil,” in *Subterranean Estates: Life Worlds of Oil and Gas*, ed. Hannah Appel, Arthur Mason, and Michael Watts (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015), 147–164; and Brian R. Jacobson, “The Shadow of Progress and the Cultural Markers of the Anthropocene,” *Environmental History* 24, no. 1 (January 2019): 158–172, <https://doi.org/10.1093/envhis/emy123>.

concerns within the corporation's global processes of extraction. Damluji attends to the work performed by petrofilms supporting oil infrastructure and "the oil city" in postcolonial Iran.¹⁵ Jacobson unpacks the conflicted and ambivalent expressions of environmentalism by British Petroleum (BP) in the sponsored film *The Shadow of Progress* (Derek Williams, 1970). Each of these studies develops an account of the work performed by these films in support of corporate oil infrastructure.

While the "hydrofilms" produced by the BPA perform comparable infrastructural work, they support a settler colonial process rather than the corporate, global extraction supported by petrofilms. The BPA and its films produce a different set of infrastructural relations—flood control, water for irrigation, a transportation corridor, and hydroelectricity—integral to the region's ongoing settler process. Not only do these dams reshape hydrologies, but as Jane Griffith explains, "dams are built with more than engineering equipment—their tools also include narratives, language, rhetoric, and image that recast Indigenous waterways for settler audiences."¹⁶ BPA films and videos produce affective responses, narrative structures, and altered relationships to the real, more-than-human world, shaping settlers' understanding of the world beyond the film.

My analysis considers films and videos addressing the river, infrastructure, nation building, culture, and geology, attending to the sedimentation of specific formations of each within the BPA archive. I organize this analysis into four categories, discussed in the sections below: ontologies of the river, powerlines and ontologies of land, reclamation, and restoration and remediation. These ontologies of river and land are integral to the system of dams and to the region's broader settler process. As the operation of these dams becomes increasingly negotiated between tribal fishing rights, hydropower production, irrigation concerns, and climate change resilience, the ontologies of the river and land sedimented within BPA media need to be examined and reconceived. This archival process traces the shift from a Progressive Era conception of the environment as a resource to be exploited to a more nuanced understanding of the region and river as a site for intercultural and interspecies negotiation.

This research contributes to the broader project of theorizing the ecological and cultural crises of the Anthropocene, Capitalocene, or Chthulucene.¹⁷ My engagement with the BPA archives leverages media to attend to the ontologies of the more-than-human that underlie settler infrastructure.

15 Damluji, "Oil City in Focus," 75–88.

16 Jane Griffith writes about the Bureau of Reclamation's parallel work promoting the Grand Coulee Dam through a print magazine. See Jane Griffith, "Do Some Work for Me: Settler Colonialism, Professional Communication, and Representations of Indigenous Water," *Decolonization, Indigeneity, Education and Society* 7, no. 1 (2018): 153.

17 For discussions of the implications of these terms and their relative merits, see Jason W. Moore, "The Capitalocene, Part I: On the Nature and Origins of Our Ecological Crisis," *Journal of Peasant Studies* 44, no. 3 (2017): 594–630, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2016.1235036>; Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016); and Bruno Latour, *Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Polity, 2017).

The instabilities, changes, and developments within these ontologies suggest ways to rethink and remediate infrastructure. More generally, this article points toward the potential of infrastructure as a lever for change. The alterations in the operations of this system of dams may provide a model for rethinking and renegotiating other infrastructural relationships. As Progressive Era ideas re-emerge in American politics and the value of public infrastructure is reconsidered, it is important to understand the abilities of public infrastructure to adapt to complexly negotiated relationships and ecologies.¹⁸

ONTOLOGIES OF THE RIVER

Since the first expeditions of Europeans and European Americans into the region, defining the river has been a critical component of the settler process. Early accounts in the journals of Meriwether Lewis and William Clark remark on the substantial Indigenous settlements on the river and the centrality of the river to these ways of life.¹⁹ Subsequent settler cultures moved away from understanding the river as a more-than-human force to be lived with, re-conceptualizing the river as a flawed but promising transportation corridor, a bountiful fishery to be exploited, and a source of hydroelectric power.²⁰ Because the river is the source of the electrical power distributed by the BPA, the administration and its films are invested in producing specific ontologies of the river. These ontologies emerge in the earliest BPA films, develop throughout the twentieth century, and persist in contemporary BPA productions. Their first film, *Hydro: Power to Make the American Dream Come True*, establishes tropes drawn on by subsequent films building a foundational narrative for the region's settler process.

Hydro was written and produced by Stephen Kahn, the BPA's first "information officer," for the explicit purpose of promoting public electricity in the Northwest.²¹ Kahn was impressed by the success of FSA films and set out to produce films that could perform similar work for the BPA.²² While exact details of *Hydro*'s screenings are not recorded, Elmer Buehler—who later preserved prints of the films—served as a traveling projectionist for screenings around the Northwest, often accompanied by promotional lectures.²³ Franklin D. Roosevelt's vice president, Henry Wallace, used the film in trips abroad promoting New Deal progressive accomplishments.²⁴ Today, the film holds its own next to the better-known FSA films—such as *The Plow That Broke the Plains*, *The River*, and *Power and the Land* (Joris Ivens, 1940)—relying on a

18 While beyond the scope of this article, the present moment is volatile for the BPA: several recent presidents have proposed privatizing the BPA; the Columbia River Treaty with Canada is being renegotiated; salmon ecologies are increasingly unstable; and climate change may significantly disrupt the river's annual flows.

19 Meriwether Lewis, William Clark, and the Members of the Corps of Discovery, "October 24, 1805," in *Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*, ed. Gary Moulton (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), <https://lewisandclarkjournals.unl.edu/item/lc.jrn.1805-10-24#lc.jrn.1805-10-24.03>.

20 White, *Organic Machine*, 30–88; and Katrine Barber, *Death of Celilo Falls* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2005), 35–63, 155–182.

21 Burke, *BPA Film Collection*, 1.

22 Tollefson, *BPA*.

23 Burke, personal correspondence.

24 Menig, "Woody Guthrie," 8.

Figure 1. The Columbia River as seen in the introduction to *Hydro: Power to Make the American Dream Come True* (BPA, 1939).

similar mobilization of poetic narration, landscape photography, dramatic orchestral score, and progressive politics.

The film's opening sequence consists of dramatic vistas of the river and its gorge, spectacularly framing a settler history of the region (see Figure 1). A voice-over narration claims, "[S]ince the days of Lewis and Clark, America has looked westward to the Columbia River . . . whose waters drain an empire as large as England and France . . . to countless Americans, the Columbia has been a river of hope, a shining symbol of plenty." This introduction aligns with many key tropes of settler colonialism. First, it defines the history of the region through settler arrival. Second, it compares the region to Europe, suggesting its potential to *become* another England or France. Third, it situates white settlers as migrants, fleeing self-inflicted ecological disaster in the midwestern United States to seek "hope." This framework links affective engagements with this landscape to a settler culture that realizes "the full potential" of the land. After enumerating the region's resources, the film makes a dramatic turn; the score moves from pastoral to suspenseful while the narrator explains, "Meanwhile, upstream and in the mountain tributaries, the Columbia is a wild and uncontrolled giant . . . plunging relentlessly to the sea." The images evoke the river's power, framing its cataracts from below, in the midst of the river's force and flow. These sequences produce an affective intensification of the river's power within a narrative that links this "wild" power to the "progress" that will ultimately tame and harness it.

The film's introduction ends with a sequence of shots: salmon jumping, a bear catching and eating salmon, and Indigenous fishermen catching salmon. The narrator explains, "[F]or a hundred years the river of the West was untamed, the same swirling fury which Indians have whipped for salmon since the days of captain Meriwether Lewis." This sequence shortens Indigenous tenure in the region by 12,000 years while

visually linking the fishermen to the bear, salmon, and river, positioned through editing to belittle, obscure, and suppress claims of Indigenous peoples to the river or land.²⁵ By highlighting the power of the wild river, circumscribing the presence of the Indigenous inhabitants of the region, and framing the ultimate conquest and taming of the river by the Bonneville Dam as a feat of impressive magnitude, this narrative introduces the public to the BPA and begins the BPA films' contributions to the region's settler infrastructure.

Hydro produces narratives of settler arrival in an unpopulated *terra nullius* (nobody's land) full of misused and wasted resources. The film produces a history of the region as a teleological progression toward the settlers' arrival. These narratives contribute to the process Lorenzo Veracini describes as "transfer by conceptual displacement," which "reframes Indigenous peoples as Other, or exogenous, in their own places and land."²⁶ This reframing accompanies disease, military combat, forced relocations, and other modes of displacement, supporting the settlers' claim to ownership without acknowledging the ongoing violence of its presence. When the region's Indigenous inhabitants are mentioned, they are framed as already in the past and always on the periphery.

Adrian Ivakhiv's model of the ecologies of affect produced by moving images helps tease apart the layers of work performed by *Hydro*.²⁷ Ivakhiv's model attends to the ways that films produce affect, narratives that structure this affect, new relations with the world outside the film, and specific expressions of power. *Hydro*'s affective dimension intensifies the raw power and endless flows of the river—a natural resource critical to the extractive economies of settler colonialism. The film's narrative layer frames these sublime images of the river as an expansive, uninhabited space awaiting settler arrival. The third layer—which Ivakhiv calls "exoreferentiality," or the relations produced through the connections between the first two layers and the outside world—connects these affective and narrative dimensions to the ongoing settler process in the region.²⁸ *Hydro*'s exoreferentiality produces a relationship with the dam grounded in the power of the river and narratives of settler triumph, positioning the dam as integral to and emblematic of both. The film produces an experience of sublime power in the audience's filmic and extra-filmic perceptions of the dam.

Hydro performs work that is critical to settling the region and begins a process of mediating the river, a theme developed in subsequent BPA films. The film produces a specific ontology of the river that defines it as raw power, shown to be controllable through massive dams built by the US government.

25 As a point of comparison, there are no images or acknowledgments of Indigenous inhabitants of the Midwest in *The River, Power and the Land*, or *The Plow That Broke the Plains*, with the exception of a title card introducing *The Plow That Broke the Plains* that explains that the events of the film occur after the land was "cleared of Indians."

26 Lorenzo Veracini, *Settler Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 35.

27 Adrian J. Ivakhiv, "Ecology, Morphology, Semiosis: A Process-Relational Account of the Cinema," in *Ecologies of the Moving Image: Cinema, Affect, Nature* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2013), 31–67.

28 Ivakhiv, 60–62.

The films *Look to the River* and *Great River* (BPA, 1963, rereleased 1973) extend this initial ontology, developing arguments for the expansion of dam building on the river and its tributaries. Building on *Hydro*'s framing of the river as a "wild and uncontrolled giant," these films retrain the viewer to see running water as waste and dams as efficient. *Great River*'s narrator explains, "To experienced eyes on the river, the water that looks good is the spent water, swirling out from the great turbines at the powerhouse. This is water that has been used." *Great River* explicitly and self-consciously defines the river as a hydropower resource. Not only does the film shape the audience's perception of the river; the film also explains this work to the audience, aligning the audience with the project of the damming of the river by framing the BPA as those with "experienced eyes," best equipped to "fix the bit" in the mouth of the river.

Look to the River extends this work by asserting the cultural superiority of this ontology of the river. In a sequence from the middle of the film, images of Indigenous fishermen at Wyam (Celilo Falls)—soon to be flooded by The Dalles Dam—fade to images of trains and barges on the river. The narrator explains, "[O]nly in recent times has man acquired the skill, the wisdom, the vision to make full use of the Columbia." *Great River* and *Look to the River* extend the ontological formations that *Hydro* began, defining the river as an expansive flow of power, a "natural" resource waiting to be harnessed. By creating a narrative of settler entitlement to the land and river, these BPA films suggest that the river's ultimate destiny is to provide power to support settler societies, an ontology essential to the region's ongoing settler process. Together, *Hydro*, *Great River*, and *Look to the River* move toward an infrastructural conception of water, explicitly defining the river as a series of slack water pools and hydroelectric dams, an ontology still active—and actively contested—in the present.²⁹

POWERLINES AND ONTOLOGIES OF LAND

The BPA's films about powerlines extend these ontologies of the river to reimagine the land. These films build concepts of space, land use, labor, materiality, and culture that support the settler process of the region while establishing powerlines as integral to these emerging cultures. The first two films discussed here are from a series of internal-use materials catalogued in the BPA archive as "powerline flyovers."³⁰ They are made by helicopter crews flying above sections of power transmission lines, photographing the lines to survey their condition.

29 In my visits to BPA dams, several BPA and Army Corps of Engineers employees expressed their frustration at the "wasted" water running over the dams' spillways. This spillage is currently mandated to support juvenile salmon migration. In a speech at Celilo Falls on Indigenous Peoples' Day in 2019, JoDe Goudy—former chairman of the Yakama Nation Tribal Council—outlined a historical argument for removing the dams on the river in order to restore the Nch'i-Wána's salmon populations, expressing a very different understanding of what is being "wasted" by the dams.

30 I chose these internal-use films as examples of the breadth of the BPA film archives, not all of which is intended for a general audience. While these films serve a technical purpose, the trope of powerline flyovers exists in the public-facing BPA films as well. See my discussions of *Intertie* and *River of Power*.

Celilo-Sylmar Flyover (director unknown, 1990) produces an uncanny experience reminiscent of a low-budget science fiction film of a human settlement on another planet. The images consist of infrared video shot from a helicopter flying above the Celilo high-voltage direct current converter station and along the transmission lines heading south to California. Crew members discuss their work through a garbled mix of static and radio frequency interference. The men review powerline conditions and speculate about what they are seeing. At one point, the videographer requests a repeated flyover in order to inspect some hot spots on a transmission tower. The crew uses this infrared imaging to find shorts, breaks, and other problems on the lines. This practice of mediation produces a specific way of seeing the world, oriented *with* the powerlines, ignoring the human and more-than-human life below, oblivious to considerations of the larger processes that these transmission infrastructures support, suppress, and shape.

Buckley-Summer Lake Flyover (director unknown, 1987), a sequence of over 2,000 still images from a similar aerial powerline survey, extends this vision of the region through aerial still photography. The flyover images review powerline conditions through sparsely populated sections of the BPA's distribution grid, producing a view of the region determined by routes and logics of powerline transmission. These flyovers use the powerlines to anchor a new visual experience of the land, ignoring boundaries, gliding over rivers, and dismissing the nonhuman and human inhabitants above and below the lines to focus exclusively on electrical transmission. These images engage only the lines and their function. Are they intact? Are there signs of damage? Are there potential issues to be repaired? This conception of space eliminates potential entanglements of the BPA's power grid with the land below, directing attention exclusively to the transmission function of its lines.

These BPA powerline films actively empty the land. As Caren Kaplan suggests, aerial views "produce geographical knowledge of contested terrain, 'filling in' space presumed or declared to be 'blank' . . . contributing to the forceful emptying of a space always already under construction."³¹ The BPA flyovers replace Indigenous pasts, presents, and futures with an abstraction of the land as an infrastructural space for electrical distribution. Like the imbrications between war and aerial imagery discussed by Kaplan, the BPA's labor- and capital-intensive aerial views produce an ontology of the land always already entangled in a settler colonial "aftermath."³² This intertwining of nation-state power, economic power, technological power, and violent settler pasts, presents, and futures produces a specific ontology of the land as settler infrastructure. These powerline flyovers extend the ontology of the river outlined above by defining the land through the material logics of power and transmission infrastructures. This ontology is expanded in publicly distributed BPA films that focus on powerlines.

Stringing and Sagging a High-Voltage Transmission Line educates its audience about the process of surveying, engineering, and constructing high-

31 Caren Kaplan, *Aerial Aftermaths: Wartime from Above* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 35–36.

32 Kaplan.

Figure 2. Transmission line detail from *Stringing and Sagging a High-Voltage Transmission Line* (BPA, 1950).

voltage transmission lines. The film explains the materialities of powerlines and their relationships with the topography they are strung and sagged across. In an early sequence, samples of powerline cross-sections are shown while the narrator enumerates the conductive and tensile properties of various designs (see Figure 2). This sequence emphasizes the balance between conductivity, strength, weight, and cost that determine the optimal construction of each transmission line. The film aligns with both the “rationalization” function of industrial films outlined by Hediger and Vonderau and Kaplan’s conclusion that “most modern rational projects announce insistently their objective intentions even as they transmit the affective, nonsynchronous intensities of conflict’s aftermaths, emptying as well as filling the fields of information and perception.”³³ *Stringing and Sagging a High-Voltage Transmission Line* fills the settler aftermath with a set of infrastructural relationships between topography, engineering, and economics. This shift extends the work of *Hydro*, *Look to the River*, and *Great River* to produce an ontology of the river and land as infrastructure. *Stringing and Sagging a High-Voltage Transmission Line* leverages these ontologies to express political, cultural, and economic power by privileging the spatial, material, and economic logics of transmission lines over other conceptions of the region.

A subsequent BPA film, *Intertie*, foregrounds the charged space between this power grid and ecologies, cultures, and lives outside it. A freewheeling, banjo-fueled, multi-narrator documentary, *Intertie* promotes the innovative high-voltage direct current “intertie” that links the Celilo converter station in Oregon to the Sylmar converter station in Southern California—connecting the power grids of the southwestern and northwestern United States. The film was screened for the BPA’s regional network of community groups,

33 Kaplan, 38–39.

Figure 3. BPA transmission lines pass above abandoned residence in central Oregon. Film still from *Intertie* (BPA, 1969).

schools, and local power utilities, as well as in international film festivals, winning eight awards, including the Diploma of Excellence at the Venice International Film Festival.³⁴

Intertie begins with a poetic introduction that situates the transmission lines from below. It opens with shots of unpopulated regions of central Oregon and a soundtrack of synthesized wind intensifying the effect of these treeless landscapes. The camera then pans across the terrain to follow an oncoming helicopter, leading to a dramatic reveal of powerlines overhead (see Figure 3). The next sequence explores an old, abandoned shack directly under these transmission lines. The narrator speculates about the life of the man who lived in this house: “[T]his man had no modern conveniences . . . and we’re putting a power line right alongside of him that, it would seem that—if he’d been alive . . . he would have had power at his door.” The narrator’s somber delivery, the conversational script, and a poetic approach to image and sound introduce the BPA’s grid with a disconcerting combination of affect, history, and analogy. *Intertie*’s reflection on an unelectrified home beneath high-voltage transmission lines expresses some consideration for those excluded from the power grid. This acknowledgment is remarkable, absent from other BPA films. *Intertie* contains this exclusion by framing it as historical, comparing the cabin to a new house with modern appliances that *would* be here if this house continued to be inhabited. Despite this framing, the film’s introduction resonates beyond this attempt at closure, calling attention to the uneven distribution and access that is a characteristic spatial logic of power grids and other network infrastructures.

34 Libby Burke, introduction to *BPA Film Collection, Volume Two, 1950–1987* (Portland, OR: Bonneville Power Administration, 2014), DVD.

Intertie expresses the intensity of being outside the power grid and hints at an experience outside *this* settler culture. The film works to contain this unease by linking the experience of being outside the power grid to the recent settler past. Framing the outside of its grid as historical weaves the film's evocative opening into a narrative of settler progress, suppressing considerations of other ways that one might be outside of, or in opposition to, the BPA's transmission lines. This tension must be considered in relation to Indigenous sovereignty in the region. *Intertie* was made in a period of significant tribal activism, much of it anchored by the region's Fish Wars, which asserted Indigenous rights to fishing grounds promised in the 1855 treaties between the Yakama, Umatilla, Nez Perce, Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs, and the United States.³⁵ Because the BPA's dams significantly reduced regional salmon populations and flooded sacred and long-inhabited Indigenous land, the administration was under pressure to change its operations.

Intertie shows that the BPA was not oblivious to the tensions between those that benefit from its grid and those that do not. The film's introduction highlights these tensions, only to quickly contain them within a settler historical framework. That this sequence introduces *Intertie* suggests that the notion of who might be excluded from the powerlines' network was a problem so obvious that it needed to be acknowledged and contained in order to preempt further reflection that might result in more difficult questions for the BPA. The film is an example of the narratives that emerge within settler colonialism to block acknowledgment of settlers' violent pasts, despite conveying unease, tension, and anxiety around this omission.³⁶ *Intertie* expresses this repressed history, gesturing toward the exclusions of settler colonialism while also attempting to displace these exclusions by framing them as historical rather than ongoing. Here, rather than the claim of settler culture's superiority over Indigenous ways of life encountered elsewhere in BPA films, *Intertie*'s introduction restructures the relationship between inside and outside as one of historical progression. The realm outside of the BPA's infrastructure is framed as the recent settler past, conceptually displacing Indigenous tribes of the region whose land is crossed by these same transmission lines and who are also on the outside of the BPA's infrastructure.

Following its remarkable introduction, *Intertie* shifts drastically in tone, drawing on the voices of linemen and engineers to explain the cultures of labor and daily maintenance integral to the BPA's power grid. *Intertie* extends the ontology of the river and land as infrastructure developed by the earlier films by valorizing the labor of constructing and maintaining powerlines. Like the imbrications of oil infrastructure in *Louisiana Story* (Robert Flaherty, 1948) explored by Janet Walker, these powerline films emerge from within the infrastructural processes of the BPA, supported by—and supporting—the technological resources, labor practices, and cultural perspectives of the

35 For an introduction to this activism, see Charles Wilkinson, *Messages from Frank's Landing: A Story of Salmon, Treaties, and the Indian Way* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000).

36 See Veracini, *Settler Colonialism*, for further discussion of this process.

administration's system of powerlines and dams.³⁷ By foregrounding the cultures and labor integral to BPA infrastructure, *Intertie* further connects these ontologies of water and land to the broader settler process.

Together, the BPA powerline films build on the ontologies of the river discussed earlier to develop an ontology of the land as infrastructure. They begin to tease out what Hediger and Vonderau describe as the "complex interrelationship of visibility, power, and organization, and specifically how film as a medium creates the preconditions for forms of knowledge and social practice."³⁸ These interrelations occur not only between each film and the work it performs but also across the archive of BPA films, which build on one another to produce ontologies of the river and land integral to the BPA's hydropower infrastructure.

RECLAMATION

BPA films about reclamation frame these ontologies of the river and land within a broader conception of settler arrival as the final phase in the region's geological process. Films such as *Hydro*, *Look to the River*, *River of Power*, and *Great River* evoke geologic scales of space and time to produce affective, narrative, and referential engagements with the transformations of the river and the surrounding region, situating the settler process in a geological framework culminating in eventual reclamation. These films valorize the massive changes brought about by the region's settlers. Not only have settlers dammed the river, but they have also diverted massive amounts of water for use in agricultural, nuclear, and industrial projects.³⁹ The reclamation of the arid Columbia River Basin was an early motivation for the construction of the Grand Coulee Dam and the forming of the BPA.⁴⁰

BPA films define these changes to the region's ecologies through a multifaceted realignment. The poles of this work are (1) the comparison between the interior of the region and the European landmass, creating a conceptual foundation for subsequent reclamation; (2) building a connection between this massive public project and the equitable distribution of the region's newly acquired wealth; and (3) a geological comparison between the immense scale of these changes and the shifts that occurred at the end of the last ice age.

The first pole compares the region to the European landmass. This work is theorized by Veracini as the "mutually supporting . . . copresence of both indigenization and Europeanisation, which are ongoing and never fully complete, always a process towards an ideal society that is both/neither European, and/nor Indigenous."⁴¹ The movement to frame settlers as Indigenous in a new/old world is produced throughout the BPA's films. Over expansive vistas of the region, *Hydro*'s narrator explains that the river drains a basin the

37 Janet Walker, "Media Mapping and Oil Extraction: A Louisiana Story," *NECSUS: European Journal of Media Studies* 7, no. 2 (Autumn 2018): 229–251, <https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/3448>.

38 Vonderau and Hediger, introduction, 12.

39 See White, *Organic Machine*, 81–88; river water was diverted through the Hanford reactors for some time, releasing radioactive water into the river system.

40 See White, *Organic Machine*, for an account of this process.

41 Veracini, *Settler Colonialism*, 23.

size of France and England combined. This trope plays out repeatedly in subsequent BPA films, establishing Europe as a frame of reference for the region while also highlighting its “untouched nature.” This opposition produces an image of an unpopulated, but “European,” landmass full of resources waiting to be extracted, waiting for its destiny to be fulfilled by migrant settlers. The conclusion of *Look to the River* expresses this triumphant destiny: “To fulfill the promise of the American way, a constantly rising standard of living for all, the wise development of our key resource, water, is essential.” The film links water, dams, and “the promise of the American way,” solidifying the region’s destiny to become a new Europe.

This “wise development” comes at a cost that is obscured by these films—the sovereignty of Indigenous peoples in the region. Griffith’s survey of print magazines produced by the Bureau of Reclamation in support of dam building in the American West interrogates the claim that water and resources are white property and Indigenous peoples are “nowhere to be found.”⁴² Griffith counters these repressions by attending to “the disastrous effects Reclamation projects had and have on Indigenous lands, water, people, and communities.”⁴³ Griffith considers Indigenous narratives of the dams, such as Lawney L. Reyes’s *B Street: The Notorious Playground of Coulee Dam* (2008), a creative nonfiction memoir of living in Sin-Aikst and Swhy-ayl-puh communities during the construction of the Grand Coulee Dam. The Bureau of Reclamation magazines studied by Griffith and the BPA’s films both exemplify the active production of entitlement narratives central to the settler colonial process.

The second pole of the reclamation performed by BPA films connects this narrative of settler destiny to socially progressive ideologies. BPA films frequently produce images of workers, households, and recreation to link infrastructural projects to the equitable distribution of wealth. In a series of cross-dissolves near the conclusion of *Hydro*, images of industrial labor dissolve into a group of workers leaving a factory, then to a man reading to his daughter by the light of his new electric lamp, and finally to the turbines inside the Bonneville Dam (see Figures 4–6). This sequence integrates hydropower with notions of labor and domesticity; it creates affect, ties it to a narrative of progress, and links both to the audience’s participation in the settler process outside the film. Moments like this one, repeated in many other BPA films, highlight the progressive trope of reclaiming land for the shared benefit of “the people”—defined to exclude Indigenous pasts, presents, and futures.

The sequence in *Hydro* also aligns with Jonathan Kahana’s analysis of Joris Ivens’s *Power and the Land*. Kahana suggests that the “power” in Ivens’s film functions allegorically, emphasizing the empowerment of rural citizens and incorporating them into a progressive public. Kahana foregrounds the production of specific publics through New Deal era films, explaining:

42 Griffith, “Do Some Work for Me,” 113. For clarification, Griffith writes about a magazine produced by the Bureau of Reclamation, which managed the Grand Coulee Dam, not the others in the BPA’s network.

43 Griffith, 153.

Figure 4. Sequence from *Hydro: Power to Make the American Dream Come True* (BPA, 1939).

Figure 5. Sequence from *Hydro: Power to Make the American Dream Come True* (BPA, 1939).

[E]ach work of documentary is . . . the record of its producers' attempt to raise specific historical, social, or ethical questions by grappling with the subjects it speaks of, to, or for. Documentary is a kind of metagenre, constantly raising the question of how the social context of cultural representation becomes its content, that is, how the outside of a work of art becomes its inside.⁴⁴

44 Jonathan Kahana, *Intelligence Work: The Politics of American Documentary* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 23.

Figure 6. Sequence from *Hydro: Power to Make the American Dream Come True* (BPA, 1939).

This production of a social context is a crucial contribution of *Hydro* and subsequent BPA films to emerging settler cultures in the Northwest. These films were shown around the region, in ad hoc presentations by the BPA and hosted by local Public Utility Districts, community organizations, and schools. This social context interweaves the dams with democratically shared resources, valorizing the BPA's progressive conception of reclamation.

The third pole of reclamation in BPA films builds on the first and second to produce a geological imaginary of the settler process.⁴⁵ These films compare the immense scale of settler impacts on the region to the shifts that occurred 12,000 years ago at the end of the last ice age. This comparison occurs across multiple films through three distinct layers: affective intensifications of the region's geology through dramatic, aerial cinematography; narrative accounts of the connections between the region's geological history and the dams; and relationships between cinematic affect, narratives, and the world outside of the films, linking an affective experience of cinematic landscapes to narratives of the region's reconfiguration and altering the way that settler cultures perceive their world and their role in it.

River of Power is the most articulate of these geological references, making a clear connection between the human-engineered reconfiguration of the river and the region's geological history. The film's introduction establishes the scale of the region's resources, the arrival of settlers—framed as migrants escaping the 1930s Dust Bowl—and then in a dramatic aerial sequence, leads the audience along the path of the river, from snow-covered mountains, through the desert, to a dam, and from the dam along the power-

45 Kathryn Yusoff in *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018) and Elizabeth Povinelli in *Geontologies: A Requiem to Late Liberalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016) further explore these connections between settler colonialism and the geological.

lines, which it describes as a “river of power.” This sequence is explicitly geological. Over imagery of mountains, river, and dams, the narrator explains, “[H]ere the ancient engines of earth and fire, air and water have worked on a titanic scale, and in just the latest eyeblink of geologic time, the hands of human beings have shaped the landscape too.” A later sequence links the ice dams of the Pleistocene with the current damming of the river by settlers. This sequence attributes a geological power and monumentality to twentieth-century settlers without the unease or irony that such arguments would be informed by in the current climate.

While *River of Power* presents the region’s geological reconfiguration as a triumphant accomplishment, earlier films express instabilities in these ontologies. The most circumspect expression of the imbrications between geology and settler culture is found in the film *Great River*. The film’s multiple release dates call attention to the BPA’s internal struggles with these articulations of power, history, and ecology. The 1973 rerelease brackets the 1963 film with an ambivalent reflection on the BPA’s history. This ambivalence serves as what Jacobson calls a “cultural marker” of the Anthropocene, capturing the messy entanglements between ecological awareness and modernist progress always already present in both the petrofilms studied by Jacobson and the films of the BPA.⁴⁶

The 1973 version of *Great River* begins with a remarkable introduction. A local news anchor walks toward the camera surrounded by the turbines inside the Bonneville Dam. As he walks, he situates the film apologetically:

The film you are about to see tells a story from a bygone era. That statement might seem strange since the film was made only a decade ago. . . . As you watch the film, you may want to bear in mind that environmental awareness has grown to full realization in less time than the film has aged. It would be an exaggeration however to say that the developers have spoiled its environment. To the contrary, in many instances they have preserved and enhanced it, but we’ll let you judge that for yourselves.

This introduction indicates that the BPA had become aware that the administration needed to develop a more nuanced position on its ecological and cultural impacts on the region. This awkward apology is followed immediately by a scrolling gothic text adopted from a passage from Ecclesiastes:

To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven. . . . For the Columbia river, the time to break down, to sweep aside everything in its wild rush to the sea, lasted 70 million years . . . the time to break down, and yet a time to build up . . . it was making itself ready for man, ready to put it to work. . . . That time came twenty-five years ago.

This double introduction, first a deferential apology delivered while strolling alongside the massive turbines inside a dam, followed by this biblical and

46 Jacobson, “*Shadow of Progress*,” 161.

geological mandate, expresses the intense pressures within these imaginaries for the region.

Great River evokes both unease at the impacts of the dams and a triumphant settler destiny. It reconciles these dissonant notions by aligning the dams with geology and the settlers with more-than-human forces of “nature.” The geological and ecological stakes raised throughout *Great River* are resolved with a tragically lighthearted conclusion. The film ends with scenes representing the flourishing settler cultures alongside the dams, explaining, “[T]he people whose working lives are enriched by the river turn to the same river for play and relaxation. The water stored in reservoirs behind the dams provides excellent playgrounds.” This narration is accompanied by images of settlers fishing, picnicking, and water skiing on the now placid river, accompanied by a peppy score that serves as a wild and unsatisfying conclusion to a film with such weighty cultural and ecological stakes.

Great River not only evokes the ambivalence of the Anthropocene but also expresses a central discomfort within settler colonialism. The film’s projection of a peaceful future actively represses the violence underlying the settler culture’s acquisition of land and resources. The geological framing of the settler process articulated in *Great River* and *River of Power* further links settler cultures, infrastructures, and histories with monumental, “natural” processes that obscure its ongoing violence. These geological frames scale the settler project beyond its historical and physical boundaries to make it a destiny, a *reclamation* process that was 12,000 years in the making and required only twenty-five years of “human” ingenuity to achieve.

RESTORATION AND REMEDIATION

BPA films frame the river as destined for extraction, powerlines as a progressive model of distributing power, and the cultures that thrive in this infrastructural media as a force of nature. Contemporary BPA videos—which have shifted from prior distribution models to the administration’s YouTube channel—are very different from these earlier films. Recent work uploaded by the BPA illustrates ways that these videos depart from earlier expressions while at times continuing to rely on ontologies of river, land, and infrastructure produced by earlier BPA films.

Columbia River System Operations Draft Environmental Impact Statement update (BPA, 2019) consists of a script delivered by alternating male and female narrators accompanied by text slides, photographs, and occasional video. The tone is dryly informative, laying out “5 Multi-Objective Alternatives” under consideration for the management of the BPA system in the future. These operating plans explore significantly different possibilities for the river-dam system, ranging from focusing on salmon ecologies, to maximizing hydroelectricity generation, to breaching four Snake River dams. These alternatives present divergent views of the future of the river and BPA.

The use of affect in this video is distinct from the earlier BPA work. The tone here is authoritative, with a cultivated neutrality that intensifies the affect of legal power, oriented toward policy-level accuracy rather than immediate comprehension. This video outlines competing narratives of BPA infrastructure, emphasizing factors such as juvenile salmon health, irrigation

of farmland, electricity generation, and flood control. These nuanced policy options define the river as a highly technical system requiring legal and scientific analysis. While *River of Power* develops a similar ontology of the river through a lengthy argument, *Columbia River System Operations Draft Environmental Impact Statement update* assumes this ontology of the river as power infrastructure. While the video's expression of alternatives seems potentially productive, the cultivated neutrality and authority of this video obscures the ways in which *all* of the problems addressed have *one* cause—the region's settler process and BPA infrastructure.

The level of detailed engagement with the needs of the river's salmonid population is striking. This is a departure from the early BPA films, which frame salmon as easily adaptable to the dams. The prioritization of salmon health is one significant shift in BPA policy brought about by Indigenous activism in the region. These changes have come about primarily through litigation around implementation of the 1855 treaties between the Yakama, Umatilla, Nez Perce, Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs, and the United States. In exchange for tribal land holdings, the treaties commit the US government to guarantee access to "usual and accustomed" fishing sites for the signatory tribes. Shifting legal interpretations of the meaning of "usual and accustomed" have been an important aspect of tribal activism for more than fifty years. Current interpretations by the US courts define "usual and accustomed" to include access to a healthy salmon fishery, requiring the US government—and BPA—to carry out large-scale salmon rehabilitation projects and substantially rethink the workings of the dams, as exhibited in each video in this section.⁴⁷

These legal decisions have shifted the workings of the system of dams and funded ecological restoration projects in the region. The BPA has proved to be a key lever for these activisms and has funded significant restoration projects with proceeds from its power sales.⁴⁸ The relations of *Columbia River System Operations Draft Environmental Impact Statement update* to the world outside the video seem directly related to this activism. Rather than a comfortable settler narrative of triumph, as presented in *River of Power*, this video adopts a more circumspect attitude, producing affect and narratives that revise ontologies of the region to acknowledge the messy entanglements of dams, cultures, salmon, and the river.

Another recent video, *BPA Strategic Plan Anniversary* (BPA 2019), serves as an almost comical counterpart to the somber tone of *Columbia River System Operations Draft Environmental Impact Statement update* and older films such as *Look to the River* or *Intertie*. The video opens with a rock anthem accompanied by images of linemen, maintenance workers, and construction projects. This introduction is followed by the current BPA administrator (chief executive) explaining the BPA's role in realizing the Northwest's "strategic

47 See Roberta Ulrich, *Empty Nets: Indians, Dams, and the Columbia River* (Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 1999) for an account of "in lieu" fishing sites; and Katrine Barber, *In Defense of Wyam: Native-White Alliances and the Struggle for Celilo Village* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2018) for histories of local activism.

48 While there is not space here to survey the Indigenous media that accompanies this ongoing process, I hope to address this media in future work.

objectives.” This video’s harnessing of affect is not subtle, anchored by the overdriven guitar score and the video’s multi-panel image, divided into sections consisting of the narrator’s upper body, video footage of linemen, drone footage of powerlines, and aerial imagery.

Significantly, even this video revises prior BPA films’ relationships with the legacies of settler colonialism. The narrator explains that the BPA has been “finding a better way to work with the Nez Perce tribe.” The claim is followed with a joint statement: “Collaboration is key to this new approach to Columbia River system management. Working together, the region’s states, tribes, and federal agencies have developed an approach that demonstrates environmental stewardship and affordable sustainable energy are not mutually exclusive.” While this video claims to have cultivated a collaborative relationship with the Nez Perce, the labor images, soundtrack, powerline flyovers, and aerial imagery seem to express *all* of the settler ontologies in prior BPA films *simultaneously* rather than a new understanding of Nez Perce sovereignty.

Helicopters Place Wood in Yakima Basin Streams—Improving Fish Habitat exemplifies a different thread of contemporary BPA videos, aligned with the “record” function identified by Hediger and Vonderau.⁴⁹ These videos are usually under two minutes long, shot on location, and document a field procedure with context supplied only as necessary. *Helicopters Place Wood in Yakima Basin Streams* illustrates the process described in its title, providing no context for the operation. It features an acoustic guitar score, drone imagery, and images of BPA and Yakama crews rehabilitating a stream, building affect from dramatic aerial shots and score to frame the restoration of this fish habitat as a warm collaboration between the BPA and the Yakama Nation. While recording the work of the BPA’s ecological mitigation teams, the video produces an affective and narrative engagement that frames Indigenous-settler cooperation as an ongoing project and the restoration of fish habitats as an important task for the BPA. Unlike the other two contemporary videos discussed, *Helicopters Place Wood in Yakima Basin Streams* significantly refigures the BPA’s prior ontologies of the region, framing fish habitat and relationships with the tribes as an integral part of the region, eschewing the exploitation of the region’s resources found throughout the BPA films discussed above.

A final example from the BPA’s current work further illustrates these shifts. *Affiliated Tribes of Northwest Indians, Standing as One (v2)* (BPA, 2018) considers the recent history of the region from tribal perspectives. The film is more polished than the examples above, including handsome cinematography, a lush score, archival materials, and interviews in a range of locations. Together, these elements outline the context, history, and present function of the Affiliated Tribes of Northwest Indians. *Affiliated Tribes of Northwest Indians, Standing as One (v2)* works in a manner very different from the twentieth-century work of the BPA, framing the tribes’ experiences of settler colonialism through a history of treaties between the tribes and the US government. This film promotes a message of solidarity, suggesting that

49 Hediger and Vonderau, “Record, Rhetoric, Rationalization: Industrial Organization and Film,” in Hediger and Vonderau, *Films That Work*, 35–49.

through organizations such as the Affiliated Tribes of Northwest Indians, the region's tribes may continue successful negotiations with state and federal governments.

While it would be heartening to find that the BPA has begun to redress the many problematic ontologies sedimented in its films, it seems equally possible that the administration has merely found more effective ways of navigating a complex political environment. Yet such cynicism may obscure the very valuable lever for activism that the BPA provides, producing significant changes in the dams' function. It may be possible that the BPA's progressive foundations, while initially designed to exclude and exploit everyone—and everything—defined as external, have been successfully leveraged to incorporate those formerly excluded into the BPA's shared power. The BPA now allows salmon ecologies to determine significant aspects of the dams' operation. This shift suggests that the BPA's ontologies of water and land can be changed over time. The work of generations of tribal members may have successfully shifted settler ontologies of the river. Or, instead, has the BPA developed a method of presenting multiple worldviews to the specific audiences attuned to receive them?

The BPA may have found a path toward a plural-voiced public face, one that—as suggested by Kahana—uses radically different approaches to produce specific publics, allowing the organization to splinter into so many distinct trajectories that it becomes difficult to trace a coherent path between the present and the past. If so, the BPA film archive presents an opportunity to trace this path from its beginnings in *Hydro* to its contemporary expressions. This newly accessible archive reveals the production of specific ontologies of the river, powerlines, reclamation, geology, and remediation. As part of ongoing work to reconfigure the system of dams and mitigate their impacts on the region, these ontologies of river, water, land, and culture must be addressed as well.

CONCLUSIONS

The BPA film archive brings together over eighty years of media, providing an opportunity to trace the films' ontological work over time. Like the petrofilms studied by Damluji, Jacobson, Canjels, and Walker, BPA films are intimately intertwined with specific material and discursive logics of the infrastructures of which they are an integral component. While petrofilms produced by corporations such as British Petroleum, Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, and Royal Dutch Shell support colonial, extractive logics, the hydrofilms produced by the BPA produce different logics, integral to the region's settler colonial process. BPA films erase Indigenous histories, create settler pasts, obscure settler violence, and reframe settlers as always already native to this land. BPA films produce new relationships to the region, defining the river as a source of power, the land as distribution infrastructure, and the settlers' massive reconfigurations of the both as geological. Contemporary BPA videos often incorporate many of these logics but at other times engage Indigenous sovereignty and more-than-human ecologies as important infrastructural relationships in the region. By studying the archive of BPA

infrastructural media, the ways that the infrastructural logics of the settler process are produced by moving images of the river, land, and region can be acknowledged and remediated.

Remediating these ontologies may contribute to the development of a “third space” of negotiated Indigenous-settler sovereignty. As conceived by Kevin Bruyneel, this third space presents an alternative to the elimination of either settler or Indigenous elements by producing hybrid spaces in which sovereignty is negotiated.⁵⁰ Engaging the infrastructural media of the BPA foregrounds the ontologies produced through BPA films so that they can be challenged. As Griffiths explains, “Isolating the words and images of the past helps to delegitimize settler narratives of water inherited and perpetuated today.”⁵¹ Finding alternatives to definitions of the river as hydropower infrastructure, the land as always already belonging to settlers, and the system of dams as geological and politically neutral is critical to producing new negotiated ways of being along the river.

Underlying this article is a complex ambivalence toward the BPA itself. While on the one hand, the BPA is deeply entangled in an ongoing process of settler violence, on the other hand, the BPA has begun to meaningfully engage the tribes. It is possible that the BPA both exemplifies the infrastructure of settler colonialism *and* supplies an important lever by which the Progressive Era mandate of the BPA’s foundations can be extended to include those excluded from its concept of shared resources. This ambivalence is not new or unique to the BPA but expresses a central problem of the Anthropocene. As Jacobson suggests, early expressions of the Anthropocene articulate and preserve the inherently contradictory nature of thinking ecologically from within cultures at odds with the ecologies they rely on for survival. Jacobson’s petrofilms “reveal a flash of ambivalence, a subtle recognition that something has gone awry in the system. One of these films’ real values is to have captured and preserved that ambivalence, leaving its trace in the historical record.”⁵² Similarly, the films of the BPA bring us closer to this ambivalence and frame it not as a recent epiphany of the Anthropocene but rather as an integral component of the settler and colonial processes from which governmental hydropower agencies, global oil corporations, and other key agents of our climate crises emerge.

By attending to the work that BPA media performs, settler cultures may move toward a better understanding of the narratives produced by *this* settler process, the exclusions made by it, and the ways that its ontologies pervade contemporary life in the region and beyond. These reflections begin to destabilize these ontologies and make space for understandings of the river, land, and region that express more complexly negotiated ways of being with the world. The process of formulating these new ontologies is a critical task for moving forward in the Anthropocene.

50 Kevin Bruyneel, *The Third Space of Sovereignty: The Postcolonial Politics of U.S.-Indigenous Relations* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 217–230.

51 Griffiths, “Do Some Work for Me,” 153.

52 Jacobson, “*Shadow of Progress*,” 170.

Adam Diller is a PhD candidate in the Documentary Arts and Visual Research program at Temple University. His current research focuses on entanglements of infrastructural media around a Google data center in The Dalles, Oregon.