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Projects of devotion: energy exploration and moral ambition in the cosmoeconomy of oil and gas in the Western United States

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This essay considers how people working in the oil and gas industry in Colorado perceive their involvement in energy exploration in relation to broader practices of devotion, compassion, and outreach. I argue that although their energy projects may appear to merely echo companies' formal promotional pitches, the oilfield and corporate actors' own moral ambitions reveal more-than-human cosmoeconomic visions of oil's potentiality. This essay thus demonstrates how multiple and diverging ethical registers intersect and inform the valuation of oil.

The LORD himself goes before you and will be with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you.
Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged.

Deuteronomy 31:8

If we do find oil here, this community of yours will not only survive. It will flourish.

Daniel Plainview in *There will be blood*

The oil and gas industry in the United States is predicated on a precarious relationship between hope and knowledge. At times the commodity markets are strong and oil producers compete zealously to acquire leases to land, negotiate contracts for drilling rigs and crews, and secure financial backing for their new ambitious plans. At other times prices fall and widespread pessimism reverberates through the industry as many producers and service companies lay off workers, sell assets, and consolidate their debts.¹ Such ups and downs are dramatic, if not also 'utterly confusing' and 'mind-boggling' (Appel, Mason & Watts 2015: 8). These volatile cycles with periodic booms and busts characterize the oil industry, yet they often exceed simple explanations for their occurrence (Mitchell 2010: 201; see also Mabro 1992).² When rationalizing the past, optimizing the present, and, not least, attempting to predict the future, industry actors draw on multiple scales that encompass the globality of geopolitics, transnational investment agendas, and devastating environmental catastrophes as well as immediate interventions of individual CEOs, boards of directors, and particular investors. It is

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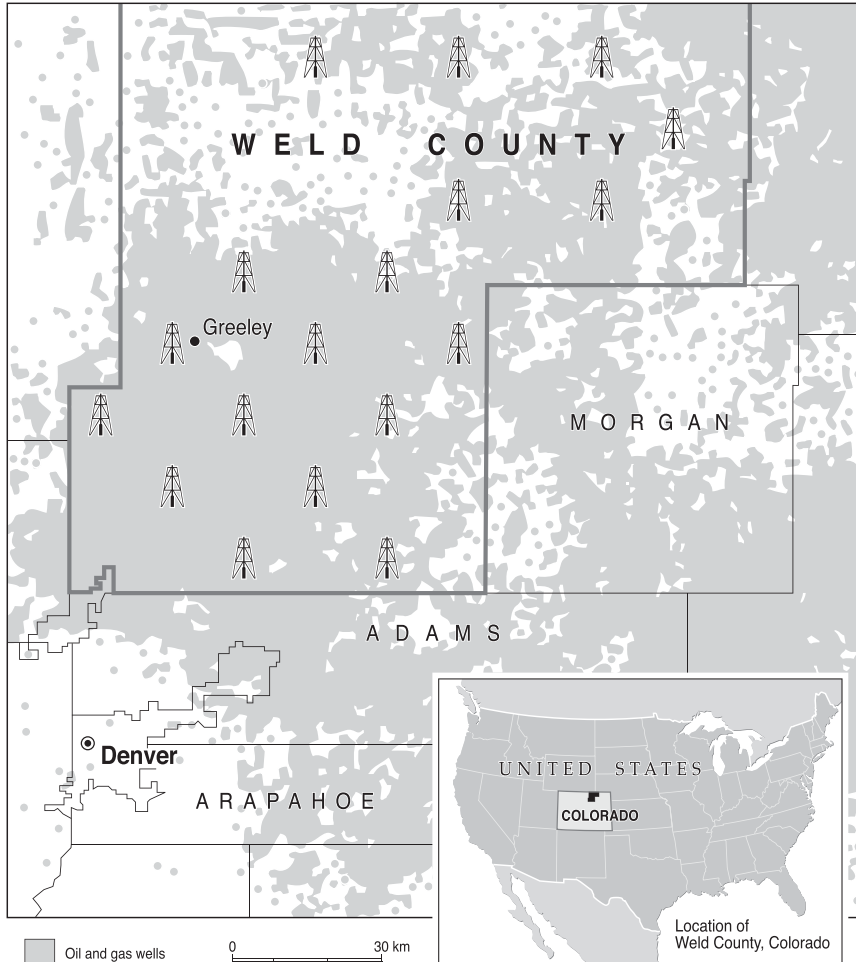


Figure 1. Map of Weld County, Colorado, which has the largest concentration of oil and gas wells in the state, numbering more than 22,000 active wells (see https://www.weldgov.com/departments/planning_and_zoning/oil_gas/, accessed 7 January 2019). (G.F. Sandeman, School of Geography and Sustainable Development, University of St Andrews).

an industry that thus encapsulates the empirical conjuncture of ‘awkward scales’ that simultaneously construct and escape the dizzying reality of life (Comaroff & Comaroff 2003: 151; see also Atabaki, Bini & Ehsani 2018: 2). It is an industry where uncertainty is produced through the specific challenges that are involved in extracting subterranean resources, as well as through events and dynamics that take place at a very grand scale.

In this essay I draw on ethnographic fieldwork that I have carried out since 2013 in Colorado, United States, among people working in the oilfields and executive offices. This fieldwork has taken me out on the rigs in Weld County, into the drilling crew’s ‘shops’ with equipment and trucks located a few hours’ drive from the jobs, to the producing operators’ ‘field offices’ in the county seat of Greeley, and into the executive headquarters in Denver where technical, sales, and executive teams are based (see Fig. 1). My hosts have let me into their workplaces and to the events that occur there. Sometimes

they have given me an office, other times they have let me shadow them as they go about their workday. Fieldwork has thus taken me to corporate events, such as pre-planning meetings, investor meetings, and in-house client presentations, as well as to informal get-togethers after work at local bars. My hosts have also let me into their homes, joining them for family barbecues, dinners with friends, dog walks in the evening, church services on Sundays, and whatever else forms part of their everyday lives. In this essay I attend to the hopes and dreams, concerns and fears that inform people's actions as they go through the ups and downs of the oil industry. Examining how they seek to pave the way for their own ethical projects, I focus on those who 'try to do something serious, something big' (MacFarquhar 2015: xv; cf. Boyer 2008: 43). That is, those who try, often in their own discrete ways, to enact their 'moral ambitions' (Elisha 2011). Overall, I am thus interested in how industry actors confronted with the fundamental and structural uncertainty of the oil economy pursue projects of devotion, negotiating 'the human predicament of trying to live a life that one is somehow responsible for but is in many respects out of one's control' (Mattingly 2012: 179).

Moral philosophers Glen Pettigrove and Michael Meyer have remarked that the notion of 'moral ambition' conjoins 'two ideas that are fatally in tension with each other' (2009: 285). On the one hand, the morally ambitious can strive so determinedly for moral excellence that it makes the person aggrandize his or her own accomplishments while also dismissing or harbouring contempt for the accomplishments of others.³ As such, it can become an example of what Thomas Hill has referred to as 'moral snobbery' (1991: 166), whereby a person's inflated sense of self becomes interrelated with a lack of respect for and a lack of recognition of others. On the other hand, if morality, in its broadest sense, is understood as a desire for life to flourish (Hursthouse 1999: 173), the morally ambitious can be caught in an insatiable state of constantly seeking something better. As Kant has put it, 'the state in which he now is will always remain an ill compared with a better one which he always stands ready to enter' (1996 [1794]: 227). Satisfaction and contentment can thus become frustratingly unachievable for the morally ambitious as the object of ambition is relative, fleeting, and only ever partial. As a result, the person is bound to be perpetually and deeply dissatisfied with life, consumed with disappointment. Considering these two aspects, moral ambition emerges as more of a vice than a virtue and is fundamentally self-defeating.

This view of moral ambition hinges on a particular and abstracted conceptualization of the striving individual (Long & Moore 2013: 4). Philosophers such as Bernard Williams identify this rationalized sovereign individual as historically and socioculturally contingent, anchored in 'modern Western culture' (2006: 6). While also described as a 'fiction of . . . capitalist ideology' (Rigi 2018: 160; see also Kapferer & Gold 2018), it does not, however, resonate with my interlocutors, who can be seen as key exponents of 'oil capitalism' (Szeman 2007). That is, my interlocutors, who participate in and embrace the oil and gas industry as enacted in the American West today, pursue their personal ethical projects through a different understanding of moral ambition. Rather than being grounded in individual autonomy, they undertake their projects 'as a matter of relations that reach both into and beyond the individual' (Laidlaw 2010: 163). Motivated by diverse Christian-inspired outlooks, which proliferate in the oilfields, moral ambition here gives rise to a different dynamic than that which is envisioned by Pettigrove and Meyer. In an industry that many of my interlocutors associate geographically with a broad expansion of the so-called 'Bible belt', extending across and far beyond the oilfields, they emphasize how newcomers to the industry can readily and more or

less explicitly be introduced to Christian faiths. Informed by the aspirational nature of Christian thought and action (Elisha 2011: 220), they conceptualize their oil work significantly in terms of spiritual servitude.⁴ As they engage in practices of devotion, compassion, and outreach, they bring broader cosmoeconomic understandings of life to bear on their work in the industry. By using the notion of ‘cosmoeconomy’ (see also High 2017), my intention is to elucidate the articulations between beings who exist in a more-than-human world that is both expansive and inclusive, yet not necessarily calm and peaceful.⁵ I am thus making an analytical move that signals from the very start that the ‘we’ of any argument is also already posited as a question, if not a problem, opening up an unknown and dynamic world of human and nonhuman beings and processes.

Oil and gas as financial objects

When oil producers and service companies navigate the volatility of the oil economy, they are quick to point towards their well-assorted inventory of financial tools and techniques that they use to calculate matters such as cash flow, collateral, and liabilities.⁶ With a keen eye on global energy prices, they construct what-if scenarios that simulate ‘asset performances’ under varying conditions in an attempt to ‘facilitate high-level optimization and decision support’ (Zhang, Orangi, Bakshi, Da Sie & Prasanna 2006: 1). Individual wells, recognized for their specific oil and gas recovery rates, production targets, and surface facilities, are conjoined with fiscal variables such as current spot prices and futures strip pricing. Assembled into larger units of proven reserves, net acreage, and asset packages, individual wells become disentangled from their localities and come to acquire a ‘modular’ (Appel 2012a: 693) existence in today’s ‘digital oil fields’ (Carvajal, Maucec & Cullick 2018).⁷ Described as ‘knowledge management’ (Soma, Bakshi & Prasanna 2007: 119), oilfield operations thus undergo a process of ‘redomaining’ (Shever 2012: 78) where, in this case, people work to transform an energy resource from a physical and idiosyncratic entity towards a digital and statistically pliable financial object. This performativity of everyday technocratic knowledge fills the spaces of corporate corridors and endless pages in industry magazines and media reports. It travels through the industry, enveloping all echelons from rig workers through to executives, foregrounding a conceptualization of oil and gas as, first and foremost, matters of finance (Ehsani 2018: 27; see also Labban 2008: 5).

This ‘redomaining’ of oil and gas into financial objects has fundamental implications for the social, political, and economic contours of the industry. While it downplays the significance of contested labour relations and spatial arrangements (see, e.g., Austin & McGuire 2017; Priest 2018), it also accentuates an ‘infrastructure of calculability’ and associated forms of risk and expertise (Beunza & Ferraro 2018: 2; Cabantous & Gond 2011). As Caura Wood (this volume) shows, the calculation of debt and the shouldering of risk have become fundamental to current practices of ‘balance sheet cleaning’ and the circulation of assets among corporate executives in the oil and gas industry. Also, Arthur Mason (this volume; see also 2007) demonstrates how the oil and gas industry employs the language of risk in its forecasting practices, contributing to the elevation of energy consultants into experts with the perceived knowledge to ascertain and manage those risks. Moreover, in the context of insurance practices and actuarial imaginaries of the oil and gas industry, Leigh Johnson (2015) has demonstrated how the calculation of risk in upstream production, compounded by increasingly adverse weather conditions, has

now turned the industry into an ‘unviable insurance class’, increasingly underwritten by futures and options markets. This relationship between calculation and judgement, also known as ‘qualculation’ (Cochoy 2002; see also Callon & Law 2005), has received great scholarly attention beyond the specifics of the oil and gas industry (see, e.g., Çalışkan & Callon 2009; 2010; Callon & Muniesa 2005; Holmes 2013; Riles 2004). Examining the ways in which risk and expertise are co-produced, scholars have demonstrated how conviction rather than certainty, judgement rather than enumeration, emerge in and through these fiscal practices (Chong & Tuckett 2015; Millo & MacKenzie 2009; Zaloom 2004). And as such, they are animated by personal, interpersonal, and collective states that entail not only mathematical but also ethical, and increasingly private, projects (see Maurer 2002; Riles 2011; Striphas 2015).

In order to understand how these personal ethical projects underlie, inform, and perhaps motivate people’s actions, I suggest it is necessary to apply a new analytical approach to the oil and gas industry. Up until now, a major area of scholarship has offered important insights into how oil and gas production is experienced by communities located near production sites (see Introduction, this volume). Scholars have examined how local inhabitants, both human and nonhuman, have felt or have been treated as marginal and voiceless, if not endangered, in confrontations with companies and governmental institutions (see Howe, this volume, for an example in the context of wind parks). This literature approaches oil and gas production as causing harm to humans as part of its ordinary functioning (Benson & Kirsch 2010: 465), and it focuses on some of the industry’s strongest critics, namely those who are directly affected by but not necessarily directly benefiting from it. It concerns local inhabitants whose lands and lives have become intertwined with the activities of industry workers, drilling rigs, heavy trucks, as well as much that is unfamiliar and unknown. Focusing on the so-called ‘brute realities of extraction’ (Jalbert, Willow, Casagrande & Paladino 2017: 3), this literature brings attention to those affected or angered by energy production. Yet in doing so, scholars have rendered people working in the oil and gas industry noticeably absent from their accounts. As Kaveh Ehsani has noted, ‘[T]his literature predominantly treats the oil sector as a black box that has a significant impact (often negative) on the world around it, yet excludes its internal tensions and dynamics from the story’ (2018: 22). By simplifying the messy reality of life, this black boxing of the industry can lead to the uncritical foregrounding of scholars’ own value judgements. David Hughes, for example, has recently commented how oil industry actors ‘are in the wrong’, should be consigned ‘to an ash heap, worthy of condescension and worse’, and ‘as an industry . . . should go extinct’ (2017: 152, 4). I understand how the urgency surrounding issues of energy production can encourage such views, especially at a time when climate change is becoming an increasingly urgent challenge for humanity. However, this challenge makes it even more crucial that we correct our ‘double vision’ (Feuchtwang 2010) if we want to understand our others; that we keep a focus on our interlocutors’, rather than our own, understandings and experiences (see also Zylinska 2014: 83). As Susanne Brandtstädter and Karen Sykes have remarked, ‘[Ex]erting judgement in order to correct wrongs and grievances suggests that anthropology might step too closely along the moralist’s path’ (2010: 92; see also Holbraad 2018). Recognizing how our interlocutors’ and our own personal ethical projects are not necessarily shared and similar, I will now turn to the cosmoeconomic understandings that underlie the public-facing fiscal practices of risk management and expertise building in the oil and gas industry.

Oil is everything

The production of oil has been part of Colorado's history for a very long time. The first oil well was drilled during the 1860s in the semi-desert high arid lands of Florence in Southern Colorado and it was the second oldest commercial oilfield in the United States (Scamehorn 2002: 43). Located along the Denver and Rio Grande Western railroad, the Florence oilfield was a booming success that spurred the search for oil across the region and led to the establishment of an industry that became an important part of the state economy and many people's everyday life. With the large-scale use of hydraulic fracturing and directional drilling, Colorado is today among the ten most oil-productive states in the country and thousands of people make a living in the industry.⁸

Drilling rigs tower high above the ranches and can be seen across the plains (Fig. 2). Oil and gas pipes, which a few years ago had to be laid quickly to keep up with the rapid pace of production, run above ground along roads teeming with huge trucks hauling sand and water to and from well sites. Steel storage tanks cluster in the corners of the cornfields while large production batteries and compressor stations for natural gas leave an almost futuristic industrial mark on the landscape. In this oil- and gas-rich state, it is hard to ignore the 'lifeblood' of these fossil fuels (Huber 2013). Yet they have an uncanny invisibility (see also B. Johnson 2014: 159; Szeman & Boyer 2017: 6). Despite their physical presence in the drilling rigs and pipelines, trucks and tanks, it is as if their presence is only commented on by those who oppose oil and gas. A recurring lament among people in the industry is thus that they feel that others do not see and recognize just how important fossil fuels are in their everyday lives. This proliferation of petroleum and petrochemical products⁹ in how we presently organize human life prompted Stephanie,¹⁰ in her late fifties and highly successful in the oil industry, to propose the following scenario for a commercial:

A man and a woman are driving on a city road into Denver. The woman is heavily pregnant and they are rushing to the hospital. But suddenly everything starts to change: The car runs out of gas . . . It comes to a halt, can't go any further. Then the tyres slowly evaporate – they disappear. Then the plastic steering wheel disappears. Then the seats, the safety belts, even their clothes. The woman is just lying there on the ground, going to give birth. There's *nothing* without oil! Nothing! There's no hospital. No bed. No car. Nothing! People think that it's just about gas. But it isn't. Oil is everything!! This commercial might make people think twice before criticizing us for the work we do.

This story-line has already been promoted by the American oil industry's trade association, the American Petroleum Institute. Among other activities, they create and freely distribute teaching materials to schoolchildren and educators. In these teaching materials, they communicate to school children how their lifestyles are 'fuelled by oil and natural gas products'.¹¹ Their accompanying film, entitled *Energizing life*, is not about 'energy' in its plurality, but about oil and gas exclusively. Showing how oil and gas 'support an American way of life', it concludes that 'American Energy is America's Progress' (see also B. Johnson 2014: 146; LeMenager 2014). You certainly get the sense that 'oil is everything'. But while this trade association explicitly and strategically advances the interests of the US oil and gas industry, company employees like Stephanie are not mere mouthpieces. They are not automatons, acting in the absence of their own motive force. When they accuse and receive accusation, when they act on and are acted upon, they are navigating ethical registers that are not limited to and bound by corporate interests. Although they work for oil producers, their own values and interests may thus exceed those of the corporation.



Figure 2. Drilling for oil in Weld County, Colorado. (Photograph by milehightraveler).

‘Can I make a confession?’, Naomi asked me. ‘Of course’, I replied, slightly nervous as to what lay ahead. She worked for a drilling company that carries out ‘frack jobs’ – that is, the actual hydraulic fracturing that breaks apart the hard shale and releases the oil and gas contained within. She was young and new to the industry but navigated it very confidently. With parents and siblings all working in oil and gas, she commented how ‘it’s kind of like my family’ and she knew the industry better than most. She had introduced me to everything and everyone, from the field offices where we wore our hard hats and protective gear to the folks she knew in Denver. She looked at me cautiously and began: ‘Some of my friends are upset with me for getting into oil and gas . . .’. She told me how she had come to the industry without a petroleum engineering degree or other related qualification. She had worked in public communications and had had to learn everything from scratch. It had been a very steep learning curve.

But I love it. I love the vibe, the drive, and the passion. You never get bored!! The company wants to make sure that I can succeed and I’m lucky to have great mentors. It’s a really good industry. But my company recently lost about 40 per cent or so of its people. Last week several of my best friends have been let go. Men I respect and who helped me become who I am.

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I asked her how she was doing when confronted with these kinds of severe job cuts, which were triggered by the recent drop in the oil price when this conversation took place in 2016.¹² Although many of her friends had been fortunate enough to find other jobs, she emphasized how they would have wanted to stay with the company if the choice had been theirs. Experiencing so many people getting laid off and wondering every day if it were going to be her turn next was intense, especially as her husband was out of work and they had two small children to care for. Yet, to my surprise, she elaborated:

Truth be told, there is so much going on in the world right now. There are many problems . . . If I was so self-obsessed that I was only concerned about my job, then . . .

She paused and looked away before saying: ‘I have much bigger issues. I am grateful to have a job’. As we nodded in unison, she continued:

I know more than I should about people. I sometimes know more about you than you know yourself. I know stuff that will happen to other people before it happens. I know stuff that will be important before other people know. Are you alright with that?

And Naomi then began telling me about how she was having premonitions – so terrifying and confusing that she has only recently recognized and accepted her abilities. When some of her friends were furious at her for working in the oil and gas industry, it was not for the reasons that I had suspected. It was not primarily because they perceived fossil fuels as morally problematic: finite resources on which people have become too dependent; pollutants that contribute to the contamination of land, air, and water resources; or factors in anthropogenic climate change. It was also not primarily because they were critical of the oil and gas industry: an industry that often appears in headlines on environmental damage, local conflicts, and wealth disparities. Rather, it was because they thought that she should use her abilities in much better ways. ‘Working in oil’ was for them a waste of unique talent and insights. And Naomi was torn. She wanted to devote herself fully to this calling – ‘a calling to do good, to help others’, as she put it. Indeed, she was actively involved in helping the homeless in her town. She volunteered at a homeless shelter and prayed for their souls. She was keen to find other ways to do more, especially for impoverished children facing a future that was far from as bright and fortunate as her own. But she felt that there were also ways of ‘doing good’ within the industry; that it did not have to be a clash or a moral breakdown if she stayed in oil and gas (cf. Robbins 2004; Walsh 2006; Zigon 2007). For her, being involved in oil and gas was, just like sharing her premonitory insights, precisely ‘to do good’. It was part of a mission to provide abundant and affordable energy to others. By working in oil and gas, she felt that she did ‘her bit’ to keep the production going and ensure energy independence and lower prices. The harder she worked in the industry, the better off she believed the less fortunate would be. Understanding energy as more than what we usually associate with an oil and gas company, she smilingly said: ‘I believe in the truth of energy. We all need energy. It is vital to our existence’.

Over the years I have come to know many people who work in both oilfields and executive offices who have personal psychic advisers, if not psychic abilities themselves.¹³ They share experiences of a world in misery where life seems to be getting increasingly worse. Every day another war, another earthquake, another landslide, another epidemic is revealed. The desperation, hunger, and pain are felt intensely by them as if it were their own bodies directly experiencing the misery. By opening up energy channels and

receiving communication, they seek to better understand themselves and their others. For some, it is an enormous, burdensome, and compassionate project that propels them into helping those in need. When Stephanie commented that ‘oil is everything’, a statement that resonates so well with the American oil industry’s trade association, we thus cannot assume that this is just ‘corporate speak’, that it is an echo of the ‘promotion pitch’. For Naomi, it was part of a larger cosmoeconomic understanding that sees hydrocarbons and communication channels as distinct, yet interrelated. In her experience, they offer complementary ways of enabling humans to live better lives. For her, we are all souls in bodily vessels and as such we live through different but connected forms of energy. You cannot create energy and you cannot destroy it. It merely changes form. Conversions, transformations, changes between one state and another are fundamental to our existence. This was Newton’s first law of thermodynamics but also Naomi’s personal experience. This does not mean that she sees an ‘energy-just world’ (Sovacool 2014: 21). This is not a world of rights, a world of fairness, a world of justice. In the absence of harmonious balance and peace, it is a world that feeds clashing and conflicting interests *because* energy is limited. This is an intensely political battleground, in particular for this industry actor.

God has a plan for you

It is not only industry actors involved in spiritual battles and premonitions who see oil work as intimately interrelated with ambitious projects of ‘doing good’. Particularly in the oilfields, the proactive Houston-headquartered nondenominational Oilfield Christian Fellowship (OCF) is fast-growing and dedicated to spreading the Word of God to men and women in the industry. With news reports about crime-crippled ‘man camps’ in oil-rich North Dakota eclipsing the more familiar accounts of workers’ drinking sprees during leaves from offshore oil platforms, the oilfield today appears a prime location for evangelizing activities. In the words of Steve, one of the members of the OCF in the Denver chapter:

The OCF is very evangelical. It looks at the rigs as a fertile field for ministry, which it is. It’s probably just a step up from evangelizing at brothels! It’s a rough lifestyle with some rough guys. It has always been that way. They have always been itinerant people, whether they were in California or Louisiana. It is a very target-rich environment. So they [OCF] felt like it was a good place to jump into people’s lives and encourage them to go for higher goals rather than just immediate gratification and with some money in your pockets.

In order to reach out to these workers (Fig. 3), the OCF has produced its own custom-made oilfield Bible entitled *God’s word for the oil patch, fuel for the soul*. Containing the Old and New Testaments in the New Living Translation version along with numerous testimonies and commentaries from CEOs to rig hands, 250,000 Oil Patch Bibles have apparently now been distributed to more than sixty countries in thirty languages – this is in addition to the OCF’s freely available digital version.¹⁴ Encouraging people to take Bibles with them on their next work trip, if not also undertake training to become an Oil Patch Chaplain, the OCF offers outreach which is as global as the oil and gas industry itself. Testimonies from workers travel across borders and along the vast range of job roles. Suddenly powerful testimonies from roustabouts intersect with those of sales executives, and any industry actor is welcomed to join their OCF prayer breakfasts, luncheons, and dinners. People are invited to come forth and give their testimony, sharing life experiences like this one:



Figure 3. Roughnecks on a drilling rig in Greeley. (Photograph by NIOSH).

‘But God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners.’ – Romans 5:8

Prior to 1983, I was addicted to drugs and alcohol. I was married and had two children and another on the way. I had recently lost my job and we had no place to live. We were offered a small house near the hometown of my wife’s parents. The house was next door to a Baptist church. The pastor of the church came to visit us every Sunday for several months. Never once did he criticize me . . . He just told me that he sure would love for me to come to a church service. He said, ‘God has a message for you.’

One Sunday morning I decided to take the preacher up on his invitation. That Sunday, as he ended his message, he extended an invitation to those who wanted to know Christ as their Saviour. I could barely see the front of the church because of the tears in my eyes, but somehow I made my way to the front. I just could not get to the front fast enough. I took hold of the pastor’s hand, laid my head on his shoulder, and cried like a baby. That Sunday, Jesus changed my life forever!

My wife and I teach prayer in prisons and churches, and we minister in the workplace. We founded the Oil and Gas Prayer Centre along with Be Free Prison Ministry. The Oil and Gas Prayer Centre partners with thousands of prayer warriors to pray for the needs of men and women working in oil, gas, and related businesses. It all started with a pastor who loved me right where I was. He prayed for me, invited me to church, and never gave up on me. Thank you reverend and thank you Jesus!

A large part of the OCF mission is thus as an outreach Bible Ministry enabled by people’s oil and gas careers: that is, a partnership between people’s spiritual calling and their work in the industry. When the oil patch is looked at as a fertile field for evangelizing, oil appears as a gift from God that can enable many to come to Christ. As people are experiencing the hardships of the industry, their hearts and minds might soften, preparing them to embrace God’s goodness, omnipotence, and omniscience. Turning the pain and suffering into an intimate learning opportunity, the ‘prayer warriors’ hope that workers in the oil patch will draw closer to God. However, for some, their path will remain turbulent and ruinous. Indeed, for them, the future is likely to become gloomier than it was before they started their careers. As such, the oil patch raises the stakes for all, challenging people with profound trials and tribulations. With a God who loves unconditionally, oil thus becomes a potential catalyst for leaving the darkness and embracing conversion to a life in faith. Indeed, for some, the pain and challenges of

life in the oilfield are considered a chance to experience the life of Christ by suffering in some small way as he did (see also Luhrmann 2012: 283). The greater gift of God in oil and gas is thus not just their mundane usage as energy sources, but also, as Steve, mentioned earlier, put it, their ability to ‘turn oil workers over to Christ’. The fossil fuels and the hard reality of their extraction offer a path for people to experience the plan that God has for them, and that, for the fellowship, is the deep and powerful significance of oil and gas.

Glorifying God through oil and gas business

While the OCF is primarily concerned with evangelical outreach activities in the oilfields, Tim, who is a member of its Denver chapter, has sought to ‘channel the goodness of oil and gas’ in a very different way. As a geophysicist, he used to work for an exploration and production company in North Dakota. But with the downturn in oil prices in 2014, he was laid off along with thousands of others in the industry. Married and with three children, he was the main breadwinner in the family. He described it as a ‘freefall from the best ever to the worst of my career’. Tim reminded me of a bumper sticker that said: ‘Please God, Just Give Me One More Oil Boom. I Promise Not To Blow It Next Time’; a humorous take on the industry’s periodic downturns, which are difficult for many. However, he had been in the industry for many decades and it was not the first time he and his family experienced a downturn in oil prices. While they had become used to his sizeable earnings, they had managed to save up over the years and knew how to weather the commodity cycle. This time he and some close friends had been talking increasingly seriously about an idea that he was passionate about: they wanted to start their own oil and gas production company. This was his dream, and this particular moment felt like the right time to realize it.¹⁵ They began to hold countless meetings with private equity fund managers and told them about their business plan, which was to acquire acreage in Wyoming where they had a high degree of familiarity and experience.¹⁶ As Tim said:

They [private equity fund managers] evaluate your team, your skill set, your reputation, your business plan, and they might commit a \$150 million equity commitment or a \$500 million equity commitment, which means you get a salary. You get money to pay for your office, overhead expenses, and you’re supposed to go buy some acreage, acquire mineral leases, or buy some producing assets and then create value by making them a lot better by drilling. It was a relatively easy path to go down for people with our degree of experience and reputation. But what we discovered was that in the last year and a half it has been an exceptionally difficult road to go down. The private equity guys’ response to the cycle is to sit back and watch, very, very cautiously. Very few teams like us would get funded. This past year, maybe only ten in the whole country. We thought we were excellent enough to get funded and what we discovered was that we were in the top 10 per cent. We know the numbers on this; we are just not in the top 1 per cent. It’s really difficult. It’s a very, very competitive acquisition world.

It was a hard reality for him to face. He was absolutely committed, not just because he had an entrepreneur’s deep enthusiasm but also because he felt that he had God’s mandate to do this. The contours of the company’s ethos had come to him as a vision from God at a point when he sought divine comfort and reassurance. Having networked frenetically for months and felt lost in the process, he had retreated to a friend’s holiday house in the mountains. The snow fell thick and deep. Eventually he was snowed in and had to extend his stay. Equipped with the Bible and various Christian books, he engrossed himself in the study when suddenly ‘I felt like God was calling me to do this. That I had the skills and that there was a purpose for it. *This* was the purpose’. Rather

than setting up an oil and gas production company that was motivated by a desire to increase profits for its shareholders, he felt that he was meant to reimagine the industry. His vision was to set up a company that was motivated by ‘proselytizing’. It was going to be a ‘force of good’ but not in an evangelizing sense. His vision did not necessarily involve Bible distribution, prayer groups, or religious conversion. Highlighting the huge potential for profits in oil and gas, he envisioned the company as a vehicle for the redistribution of wealth, both through direct employment and through charitable donations. It was going to be a ‘social entrepreneurship’. As he said one day in-between his meetings with equity fund managers, ‘My dream is to do this oil and gas business in a way that really glorifies God’.

But his entrepreneurial journey was not straightforward, and after almost three years of trying he had to shelve the project, at least for the moment. Reflecting back on his path, he remembered the stay at his friend’s holiday house in the mountains:

One of the books I read had the theme of ‘moving from a life of success to a life of significance’. There was an exercise that was about identifying the things that hold you back from doing what you really feel you should do. And I realized without question that it was fear. It was fear of two things: it was the fear of failure and it was the fear of finances. So guess what I got . . . I took a very big step backward financially and I failed. And guess what . . . It’s not great but it’s OK.

It’s possible that the reason why I was supposed to do this was so that I would learn that I’d be OK. After we threw in the towel on the business, I thought, ‘OK, I’m going to have to look for a job but in the meantime I need some cash flow’. So I started driving Uber. The business failure, the financial setback, and the driving were so humbling to me. The whole driving thing, which I did for seven months, was a deeply spiritual experience for me of just humbling myself and connecting. So I think maybe God said ‘this is what you should do’ because I can be prideful. But I’m not greater than anybody else. It was an amazing experience and education.

I now have this deep peace that it was what we were supposed to do. The reason why God wanted us to do this was that he had a different outcome in mind. What he had in mind required of us to start the company and for it to not be a success. Instead of accomplishing some grand reimagining of the oil and gas industry, which is really nothing less than what I have in my head still, maybe what I’m supposed to do is just be a great dad, a great husband, a great co-worker, a great non-profit board member, and a great volunteer. And touch a few hundred people that way. Maybe that’s more radical than the other thing, really. I don’t know.

Tim’s work in the oil and gas industry offered him multiple routes for glorifying God, and although the start-up company did not succeed, he felt that he was able to find meaning in that process. He now works for a service company in the industry and hopes that perhaps one day God’s plan will come to involve the successful launch of his production company. ‘Throwing in the towel’ thus did not lead to distrust either in the oil and gas industry or in God. Indeed, Tim’s personal crisis became an important moment of reassurance for him as it demonstrated not just that God mattered as an abstract principle fundamental to the universe, but also that God was present for him in the particular (Elisha 2011; Luhrmann 2012: 127). Rather than asking God why his bids failed, he relied on his years of experience and well-versed technocratic knowledge to explain this. He shared with me detailed insights into the various financial models he had pursued and presented a ‘conviction narrative’ (Chong & Tuckett 2015) of his failure. But in an industry of ups and downs, where people are keenly aware of the limits to their knowledge with regard both to the future of the industry and to the future of their own careers, hope becomes an important mode of orientation. Rather than dwelling on the specific, be it a commodity cycle, a company merger, or a local community protest, hope has a propensity, if not an ability, to slip away from the immediate realm (Miyazaki 2006: 149; cf. Narotzky & Besnier 2014). Looking towards

the future, Tim's faith in God made it possible for him to hope that opportunities would emerge so that one day he could pursue the oil and gas business in a way that he felt was compassionate.

Conclusion

This essay has examined how some of the people working in the oil and gas industry pursue morally ambitious projects through the production, distribution, and consumption of these fossil fuels. For them, these hydrocarbons are resources that can bring about fundamental changes in people's lives; changes that go far beyond those commonly identified by the oil and gas industry itself. Implicated in relationships with various human and nonhuman beings, oil and gas become for them catalysts, if not proselytizers, of human flourishing.¹⁷ They are regarded as 'forces of good' in spiritual battles against darker forces, in conversions to a life in faith, and in tortuous paths towards finding one's calling. These conceptualizations of oil and gas as 'forces of good' are not challenged or diminished by concerns about climate change. While some see the opportunities provided by fossil fuels as far outweighing negative consequences, others see 'change' as an inherent dynamic in the earth system as created by God. My interlocutors thus share a mode of knowing that places immense faith in spiritual worlds and that questions the nature and motivations of human actions (see also Gardiner 2010). Their moral outlooks raise personal and political questions about inequalities of access and what it might mean to flourish. Encouraging a reimagination of the role of energy in human life, they urge us to (re)consider the extent to which oil and gas can be forces of good.



But although these industry actors are employed by oil and gas companies, their insights into the place of energy in human life are far removed from the usual territories of corporate ethics. Often referred to as 'corporate social responsibility' or 'corporate conscience', this twinning of the corporate and the social, the market and morality, subsumes ethics within highly particular value regimes that are first and foremost related to marketing, advertising, and pricing (see also Dolan & Rajak 2011). As Hannah Appel has shown in her work on oil extraction in Equatorial Guinea, for transnational oil companies, corporate social responsibility is central to companies' involvement in zonal capitalism, to their disentanglement from what goes on outside the company gates. The separation, although partial and never complete, is strategic and performative, with 'many people doing a tremendous amount of work to maintain its boundaries' (Appel 2012b: 450; see also Cross 2011). It is a detachment that never succeeds. Attending to the practices of corporate social responsibility can thus yield insights into how 'the good' and 'the desirable' are mobilized and used instrumentally and strategically to help make companies financially viable and attractive entities to investors (see also Foster 2010). However, they tell us very little about how the various corporate actors who individually and collectively constitute these companies (Welker 2014) conceptualize and act on the ethical.

'Human flourishing', as recognized by Aristotle in the *Nicomachean ethics*, is not a meta-ontological category. It depends on how each of us defines the ultimate goal for a good life, enabling us to experience and make sense of our actions accordingly (Cooper 1975: 98). People in the oil and gas industry who pursue their various projects of devotion underscore how ethics are embedded squarely in the realm of action rather than (only) abstract reason (see also High 2018: 83; Lambek 2010: 14). Inspired by their moral ambitions and mobilized into what they see as compassionate action, these

projects seem to showcase an individual's ethical capacity. Indeed, in the literature on charity work, such individuals require much explanation. Why do they do it? How far would they go? What do they expect in return? Basically, what propels compassionate individuals into action? (see Allahyari 2000; MacFarquhar 2015; Miller 1999; Wuthnow 2012). But, as poignantly noted by Cheryl Mattingly (2012), this elevated and abstracted individualism that cultivates a virtuous character through self-care and agency has been central to not only Aristotle's practical (ethical) philosophy but also particular strands of anthropological theory that have presumed the efficacious individual to be more empowered, liberated, and creative (see also Laidlaw 2010).

Since I have highlighted how these industry actors have values and interests that may exceed those of oil and gas companies, they risk emerging as precisely such supercharged individuals who autonomously and abstractly bring about change. And this is how some of them may appear when you first meet them during fieldwork. The oilfields are host to many individuals who have left friends and family behind; who work for one company before working for another; who work on a rig in one site before relocating to another site; who treasure their independence and freedom; and who see the ups and downs of the industry as challenges they can and will overcome. The 'awkward scales' of the industry become a backdrop to the proclamation of an individual's strength and invincibility. However, by attending to their moral ambitions in a world in which the ultimate goal for a good life is often difficult to discern and even harder to achieve, I have sought to show how they pursue ambitious projects through their contingent relations and interactions with others. By recognizing these multiple and dynamic relational ties that exist within the cosmoeconomy of oil and gas, we can see the expansive and inclusive world within which people mobilize ethical action, sometimes in ways that we might not expect.

NOTES

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¹ This special issue contains several ethnographic examples of how 'down periods' give rise to reassessments of responsibility and accountability, for example in the context of 'mature' oil assets in Canada (see

Wood, this volume) or coal as unacknowledged ‘gifts’ from miners in Wyoming (see Smith, this volume).

² As a convenient shorthand, in the rest of the essay I will sometimes refer to the oil and gas industry as simply the ‘oil industry’. I do so not to ignore the importance of natural gas or to exaggerate the importance of oil in these contexts but rather to render the text more readable.

³ I am here drawing on Pettigrove’s (2007) work on ambition, especially his reflections on the dynamics of motivation and desire in relation to what he calls ‘the value of ambition’.

⁴ The notion of ‘ambition’ holds an important place in not only philosophical but also theological debates. In Saint Augustine of Hippo’s own account of how he converted to Christianity after living a life in sin, he denounces the vice of ambition. Presenting it as a desire for the honour and glory that should only be accorded to God, he advises his followers to ‘renounce worldly ambition’ (1997: 198). As such, Augustine admonishes against a particular mode of ambition associated with the sins of the self. There are interesting parallels between the theologians’ and philosophers’ concerns about human ambition, but they would be too extensive to discuss here.

⁵ Although the notion of cosmoeconomy emerged from my research on the Mongolian gold rush (High 2017), I have found it useful more generally when contemplating the vast world within which people conceptualize and mobilize economic life.

⁶ See Mason (this volume) for a discussion of how this kind of technocratic knowledge is produced by energy consultants and received by government actors in the context of a natural gas pipeline in Alaska.

⁷ Within the oil and gas industry, the notion of ‘digital oil fields’ refers primarily to upstream operations: that is, the extraction of oil and gas. It refers specifically to the integration of digital technology such as sensors and automated well mechanics, enabling the collection of high-volume data in real time, remote operations, automation, and visualizations. As I argue here, digitalization is part of a broader process of knowledge transformation and valuation in the industry.

⁸ For more detailed information about the oil and gas industry in Colorado, including industry perspectives on issues surrounding hydraulic fracturing (also known as ‘fracking’), see the Colorado Oil and Gas Association’s website at <http://www.coga.org>. Also see de Rijke (2013) for a discussion of anthropology and hydraulic fracturing as well as Loomis (2017) for an account of the world-wide boom in unconventional oil and natural gas.

⁹ Petroleum products include various grades of fuel oil and gasoline, while petrochemical products include chemical compounds used in plastics, fibres, adhesives, lubricants, and gels. According to the British Plastics Federation, ‘4% of global oil production is used for plastics. 87% is used for transport, energy and heating’ (see http://www.bpf.co.uk/press/oil_consumption.aspx, accessed 7 January 2019).

¹⁰ In this essay I use pseudonyms to protect the identity of my interlocutors. I have also altered other potential personal identifiers to further respect and ensure their anonymity.

¹¹ Their website (<http://www.api.org>) outlines their online educational resources and ‘consumer information’ for the classroom.

¹² Over the course of my research so far, the price for West Texas Intermediate crude oil has gone from a high of \$111 per barrel in June 2014 to a low of \$29 per barrel in January 2016. The volatility is thus dramatic and can happen over short periods.

¹³ Their spiritual practices and affiliations are varied, but for reasons of confidentiality, I do not disclose any particular groups in this essay.

¹⁴ The New Living Translation is a present-day rendition of the ancient Hebrew and Greek texts, intended to appeal to readers through its semantic translation rather than prioritizing the equivalence of words. As such, it is easy to read and in July 2008 apparently became the most popular English version of the Bible based on unit sales (see <https://www.gotquestions.org/New-Living-Translation-NLT.html>, accessed 7 January 2019).

¹⁵ Trying to establish an oil production company is a relatively common aspiration for senior workers, especially at times of redundancy. However, the odds of success are low in any commodity cycle, and at this particular time it was apparent that only about 1 per cent of the start-up attempts managed to acquire sufficient investment.

¹⁶ In a forthcoming article, I examine how private equity finance relates to oil entrepreneurs’ visions in the circulation of finance capital.

¹⁷ Paul Thomas Anderson’s 2017 film *There will be blood* captures this potency of oil, which initially offers the lure and promise of flourishing wealth.

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Projets de dévotion : prospection énergétique et ambition morale dans la cosmoéconomie du pétrole et du gaz dans l'Ouest des États-Unis

Résumé

Cet essai examine la manière dont les travailleurs du pétrole et du gaz au Colorado perçoivent leur implication dans la prospection énergétique en relation avec des pratiques plus larges de dévotion, de compassion et de relations de proximité. Bien que leurs projets énergétiques semblent uniquement faire écho aux éléments de langage promus par les entreprises, les ambitions morales personnelles des acteurs sur les gisements et dans les entreprises révèlent des visions cosmoéconomiques des potentialités du pétrole qui vont au-delà de l'humain. L'auteure montre ainsi comment de multiples registres éthiques divergents se recourent et entrent en compte dans la valorisation du pétrole.