

MYTHOLOGY AND MATERIALITY IN 21ST CENTURY NORDIC PETROFICTION

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

- Stephanie LeMenager, *Living Oil* (2014)

In accordance with Stephanie LeMenager's call in *Living Oil*, this talk sets sail and ventures seaward to examine **how the history of offshore extraction is registered and produced in newer Nordic works of art.**

To keep the framing tight, my discussion here will revolve around the Danish novel: *Aftenstjerne* (2019; *Night Star*) by Aske Juul Christiansen. I do however believe the argument can be extended, for instance with the inclusion of works like these: Kristina Stoltz – *På ryggen af en tyr* (2014), Øyvind Rimbereid – *Solaris Korrigert* (2004) and *Jimmen* (2011), Ida Marie Hede – *Inferno* (2014), Silja E. K. Henderson – *I.7 Tipping Point* (2018), Ida Börjel – *MA* (2014) and Andrzej Tichý – *Kairos* (2013).

At its core, my argument is that offshore extraction overwhelmingly is registered in the Nordic nations in the shape of irreal figurations with mythology as a main vector. These novels display and displace a recurrent dialectic of oil invisibility and materiality at sea. As such, they combine the Nordic maritime culture of seafaring and shipbuilding, of mythologically guided exploration and industrial production, in their effort to approach the illusive offshore oil.

According to Nancy Couling and Ursula Hein, throughout the second half of the twentieth century, the North Sea became “one of the most industrialised seas in the world.”¹ However, they write, this intense amount of oceanic “energy logistics” is

¹ Nancy Couling and Carola Hein, "Blankness: The Architectural Void of North Sea Energy Logistics," *Footprint* 12, no. 23 (Autumn/Winter 2018): 90, <https://doi.org/10.7480/footprint.12.2.2038>.

partially concealed by a “conceptual void” in Western societies going back to the Scientific Revolution in Europe: “Maritime cartography up to the sixteenth century had incorporated narrative features, expressing both real and imagined experiences at sea, but by the seventeenth century, the sea [...] had become largely empty.”²

They describe this development of “western idealisation of the ocean surface as a ‘great void’” as a reflection of the growing colonial and mercantile idea in Europe of “the sea as a place to exert and consolidate [...] political and economic strength.” The ocean itself was only to be kept open for passages in order to secure “unhindered sea-borne trade” to the benefit of European states.³ Throughout the twentieth century, though, following the wake of subsurface marine explorations,⁴ fossil extraction rushed to the sea.⁵ New deep sea discoveries sparked instances of oceanic frontierism as “[f]igures of the boundless sea or the oceanic sublime encourage[d] humans to treat it as an inexhaustible storehouse of goods.”⁶

In the heydays of expanding offshore petroleumscapes, a troubling concern however also emerged in the political discourse. That of peak oil. While discussions of depletion go way back, the introduction of M. King Hubbert’s peak theory did steer up the boat rather intensely – as the explicit iconography in these dire forecasts and doomsday predictions illustrate. The idea of Peak Oil gave way for heated discussions of what were to replace oil. Combined with the oil crises of the 1970’s, wind energy was promoted in Denmark for instance, while Norway kept developing its long history of hydropower going back to 1892. In the end though, the answer to what were to replace oil was right in front of us: More oil. Not the least due to new methods of extraction like

² Couling and Hein, "Blankness," 88.

³ Couling and Hein, "Blankness," 88. See also Nancy Couling, "The Offshore Petroleumscape: Grids, Gods, and Giants of the North Sea," in *Oil Spaces: Exploring the Global Petroleumscape*, ed. Carola Hein (New York: Routledge, 2021), 110-12.

⁴ “[T]he years from 1840 to 1880 witnessed a dramatic increase in awareness of the open ocean as a workplace, a leisure area, a stage for adventure, and a natural environment,” Helen M. Rozwadowski writes in her cultural history of marine exploration, *Fathoming the Ocean: The Discovery and Exploration of the Deep Sea* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005), 4.

⁵ According to the National Ocean Industries Association (NOIA), offshore drilling tentatively took off in the 1890’s, modern seismology was developed in 1926 and in 1947 the first “out-off-sight of land” platform was built “mark[ing] the beginning of the modern offshore industry as it is known today.” <https://web.archive.org/web/20100806100254/http://www.noia.org/website/article.asp?id=123>.

⁶ Patricia Yaeger, "Editor's Column: Sea Trash, Dark Pools, and the Tragedy of the Commons," *PMLA* 125, no. 3 (May 2010): 535, <https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2010.125.3.523>.

tar sands mining, hydraulic fracking and ultra deepwater drilling, i.e., Tough oil extraction.

The advent of these more-than-usually dirty methods combined with the growing intergovernmental and public awareness of climate change has surely influenced the contemporary perception of oil in the West. However, Couling and Hein argue, the understanding of oceanic blankness fostered by seaward commerce lingers on today in the shape of obscurity as “corporations and nations control the spaces of oil and gas in secrecy and concealment, making it extremely difficult to *site* as well as *sight*.”⁷

Today, rather than sustaining an understanding of the ocean as non-developable, oceanic blankness can therefore be said to serve another purpose, namely that of concealing the deed of exploitation: “Since the 1940’s, the majority of offshore platforms have been built out of sight of land. [...] This invisibility is a function of where oil and gas deposits are located but also of political, economic, and aesthetic considerations,” Fiona Polack and Danine Farquharson writes.⁸ Couling and Hein concur as they write: “[When] a commodity is kept at a distance and its materiality negated, its cultural dimension becomes equally challenging to excavate.”⁹

Illustratively, in the two Nordic North Sea nations, Denmark and Norway, a discursive instance of oil material negation took place with the sheer naming of the nascent enterprise in the 70’s. Colloquially referred to as *Olieeventyret* (the Oil Adventure), the Danish and Norwegian extraction of oil had from the very beginning a mythical dimension – as it does so many other places around the world. Since then, these Nordic nations have been invested in the extraction of oil, but lately they have also worked hard to compose another story. That of green frontierism. While both nations are increasingly green on the front, however, they continue to uphold a black enterprise at sea. Inconsistent at heart, this dyad of a green front resting on a black foundation is exactly upheld by the fact that the petrostructures at sea are largely kept out of sight (and thus out of mind).

⁷ Couling and Hein, "Blankness," 90. Original italics.

⁸ Fiona Polack and Danine Farquharson, "Offshore Rig," in *Fueling Culture: 101 Words for Energy and Environment*, ed. Imre Szeman, Jennifer Wenzel, and Patricia Yaeger (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), 253.

⁹ Couling and Hein, "Blankness," 90.

The media exposure of blow outs, oil spills, and shipping impasses like the ones at Deepwater Horizon, Norilsk and Suez (and so many others) do however dint this narrative of seaside invisibility on the global scale. Just as the display of plastic gathering in The Great Pacific Garbage Patch has done damage to the idea of oceanic blankness and serenity.

As the havoc of offshore oil increasingly washes ashore the western consciousness, my reading of Aske Juul Christiansen's *Aftenstjerne* proposes that *contemporary* Nordic petrofiction likewise seems especially keen on registering this dialectic between oil invisibility and materiality offshore. And that this is precisely done with narrative features such as mythical creatures and *unheimlich* mystique. As Graeme Macdonald argues in his recent article "Dynamic Positioning," the cultural representation of North Sea oil has always been inclined to the speculative register.¹⁰ However, the hypocrisy of the self-aggrandising narrative of green frontierism in combination with ongoing backyard extraction and exploration taking place in the blinding light of a planetary emergence *has* increased the volume of cultural responses. Even to the point where it is possible to speak of a peculiar tough petrofiction of the North that refuses to be dazzled by the promise of a coming green conversion and instead turns its attention to our outdated but omnipresent 21. century petrostructures of feeling.

Oceanic Frontierism in *Aftenstjerne*

Aske Juul Christiansen's novel *Aftenstjerne* from 2019 is composed as a logbook with entries written from different oil and gas frontiers. In its form it resembles journal logbooks of expeditions like Charles Darwin's *The Voyage of the Beagle* (1839) or the works by polar explorer Knud Rasmussen (1879-1933). Mixing the sentiments of Darwin's geological and Rasmussen's anthropological surveys, *Aftenstjerne* revolves around the curious case of oil's im/materiality.

The novel takes place around different on- and offshore petroleumscapes from the Greenland Sea over Salvador and Doha to the Ross Ice Shelf and several sites in between.

¹⁰ Graeme Macdonald, "Dynamic Positioning: North Sea Petroculture's Backwash," in *Cold Water Oil: Offshore Petroleum Cultures*, ed. Fiona Polack and Danine Farquharson (London: Routledge, 2022), 67.

Here I focus on the entries on offshore exploration and drilling predominantly from the North Sea and further North.

Echoing the frontier ethos of ancient seafarers, the offshore entries in the novel confirm what Polack and Farquharson writes about subsurface drilling: “In their use of overdetermined language of the frontier, and their emphasis on human ingenuity and technological prowess, accounts of drilling in deep water and offshore Arctic locations resonate with Hegel’s comment that ‘the sea invites man to conquest.’”¹¹

Moreover, the frontierism expressed in the novel hinges on an interesting techno-mythology where divinity is replaced with a worldly vocabulary without losing the mystical aura of inexplicability. In a log from the Norwegian Sea the reader for instance is confronted with this reflection of the ocean:

We know the surface, we can see the waves striking the ship and against the shore, and we can see the water glisteningly spreading between. We can dive down and see the water as we can’t see the air, and then we can touch the surface. There we stop. Below everything is speculation, below we drill for answers.¹²

Here we can see how a sort of oceanic blankness also guides the perception of the oil workers exploring the ocean floor for fossil fuel deposits. They only know the surface. To know anything down below they must, “shoot pressured sound down in the hope of a meaningful answer. The answer is meaningful when the algorithms in Salvador has interpreted them and sent them back. Then they must correspond to reality,” as the entry goes on.¹³ Another entry confirms this schism between surface and unknown underground: “I look into the control room and see new combinations of colour on the screen, so below us it moves, but not here, it’s the same surface over another deep and I smile still in the assumption that I know what is under us.”¹⁴

¹¹ Polack and Farquharson, "Offshore Rig," 252.

¹² Aske Juul Christiansen, *Aftenstjerne* (Copenhagen: Forlaget Arena, 2019), "10 / 6 / 16 Norskehavet". This and all the following quotations are in my translation. The novel is not paginated, I therefore refer to the entries' 'date stamp.'

¹³ Christiansen, *Aftenstjerne*, "10 / 6 / 16 Norskehavet".

¹⁴ Christiansen, *Aftenstjerne*, "3 / 7 / 16 Grønlandshavet".

The back cover of the novel fittingly describes it as “a book about oil, a compendium, a myth circle, and cartography; an intense poetic survey of the oil industry’s last days.”¹⁵ But whereas the maritime cartographies prior to the Scientific Revolution incorporated creatures and critters to provided dubious answers to the subsurface mystique, here the role of soothsayer befalls a technological creature – the algorithms in Salvador. In this light, it is unsurprising that an unfathomable techno-mythology guides the oil workers’ offshore passage. Victim to the digital machinery, reality at the techno-ocean is dictated in a binary fashion for the oil workers: Fossil fuels or not is the only meaningful answer below the surface.

This general experience of oceanic blankness often lead the workers to succumb to the cultural legacy of seafarer mythology and folklore when describing the technical equipment: “The great yellow drums stand in a row. 24 lines stretching from them, one and a half kilometre behind us like the dragged tentacular of a jellyfish. To avoid stressing them as much as possible we must turn slowly, preferably we must let ourselves be led.”¹⁶ Almost resembling the kraken, these giant squid-like tentacular keeps the oil workers at sea awake and working.

As such for the oil workers at sea, the modern cartography of the oil corporations’ unrestrained appraisal of technology has not erased the sea monsters. The technological development is not a final domestication of the great and at times unhospitable ocean it is rather an extension of the age-old faulty “ideal of mastering the ocean for economic gains.”¹⁷

Unsurprising then, there is also a lurking doubt about data present when the workers talk among themselves about the fixation and worship of the algorithms from Salvador: “[W]e meet and discuss data/if there is data everywhere/we create information and gather around it as a warm fire. Are we better? Do we build anew?/We make changes, I say/Bjarke, with his dark mouthhole; we are prolonging.”¹⁸ With this idea of prolonging, Bjarke dryly criticises how data are used to carry the oil enterprise into the “Tough Oil

¹⁵ Christiansen, *Aftenstjerne*.

¹⁶ Christiansen, *Aftenstjerne*, "4 / 6 / 16 Nordsøen".

¹⁷ Polack and Farquharson, "Offshore Rig," 252.

¹⁸ Christiansen, *Aftenstjerne*, "21 / 6 / 16 Norskehavet".

World.”¹⁹ Through technical innovation and datafication the fossil fuel business is kept very much alive.²⁰ In many ways then, *Aftenstjerne* is a portrait of the prolonged Tough Oil existence – if anything, the novel actually displays how “the oil industry’s last days,” as the back cover mentions, is itself a sort of phantasmagoria.

The representation of offshore petroleumscape in *Aftenstjerne* is often in line with how Nancy Couling describes this concept as “a mythological space” that constitutes “a legendary space of everyday culture.”²¹ The everyday aspect is most notably represented in *Aftenstjerne* by a continuous focus on the work culture at these giant sites like platforms, oil tankers, drill ships, seismic vessels and more. Christiansen thereby emphasises the materiality of oil throughout the book as a sort of myth-busting endeavour.

On the formal level, the entries in the book are all written in a disrupted and simplistic syntax that seems to filter out all non-oil related matters. In that way, they mimic a sort of multicultural or migrant workforce language processed by the oil resource that they work with. The language has been refined only to accommodate the life of oil. Thus, the entries in *Aftenstjerne* on the one hand illustrate a certain illiterate confrontation with the offshore world of oil and gas.

But on the other hand, the oil-tuned language also emphasises how the oil industry shape and synchronise the oil workers’ entire bodies to the drill work:

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

[...] I am a fixed point and nothing else, an anchor for the drill.)²²

In this quote we see how the oil workers’ language as well as their physical composition are adapted to the task at hand: Exploring, drilling, extracting, refining. Individuality and

¹⁹ See Stephanie LeMenager, *Living Oil: Petroleum Culture In the American Century*, Paperback ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 3.

²⁰ LeMenager, *Living Oil: Petroleum Culture In the American Century*, 3.

²¹ Couling, "The Offshore Petroleumscape," 110.

²² Christiansen, *Aftenstjerne*, "4 / 9 / 16 Ordos".

desire are set aside as the dark substrate like a virus seems to infect and consume its host. The workers are reduced to impersonal vehicles for the extraction of oil.

Aftenstjerne thus shows that no material consequence – whether on the workers' own bodies or the natural environment – can put an end to the capitalist drill bit. In a peculiar summarising statement on a page of its own, Christiansen even seems to let this developmental ethos speak for itself in an unsentimental tone as he writes:

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

imitation

repetition

development

maybe I am just looking for death in different words.²³

These examples from *Aftenstjerne*, I hope, demonstrates how the usage of mystique can obscure the physicality of petroleumscapes but importantly, the affective register of obscurity can also be invoked in a myth-busting fashion to enlarge some dark social and material realities through the reinvention of mythological cartography.

The Nordic oil novels can be read as fictional renditions of two complexes – oil and water. As we know, they do not mix. Yet, I argue, that contemporary fiction show that they are equally impossible to separate in the reality of world-economy/world-ecology entanglement.

The unreal sentiments at play confronts the reader with a more real, but by no means clearer, depiction of the world-economy/world-ecology. In other words, these novels are adamant in making visible the existing *opacity* of oil rather than trying to construct a transparent depiction of oil existence. And consequently, with unreality as the formal instrument, they succeed in both. Simply because the world-ecological reality of oil – of extractivism – *is* opaque and ominous – yet strangely alluring.

²³ Christiansen, *Aftenstjerne*, "27 / 8 / 16 Doha".

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