Oil Fictions
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Published by Penn State University Press

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Oil Fictions: World Literature and Our Contemporary Petrosphere.
Penn State University Press, 2022.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/113267.

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Preface

Stacey Balkan and
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*Oil Fictions* is a transnational collaborative project, with its editors and contributors located in diverse global contexts and connected through metaphorical pipelines of an increasingly precarious environment. Having never met beyond the virtual world, we editors connected over a common concern for our shared living in the “real” world. *Oil Fictions* began to take shape in the fall of 2017 amid unprecedented environmental chaos. A series of potentially cataclysmic storms would form in the Atlantic Ocean—Irma, a Category 5 hurricane, caused the evacuation of Stacey’s community in South Florida; and a sustained heat wave, hovering above 46 degrees Celsius (115°F), would plague the Indian state of Telangana where Swaralipi teaches and lives with her family. As we finished work on this volume, Hurricane Michael left unimaginable destruction in Florida, and India was recovering from a devastating flood in Kerala, the worst in a hundred years. Such catastrophic weather events have become commonplace in the era popularly referred to as the Anthropocene, but Telangana, Kerala, and South Florida offer uncannily concise indices of the deleterious effects of fossil capitalism, extreme extraction, and feckless development. Not to mention that the “MOUist corridor” in central Andhra (adjacent to Telangana), documented by Arundhati Roy in her 2011 *Walking with the Comrades* and labeled as such for the scores of MOUs (memoranda of understanding) on every “mountain top” and “blade of grass” in the region, precisely mirrors the legal land grabs sanctioned by private industry across South Florida. The result has been the decimation of local ecologies and the increased vulnerability of local communities to extreme weather events. As such, these diverse states figure as central coordinates in the global petro-sphere that the present study seeks to map; so too does the possibility of collaboration and a spirited conviviality in these desperate times.

A distinct objective of *Oil Fictions* has been to explore literature on petroleum as world literature, focusing on the ubiquity of oil as well as the cultural
response to petroleum in postcolonial states. Petrocultural discourse has largely been tethered to cultural production in the Global North. When we started conceptualizing this project, we were haunted by the glaring lacuna of a sustained petrocultural paradigm in postcolonial contexts—barring a couple of independent critical essays. It has therefore been a central aim of this volume to engage with petrofictions in a variety of postcolonial and world literature milieus: African, South American, South Asian, Middle Eastern, and transnational encounters addressing the all-pervasive oil economy. Another ambition of the volume has been to foreground the human cost of petroleum extraction while also grappling with the vexed categories of the “human” and “nature”—those real abstractions that have long sustained global capitalism. Our volume engages with literature that represents a trajectory of imperial power imbalance as well as the extractive labor regimes of the transnational petro-economy. The volume thus intervenes in the idea of petroleum as a given, inevitable aspect of modern life and instead investigates the complex power structures that sustain our global petrosphere.

_Oil Fictions_ has also tried to strike a balance between the renowned scholars of the field and a host of emerging voices. When we floated the call for papers, we were overwhelmed with the response, not only in the volume of abstracts we received but also in the discovery of the myriad ways in which petroleum culture is theorized, imagined, and resisted through literature all over the world. Our volume has thus spilled over theoretical boundaries and genre categorizations; it investigates petrofiction as a genre of world literature and film, the relationship of colonialism to the fossil fuel economy, issues of gender through ruminations on petrofeminism in the Thermocene epoch, and discussions of migration, precarious labor, and the petro-diaspora. The volume’s uniqueness is enhanced by the inclusion of testimonies of the oil encounter—through memoirs, journals, and interviews—from a diverse geopolitical grid ranging from the Permian Basin to the Persian Gulf. Indeed, the collection as a whole instantiates a joint effort to recognize the wide-reaching effects of fossil-fueled tyranny while also cultivating a transnational community of scholar-activists committed to fighting for social and environmental justice.

In the chapters that follow, we labor to recognize the material resonances of the aesthetic and the role of the imaginative in the “urgent envisionings” necessary to move beyond petroleum;¹ we chose the image on page viii to
reflect just this. *Mortality* casts three petroleum-based plastic ribbons, vital and aglow, against the extinguished life of a single flower. The painting beseeches its viewers to consider the finitude of mortality. As petro-critics we understand the work as a call to recognize the imperium of artifice and of the commodity form and thus the imperative of our work to cultivate life in the ruins of capital.

**Note**
