Melanie Dennis Unrau

Rig Talk and Disidentification in Peter Christensen's *Rig Talk* and Mathew Henderson's *The Lease*

> *Rig Talk* seems to be a controversial book. Basically seems the academics don't understand what the book is about and quickly pass moral judgment on all those heathen folk who dirty their hands.
> —Peter Christensen, Letter to Glen Sorestad (1982)

Peter Christensen's *Rig Talk* (1981) and Mathew Henderson's *The Lease* (2012) are poetry collections about oil work published during different oil booms, three decades apart. While the texts share many remarkable similarities, this article focuses on their use of vernacular "rig talk" that positions the speakers as ambivalent insiders among oil workers. As the language of production in the oil patch and the petrostate, rig talk is petropoetics, a discursive formation and world-making project in which everyone is implicated. Rig-talking petropoetry simultaneously reproduces and critiques the classist, ecocidal, settler-colonial, racist, misogynist, homophobic, and ableist structures of an extractive industry in which workers are both perpetrators and victims; it figures oil workers as vital makers and theorists of our petromodern predicaments. This article draws on cultural theories of disidentification to consider rig talk as a way for oil workers and other petrocultural subjects to position ourselves as complicit, dependent, resistant, and in solidarity in relation to the poetics of extractive industry, petrocultures, and the petrostate.[1] Part of a larger project on poetry written by Canadian oil workers, it uses a focused reading of *Rig Talk* and *The Lease* to demonstrate

the existence of a decades-long tradition of Canadian oil-worker poetry that can serve as a touchpoint for literary and cultural studies of Canadian petropoetics in the burgeoning field of petrocultures or the energy humanities.

Rig Talk as Petropoetics

Literary criticism has treated the recent boom in Canadian oil-worker poetry as a new phenomenon.[2] In "Canadian Petro-Poetics: Masculinity, Labor, and Environment in Mathew Henderson's *The Lease*" (2014), a foundational text in the study of both Canadian oil-worker poetry and a more broadly defined Canadian petropoetics, German ecocritic Judith Rauscher describes Henderson's *The Lease* in terms that could also describe Christensen's *Rig Talk*:

> His poems both construct and subvert an imagined working-class masculinity forged by the hardships of petro-labor and marked by exaggerated misogynist heterosexuality as well as a celebration of technological domination over the land. In the process, the texts explore the possibilities and limits of a proletarian ecopoetics sensitive to patterns of subjection of both land and people. (104)

Yet, Rauscher names only *The Lease* and Dymphny Dronyk's "The Patch Poems, 2006" (2007) as examples of poetry about oil work written from an "insider perspective," and as exceptions to the rule that "much of Canadian petro-poetry since the 1970s is written from the viewpoint of a concerned yet distant observer" (101, 109n7). Similarly, in a 2016 lecture, Henderson describes writing *The Lease* while completing an MFA at the University of Guelph as "walking into an empty space" in Canadian poetry because "there hadn't really been anybody writing about this particular scene" ("Navigating" 05:38-05:48). Such accounts of oil-worker poetry coming out of only the most recent Canadian oil and gas boom (2004-2014) overlook Peter Christensen's 1981 collection *Rig Talk*, a foundational text for a disavowed and forgotten tradition.

Any account of Canadian petropoetics as both resource logic and resource aesthetic[3] must treat with suspicion claims to so-called "empty space." Oil and gas production in Canada is premised on forgetting, first through the myth of *terra nullius* that underpins settler-colonial claims to Indigenous land and resources, and subsequently through the erasure of memory involved in the boom-and-bust cycles of a staples economy. As francophone petrocultures scholar Dominique Perron observes, the movements of the boom-and-bust cycle, "while predictable, seem to

provoke an invariably renewed astonishment on the part of provincial and federal governments, as if they were all affected by a collective amnesia, helpless in reaction to this rather frequent phenomenon" (615). It is because of such forgetfulness that Canadians and Albertans can, as oil-worker poet Lindsay Bird writes in her book *Boom Time*, "swing fat and hammocked / between bust and bust" (43), failing to plan or save for the next bust or for the end of the fossil fuel era. Such forgetfulness also contributes to the sense, common among the oil-worker poets I study, that each of these writers is alone, writing into an empty space rather than a tradition; thus, the white Canadian drilling fluid specialist and poet Naden Parkin expects no response when he challenges readers of his book *A Relationship with Truth* (2014) to "[n]ame another oil worker constructing poems" (38). Canadian petro- and ecocriticism must resist the overlaying of a boom-and-bust mentality on our analyses of culture because it isolates individuals in the petrostate and serves to keep them, as Perron observes, "*in their place*" (606).[4]

Rig Talk is a product of the era of the oil shocks and boom of the 1970s, published during the brief regime of the National Energy Program (1980-1985) and the rise of Western alienation in Canada before the glut of 1982 and the bust of 1986, at a time when oil was greasing the gears of an ascendant neoliberal ideology and oil companies were already researching the "greenhouse effect." *The Lease* was published in the last hoorah of the boom that peaked in 2008 and then made a recovery after the financial crisis and before the new bust of 2014—in the era of Prime Minister Stephen Harper, an Albertan, whose tenure was marked by deregulation and industry-friendly policies, as well as an apology to survivors of the Indian residential schools in 2008, absurdly followed by his claim the following year that Canada has "no history of colonialism" (Ljunggren). Treating *Rig Talk* and *The Lease* as part of the same tradition brings their historical contexts into conversation with one another, as points of situated knowledge in an ongoing process that Christensen and Henderson participate in, observe, and critique from the inside.

The insidious forgetfulness of petroculture is not the only reason Christensen's *Rig Talk* has been overlooked: it was not well received at the time of its publication. The endorsement on its back cover written by Canadian work poet Tom Wayman emphasizes the book's significance as work literature: "Peter Christensen's RIG TALK brings us, for the first time in contemporary writing, an insider's look at the harsh and difficult

working life in the oil patch. These are tough poems about a terrible job, destructive no less to the people who work at it than the landscapes it scars." Wayman has long argued that work writing is authentic and potentially transformative when it is written as an "inside job"—that is, from the insider perspective of a person who has done the work (as opposed to that of an outsider who has done research on the work [see Wayman]). For Wayman, both the "tough" or "stark" style of the poetry and the balancing of ecological and labour concerns are appropriate for insider oil-work poetry. Despite support from advocates of work poetics such as Wayman, however, *Rig Talk* was heavily criticized for its plain, literal, and rough language and imagery; for Christensen's seeming "acquiescence" to a violent masculinity (Smith 17); and for what reviewers saw as a disconnect between Christensen's work poems and nature poems.[5]

In one review, Francis Zichy writes, "Christensen is committed both to the world of big machines and tough men, and to the natural world, and he is puzzled and disturbed by their incompatibility, but he finds no way out of the bind, and often fails to discover the language that will bring his concerns to life" (11). Zichy portrays Christensen as an unskilled poet who fails either to choose between or to overcome the stereotyped, ideological positions of the oil worker and the nature poet. Yet, when Christensen comments in a 1982 letter to his editor at Thistledown Press, cited in the epigraph above, that the literary reviewers misunderstand "what the book is about" and focus instead on the individualizing, classist question of who has clean or dirty hands, he suggests that it was the literary critics who lacked the language to describe his project. In contrast to a conception of nature poetry that falsely assumes that nature can be separated from culture, labour, or industry, Christensen's poetics is more accurately described in the terms Rauscher uses for *The Lease*—terms that were not yet in use in literary criticism in the 1980s—as *proletarian ecopoetics* and *petropoetics*.[6] What *Rig Talk* is about is no mystery, yet it eluded Christensen's critics: it is about petropoetics, a material and cultural process that brings together "the world of big machines and tough men" and "the natural world," to explosive and devastating effect. Christensen's term for petropoetics is *rig talk*.

Christensen is a white settler poet who was born to immigrant parents in rural Alberta and who worked as an oil rigger, seismic helper (or

jughound), and gravel truck driver during the oil boom and shocks of the 1970s. *Rig Talk*, his second poetry collection, is dedicated to "the Province of Alberta" and illustrated with pencil drawings of workers, non-human animals, and oil rigs by Jacqueline Forrie. It features cowboy-style poems in Christensen's characteristic mode of "tough imagism—clipped lines, flat observation, stark visuality" (Cochrane 206)—with several poems reading as truncated or censored sonnets. *Rig Talk* is divided into three sections. The first, "Oil Rush," contains documentary poems about oil work, spoken by a persona of the poet who narrates as

> Roughnecks work the deck
> Spin chain
> couple uncouple steel
>
> the nights pass like noise[.] (25)

After the accidents described in "Wild Fire" and the concrete poem "The Driller Makes a Mistake," the young worker who went "Up North" (10) with aspirations to become "[a] big man" (14) realizes that "I am an expendable machine" (32). A subtle metaphor compares workers to the Christensen-brand drill bits, labelled with Christensen's own surname on their sides, that were commonly used in the 1970s and 1980s, so that the workers in "Graveyard Shift" trip pipe all night to retrieve and replace a diamond drill bit, "worn smooth" (24), that symbolizes what the industry does to workers (see the Christensen Diamond drill bit in Figure 1). The second section, "A River Begins Here," is a suite of ecopoems focused on the natural world and the worker's relationship with it—as a site of home, work, and recreation; as a victim of pollution and ecocide; and as a voice of critique against extractivism and colonialism. For example, "River Dance" reproduces and subverts colonial tropes by recalling "the last dance" of the Bighorn Stoneys on their territory before it was flooded in 1972 by the Bighorn Dam and the politicians who "raise themselves over the earth" to make a "dead river" (38). The final section, "Rig Talk," is made up of vernacular poems in the voices of residents of the oil patch and workers off the job. These are often parodic (but seldom funny) performances of a harsh masculinity that leave open the question of whether the acts of abuse and negligence—of getting "so drunk on the same old shit" of misogyny, racism, and lateral violence (56)—are committed by Christensen or someone else.

Figure 1. Christensen Diamond drill bit from the 1970s-1980s. Photo courtesy of the Canadian Energy Museum. Used with permission.

Although the coming bust, the long-term impacts of neoliberalism, the widespread public knowledge of climate change, and the crisis of abandoned and orphaned oil wells in Western Canada were yet to come, *Rig Talk* foreshadows them through the speaker's ambivalent participation in the hubristic poetics of an extractive industry. Embodying, if not necessarily believing in, ideologies of progress, upward mobility, misogyny, and settler-colonial ownership of the land, the speaker works "[s]eventeen hours a day" in a booming and dangerous industry (16); blows up animals, trees, and rocks "for fun" (18); and enables or perhaps perpetrates assaults on Mother Earth and women (15, 50-52, 57). Yet, in ways that suggest solidarity but may also be appropriative, he also links exploited workers with polluted rivers, abused women and animals, dispossessed peoples, and nature at "the end of the chain" (43). He calls out holier-than-thou consumers of oil and petrochemicals in a culture where "Everything Must Be New," responding to the illusion that some citizens of the petrostate can have clean hands with the petropoetics of an oil worker who says, "I do not forget / my place among things" (61). He implicates poetry in rig talk as too much "talk talk talk" that overwrites and "owns everything" (58); and, for good measure, he implicates the reader, "you," through his occasional use of second-person narration when "you cram into the camper" going up north (10), "[y]ou drill another hundred feet" (24), and "you dive from the catwalk" after lighting the cigarette that starts a rig fire (31). In the disorienting, wide-ranging, and scale-jumping poetics of *Rig Talk*, individual culpability is beside the point, and rig-talk-as-petropoetics is what geographer Kathryn Yusoff calls a "collaborative project" between humans and fossil fuels ("Geologic" 781). This project keeps all of us in our places by upholding the myth that only some of us are oil workers.

Christensen's speaker performs versions of rig talk that range from the talk of oil workers to a resource poetics of oil and the material-discursive structures of the Albertan and Canadian petrostates. *Rig Talk* provokes questions and offers warnings about what the industry was making of Alberta, blurring the lines between material and cultural production, poets and petropoets, and oil workers and other petrocultural subjects. As a synonym for petropoetics, *rig talk* emphasizes that oil workers are not only petropoetic objects, taking their place in a system where "[t]he plains are alive / with the campfires of millionaires" (9), but also petropoetic subjects,

fluent in the language of oil production and positioned to interpret and cut into its power dynamics. Rig talk is a world-making project in which Christensen implicates himself as both exploiter and exploited, "sky man" and "expendable machine" (14, 32); yet rig talk can also be a non-innocent, disidentificatory means of resistance that may be effective because it is what Wayman calls an "inside job."

Rig Talk as Disidentification

Disidentification is a linguistic and performative mode through which gestures or speech acts enact both complicity and resistance; its transformative potential lies in its rejection of the idea that subjects must be constituted as either for or against dominant ideology. Marxist philosopher and linguist Michel Pêcheux first used the term in *Language, Semantics and Ideology* (1975; English edition 1982), in which he lays the groundwork for a "*materialist theory of discourse*" after Louis Althusser (60). According to Althusser, ideology must constantly be reproduced through the interpellation and the consent of subjects. Pêcheux demonstrates that such reproduction happens both through the seamless identification of the "good subject," who accepts and embodies the discursive formations of dominant ideology, and through the outright refusal of the "bad subject," who "*counteridentifies* with the discursive formation imposed on him [*sic*]" and yet still serves to strengthen it (157). As an experimental, transformative refusal of the subject positions on offer, disidentification involves taking up "*a non-subjective position*" (158) that works in an "epistemological break" where meaning has broken down (136). It turns ideology "against itself" and produces the grounds for a resistant politics (195)—for Pêcheux, a proletarian politics (150).

Cuban American queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz draws on queer and critical race studies to make an important intervention in Pêcheux's theory by bringing together disidentification and performativity in his *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (1999). As Muñoz demonstrates through his study of disidentifications like Pedro Zamora's queer, Latinx, and HIV-positive "counterpublicity" on the early reality-TV show *The Real World* (147), disidentification can look like mere complicity, parody, or mimicry of normative or majoritarian ways of being, but it is also resistant. For Muñoz, the critical ambivalence of

disidentification suggests modes of solidarity that can accommodate difference, disagreement, and desire. Muñoz was influenced by the work of Judith Butler, who emphasizes, in her own assessment of Muñoz's work after his death, the implications of disidentification for solidarity and resistance. She argues that identification is not identity, that it always introduces "noncoincidence and difference," and that "it reveals itself to be disidentification from the start" (5). For Butler, solidarity is not necessarily sameness, agreement, or identification: "We don't need to identify with one another, but we need to converge at the site of our disidentification" (18). Muñoz's theory of disidentificatory performativity and its implications for broad-based solidarity are key to any subsequent work on disidentification, including my analysis of rig talk as being concerned with class, gender, sex, race, and land.

As *Rig Talk* shows, everyone has a place and does work in the material-discursive structure of the petrostate, including the oil worker and the nature poet, who are both complicit in settler colonialism and extraction. From its beginning, *Rig Talk* blurs the distinctions between the speech of poets, oil workers, readers, and the rigs themselves, using a disidentificatory strategy that Muñoz calls "tactical misrecognition" to put subjects out of place and disrupt petrocultural discourses and power structures (168). In the opening poem, the speaker visits a drilling rig and is mistaken for a labourer looking for a job. He tells the driller, "I'm writing / a book about rigs"; the driller responds, "*Well it's about gawdam time / somebody wrote about us,*" and offers the speaker a tour (7). The speaker establishes his own credibility as a work poet not only through his familiarity with the rig and his donning of a hard hat, but also by describing the way the driller first misrecognizes him and then endorses his writing. Yet, the speaker is also careful not to appropriate the driller's speech. If tactical misrecognition allows the poet to be recognized as a worker, it also allows the driller to be recognized *as a poet* who does not need another poet to speak for him. Christensen uses italics to show the driller's voice breaking through the narration of the speaker.

The driller and the poet enact an additional misrecognition: "a book about rigs" is taken by the driller to mean a book about oil workers ("*us*"). Thus the poem introduces under erasure the idea that the book is also about the "talk" of the rigs themselves. In Christensen's poems, where

"A touch from a spinning drill stem / can leave you dumb broken" (25), and Forrie's illustrations, where dark steel rigs tower over the soft bodies of workers (see Figure 2), rigs represent power, capital, settler-colonial ownership, and the indifference of oil executives and consumers who exploit and objectify workers. The workers, in turn, exploit and objectify

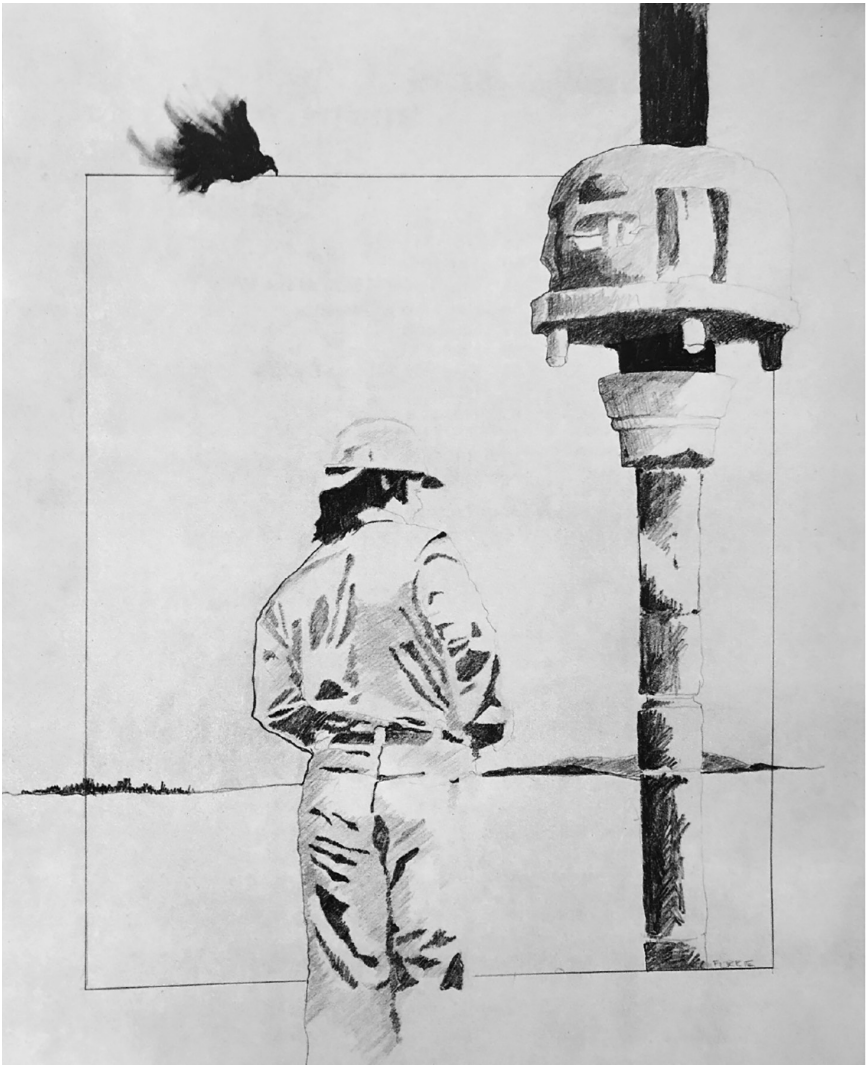

Figure 2. *Rig Talk* illustration by Jacqueline Forrie. Used with permission.

women, non-human animals, and the land, playing their part in a system predicated, as ecofeminist scholar Carolyn Merchant has shown, on a modernist, colonial, and misogynist ideology of "the death of nature." Yet, if rigs are often treated as tools, inanimate objects, or metaphors in *Rig Talk*, they also exceed or shift such categories, with both the poems and Forrie's illustrations showing rigs breaking out of their frames, twisting, and bursting into flames. Accidents, blowouts, and fires shake up the poetry, speaking the power and resistance of the land itself when a non-human power comes

> rushing up from the earth core
> fifteen thousand feet
> rushing up
> to greet the fire
> and celebrate a new sun[.] (31)

Rig Talk is complicit in a Canadian linguistic and literary tradition that Okanagan Syilx writer and scholar Jeannette Armstrong describes in her poem "Threads of Old Memory" as "meant to overpower / to overtake" (184). Christensen fails to escape or transcend the way of being on the land that he refers to as being "New Here" (15). Yet, in moments when land talks through the rigs, exceeding, subverting, and breaking the discursive formations of extraction, *Rig Talk* gestures toward, or longs for, what Armstrong calls "land speaking," Indigenous discursive traditions where human beings can be harmonious with a wider "land language" (178). Workers have intimate knowledge of the land's resistance to colonization, objectification, and extraction. Although they suppress that knowledge through the boasts, threats, and violence they use as inadequate strategies for "Keeping Fear Away" (18), each invocation of *rig talk* is also a reminder that nature is not under human management or control.

The final poem, titled "Rig Talk," closes the book by further opening up disidentificatory positions for oil workers. I quote the poem in full here:

> I wonder at the power
> of the men
> I work for
> They make me
> rough like their talk
>
> I laugh with them

when they say
they are not afraid
of women
  sex
  manhood
  ANYBODY (67)

Although it can be read—unimaginatively—as a young poet's claim to have been corrupted by his coworkers, this poem is filled with the irony and double meaning of disidentification. Spoken from a more wizened perspective than a poem earlier in the book in which a young boy looks up to oil workers as "Heroes" (47), the word *wonder* in the line "I wonder at the power" signals "wonder and dismay" (Zichy 11)—both awe and a questioning of power. *Power* refers simultaneously to the power oil workers hold over one another in the tight hierarchy of a rig, the labour power appropriated by the bosses, the fuel the workers extract from the land, the power they claim illegitimately over others, and the terrifying-yet-repressed power of the land. As the earlier poems show, "the power / of the men" is fleeting and also includes disempowerment and danger. This is signalled by the implied bracketing of the words "of the men," which makes power, in its multiple senses, what the speaker works for. While the statement "[t]hey make me / rough" seems to deflect responsibility or blame from the speaker, I take this as another tactical misrecognition, spoken by a worker who is also "worn smooth" by oil work. The line break after "[t]hey make me" highlights the dynamic through which energy workers are the underappreciated makers—the disavowed poets—of petromodernity, who can only make all of us rough by offering glimpses of the rough working conditions and the ecological sacrifices through which our ways of life are actually reproduced.

Christensen begins the second stanza by having the speaker say "I laugh with them," making a tenuous and disidentificatory distinction between *laughing at* and *laughing with* the performances of oil workers who claim not to be afraid of "ANYBODY"—not the sublimated power of a feminized earth that the worker counters with "sex," nor the impossible interpellation into "manhood." *Laughing with* mingles respect and critique—in this case, a critique that comes not from the outside but from the workers themselves. In light of the stories told in the preceding poems of workers burned alive, broken, or narrowly escaping such fates, as well as stories of how workers

cope with ever-present fear, the speaker invites readers to laugh with them, too. The speaker knows he has plenty to fear, and knows he is not the only worker who laughs at the idea that misogyny, extraction, destruction, and denial are the only appropriate responses to fear.

Rig Talk closes with the suggestion that the conditions of oil work position all workers and indeed all Canadians as disidentificatory subjects, interpellated into identities that Muñoz describes as "toxic" or "spoiled" (185)—identities similarly exposed by Métis scholar Warren Cariou when he asserts that in Canada we all have "tarhands." Caught as we are between wonder and dismay, Christensen shows solidarity by speaking as an insider instead of setting himself apart as better or purer than other workers. He identifies with oil workers by doing extractive labour; by performing a fearless and violent masculinity; by going along with hazings, abuse, and homophobic jokes; and by showing disdain for the land that he and other workers live and work on. Being a complicit insider rather than a judgmental outsider allows Christensen to show that oil work always involves disidentification; that workers see through, laugh at, and are sickened by these performances; that they care about the land; and that they do not necessarily agree with or give consent to the millionaires or the petrostate. In moments of crisis, danger, and self-awareness, rig talk articulates and embodies petrocultural disidentification as a form of petropoetic theory, critique, and resistance.

Rig Talk and Disidentification in *The Lease*

Mathew Henderson is a white settler who was born and raised in Prince Edward Island, but who moved to Alberta the year he finished high school and his father took over an oil and gas production testing company. Henderson worked as a production tester in Alberta and Saskatchewan for a year before starting university, then in the summers for several years after that. Henderson's first book, *The Lease* is a collection of lyric, narrative, confessional poems that mimic the talk of workers and focus on the interior life of a conflicted production tester. In a petromodern pastoral where "cows gather in darkness near the edge of the site, / scratching thighs against steel tankers" (8), and where the job of the production tester is to "[t]end the rusted steel like a shepherd" (9), the oil patch is a resource frontier that can no longer be mistaken as natural or pristine,

where the oil-worker poet both represents and critiques extraction and overconsumption. Many of the poems are written in the form of the sonnet—especially of PEI-born poet Milton Acorn's Jackpine sonnet, "a short poem with a dialectical play of argument" that is "not always limited to fourteen lines" and that need not rhyme (16). Henderson's poetry accommodates the speaker's abuse of and affection for the "dead prairie" he inhabits (7), his equation of ecocide and misogyny, and the mixture of admiration and contempt he expresses for his coworkers and himself.

The reception of Henderson's book has been overwhelmingly positive, including a glowing review in *The New York Times* (Garner) and shortlistings for the Trillium and Gerald Lampert awards for poetry; settler Canadian poet Matthew Tierney calls it "universally loved" (Tierney and Henderson). In fact, *The Lease* seems to be beloved for the same characteristics for which *Rig Talk* was rejected—for expressing a workerly language and tone that are "honky-tonk-plain or Tonka-truck-tough" (Clarke), for performing and critiquing a stereotyped toxic masculinity (Rauscher 105), and for refusing to take sides between workers and the land. In his review of the book, Africadian poet, playwright, and literary scholar George Elliott Clarke praises *The Lease* but also critiques its privileging of class over race: "Intriguingly, Henderson writes often of Caucasians 'coloured' by sun, oil, or gas, but seldom about 'the Natives,' whose land is being looted of its resources. 'Colour' is pronounced, but it's class that's privileged."[7] Instead of adopting Rauscher's lens of *proletarian ecopoetics* to interpret this text, I read *The Lease* as rig talk and petropoetics as a way to tease out what it says not only about labour and ecology but also about gender, colonialism, and race.

In Henderson's poem "What You Do," the narrator responds to the sexist and racist talk of one of his colleagues by disidentifying: "When he talks you quease and pull away, but grow a little / more like him for all your shutting up" (64). Like Christensen, Henderson uses a line break to show that the narrator of his semi-autobiographical poetry is both made sick and simply *made* through oil work and rig talk: the narrator *grows up* and *grows to belong* in the hypermasculine, sexist, homophobic, racist, and violent culture of the oil patch. Like the speaker of *Rig Talk*, the workers in *The Lease* frown upon too much talk. In one poem, the narrator describes low-level workers as "hands" who "wring oil from the earth" and "do not speak"

(48); in another, coworker Dave expresses disdain for "This one guy" who "goes and gets himself a shrink who gets him on comp / because he had a *traumatic experience*," a guy who, according to Dave, does not know "what work *is*" (52).[8] The workers suppress speech and emotion, converting their anger and fear into violence against women, non-humans, and themselves. Yet, the narrator breaks with the prohibition on so-called *bitching* and "howling" by using the mode of confessional poetry to address a presumed audience of sympathetic and complicit readers (30, 67). Disidentification registers in *The Lease* through the narrator's confessions of the aches and pains, anxieties, failures, and feelings that he silences in his day-to-day work, as well as through his portrayal of the talk that passes between oil workers when they think no one else is listening. By admitting his feelings of both disgust and familiarity, and by incorporating rig talk into his own speech throughout the book, the narrator refuses interpellation as either a good poet who exists at a remove from the bad workers or a good worker who shows complete loyalty to the extractive industry that pays his bills.

With the exception of a couple of vernacular poems spoken in the first-person voices of other oil workers, the poems in *The Lease* use present-tense, second-person narration to implicate poet and reader alike in the narrator's actions as well as his fearful and guilty feelings about them. When the narrator commands himself, "Now open the fucking well and walk the pipe like a healer, / your ungloved palm hovering over the unions" (10), his imperative phrasing places readers as workers along the pipes, pipelines, and commodity chains of the oil and gas industry, preventing them from counteridentifying or assuming a comfortable distance from the poems. Yet, he also blocks identification, as in the poem "Who Are You Out There?" in which the narrator says, "You're no part of it. You can only watch" (14)—referring at the most literal level to the production tester who watches roughnecks working on a rig, yet also reminding readers that *you* are an outsider and a voyeur. In the closing poem, when the narrator accuses both the reader and himself of "faking, lurking," he worries simultaneously about how he will write about his former coworkers after leaving the industry and about the way readers might also betray the workers—about whether "you turn them over in the end" (67). Such narration by "you" puts the reader in a position of "reflexive spectatorship," a position which Jennifer Wenzel argues is a promising mode for solidarity

(*Disposition* 167). It resists what Wenzel calls the "*unimagining*" (*Disposition* 18) of the role of the oil worker in Canadian culture, which Henderson has described as an "empty space" but which also takes the form of stereotypes. In such a reflexive situation, readers may "quease and pull away," yet they may also recognize their dependence upon and likeness to workers like the narrator. *The Lease* shows that rather than full identification or belonging, the critical ambivalence of disidentification is what it feels like to be an oil worker, or to be in solidarity with workers.

The disidentificatory poetics of *The Lease* comes together around the central question of the text: what is the lease? Pêcheux describes the "shake-up" of the epistemological break (139), where meaning breaks down because it turns out to be ideological and where disidentification opens up as a possibility, in relation to a question: "What I am referring to here is that work of the unthought in thought whereby the very terms of a question, with the answer it presupposes, disappear, so that the question literally loses its meaning while new 'answers' form to questions which had not been asked" (137). The shake-up around the lease brings together the exploitation of land, workers, women, and Indigenous and racialized peoples, an epistemological break that the workers in *The Lease* discuss with one another. In one of the portrait poems, the narrator tries to explain what the lease is to his coworker Todd:

> and the lease, you have to tell him,
> is just where you work. No, *Where you work*
> *is the lease*. Confusing because it isn't beer
> or smokes or a car stereo system. (38)

Despite his mocking of Todd for being "slow" (38), the speaker is also confused by the location, dimensions, and meaning of the lease. If the italics in this stanza signal Todd's speech, it is Todd who understands that the lease is more than "where you work": it is also a discursive formation that creates the material conditions through which "you" sell your labour power, own or live on the land, and understand your place in the world as an oil worker. The narrator works on the lease, but the lease is also where he lives, as a resident of the oil patch with the mineral rights for his family's land leased by an oil and gas company.

In "Washout," the narrator remembers his father teaching him how to knead dough while "there was a man outside punching holes in the earth, / making your mother's windows buzz and rattle" (10). Having a "man outside"

the family home is a violation—one that is compared to a violation of the mother's body. The treatment of the narrator's home as just another lease parallels both the tenuous and shifting definitions of women in the oil patch as wives, mothers, sisters, or "just pussy" (35), and the way the workers themselves are treated by the industry and consumers as "tanned gears" or replaceable tools (14). The man is another worker, doing what both the father and the narrator do outside other homes in a system that Perron has described, following Denis Duclos, as *autophagic*, where "individuals' and markets' sustainability depends on consuming what they produce in order to survive in a neoliberal economy" (612). What the narrator and his father are meting out as oil workers is also what they are being fed as oil-patch residents: dispossession through abstraction, alienation, and violence. This dispossession is predicated on the dispossession of Indigenous peoples, an origin and ontology of the lease that is nearly always outside the frame of Henderson's poems.[9] The whitewashing of dispossession in "Washout" suggests reading the poem alongside Kainai/Sámi filmmaker Elle-Maíjá Tailfeathers' short film *Bloodland,* which depicts drilling for oil as drilling into the body of an Indigenous woman. Tailfeathers made the film using funds from a distribution cheque from an oil-and-gas lease that the Blood Tribe Chief and Council signed without the consent of band members. It links harm to the earth with gender, racial, and settler-colonial violence. The epistemological break around the lease, and the intersecting forms of dispossession and harm the lease encompasses, requires what the final report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls calls a "Deeper Dive" into the documented links between oil and gas extraction and violence against Indigenous women, girls, and Two-Spirit people in particular, including the negative impacts of "man camps" and transient workers in local communities. Like rig talk, the lease is a synonym for petropoetics that can attend to its land, gender, and racial politics.

In the poem "You Ask Your Father What a Lease Is," the father answers the narrator's question with seemingly unrelated information, "about the geese beyond / the aqueduct, how they turn the sky grey, / how as a teen he never put his gun away dirty" (17). From his complex and compromised position as a landowner and production testing contractor, the father responds to the lease with an ethics of hard work, responsibility, and care, but also with a sense of entitlement to abundant and cheap natural

resources that seem to be there for the taking. Yet, like Todd and the narrator, he is unable to put the lease into words. In the stanza that follows, the narrator draws his own conclusions about the lease:

> The lease is meaningless: a square paced
> first by seismic workers, and then your father,
> and then by every other man you know.
> But you've always pulled meaning from nothing,
> and when he leads you to an empty field you
> tear grass in fistfuls, read the roots like a will. (17)

The narrator considers the lease as a square of land, paced by men who represent ownership by the father, ownership by the province, and ownership by the oil and gas company that leases the mineral rights. The repeated act of pacing, emphasized by the iambic metre of the line "and then by every other man you know," demonstrates that the claims of settler-colonial ownership and industry leases must constantly be reproduced by ideological subjects—that, as the narrator observes, "[t]his place repeats itself" (8), and that it must repeat itself or fall apart. The speaker feels that as a poet he should know how to "[pull] meaning from nothing" in the way that wills, leases, surface rights agreements, and the treaties that underpin them do; but when he goes looking for meaning or metaphor in the "empty field" and in the roots of the grass he pulls from the ground, the epistemological break only widens. The empty field is a colonial *terra nullius* that the narrator knows is not empty. Although he might "read the roots like a will," looking for his inheritance and his claim on the land, he finds something more radical lying there at the root, in the double meaning of *will.* His extractive approach to meaning as something he can take from the land comes up against the will and sovereignty of the land itself, and of its original Indigenous caretakers, which persist despite the repeated pacing of the lease. Although the narrator may judge fellow worker Dave for "the shit he says" and for having a racist attitude toward "the Natives / who sleep, curled up, on his hometown streets" (61), what lies at the root of the lease is the colonialism and systemic racism from which the narrator benefits, which, as the ground of petropoetics and the petrostate, allow him and Dave to sleep safely but illegitimately on stolen land.

In the relations structured by the lease, power and wealth flow upward while abuse and violence trickle down. Henderson represents workers as abusers and money-counting beneficiaries in this system, yet also as

victims—terrorized gophers (18), drowning kittens (49), and broken men. The devaluing of workers' lives through the lease can be seen in their discussions of which body parts they would cook or lose "for an even million" (31) and their visceral responses to the news of a fatal blowout where "the pipe swung so fast it took one guy's face / clean off" (54). The lease legitimizes an extractive industry's use of the land and of workers' bodies. Although it seems to provide the workers with identity, freedom, and a way of life, it also takes away from these things, offering them only temporarily and at a high cost. In the epistemological break around what the lease is and means, it can be seen as a compromise that workers might not continue to be willing to make.

In the poem "Joe Talks about Snubbing," coworker Joe describes a job he "won't even do" that pits the lives of workers against the will of the earth:

> But yeah, it's tripping under pressure.
> Basically pushing pipe down a hole
> that wants to push you back. It's when
> the patch itself gets so goddamn angry— (63)

The story drops off here because it reminds the narrator of another story about Joe sharing how to "avoid the nipple" and pleasure a woman (63). In the third stanza, the narrator—"you"—sets the scene, complete with Joe's "dirty or freckled" elbows and his miming, "darting his tongue / in and out under the imaginary tit" (63). The final stanza is narrated by Joe again:

> Right there, that's what they like,
> just underneath. Get your tongue
> in there, boys. My ex-wife, real good girl,
> Christ, she giggled like fuck for that. (63)

Through this seeming accident of memory, the narrator shows Joe expressing the unthought thought that oil and gas extraction—"punching holes"—is comparable to rape. The contrast between the ex-wife's pleasure and the earth's anger shows that everyone—including Joe, the narrator, and "you"—knows that the land is more than dead nature or "a mindless, submissive body" available to be exploited and leased (Merchant 190). In a situation where it becomes clear that Mother Earth does not consent, Joe reveals a disidentificatory ethics of what he "won't even do" for money or for the industry.

The narrator knows he is subject not only to "the wills of men / who will you" (50) but also to the will of the land, which oil work pits him against, in a battle the narrator expects to lose. Rather than expressing the climate-change

denial that readers might expect from an oil worker—a stereotyped denial that I have not found in poetry by oil workers—the narrator characterizes the lease as a deferral rather than a denial of the eventual triumph of nature. He expresses a cynical "hope" in the persistence, for a little while longer, of oil work and of the lease itself:

> As if hope alone could tend the ocean,
> could hold it above you just a while
> more before it crushes the record
> clean, ravines the prairies and scrubs
> the sum of your summers to
> bent steel beams, cracked alfalfa. (50)

The lease is a hope to delay the consequences and the dangers of petromodernity, represented here by the rising seas of climate change or the Genesis flood. Unlike rig talk, the lease has a finite temporality that leaves the workers waiting, individually and collectively, for the catastrophe or transition when the lease will be up and they will no longer be oil workers.

The epistemological break is not in itself a resistant politics; it is only an opening for a politics to emerge. Muñoz writes, "disidentification is a step further than cracking open the code of the majority; it proceeds to use this code as raw material for representing a disempowered politics or positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture" (31). The narrator of *The Lease*, in response to both the sight of a coworker who lost a hand in an accident and the panicked feeling he has every time he opens an oil well, says "[y]ou wait" (49 [see also 31]). The only explanation of what he waits for is the metaphor of a drowning man who waits "for a hand or hook to pull you from this place" (49). This sense of waiting comes from the disidentification that Butler notes is part of identification from the start, and the narrator appears to wait with urgency but without knowing what he waits for. He waits for a change that could be a blowout, an accident, the automation of his job, a flood, a collapse in oil prices, a strike, a shutdown, a green energy transition, or a politics of reparation and of giving land back to Indigenous peoples. His waiting is a dormant or deferred form of resistance, a critical ambivalence that hides behind his "hope" for things to remain the same. Perhaps the worker waits for a hand extended in solidarity among a critical mass of workers and Canadians ready to redefine what they will and will not do for the petrostate. Perhaps the cracked code of the lease serves as raw material—a hook—for critiquing extractivism and imagining alternatives.

After Rig Talk: Toward a More Comprehensive Study of Petropoetics

Christensen's *Rig Talk* is a foundational text in Canadian petropoetics, as both an early example of oil-worker poetry and a founding theorization of petropoetics as a world-making project that extends beyond poetry to the work we all do to produce and reproduce fossil fuels, CO_2, inequity, and dispossession. Against the idea that oil and gas workers are hypocrites, dupes, or too implicated in the system to understand it, *Rig Talk* and *The Lease* demonstrate that workers are uniquely positioned to theorize and resist petropoetics. Disidentificatory rig talk is urgent cultural work that articulates oil workers' desires for the transformation of the relations of petromodern production and the settler-colonial petrostate. It creates openings for solidarity between oil workers and other Canadians in the differences, desires, fears, and hypocrisies that make all of our petromodern identifications also disidentifications. I close here with a call for continued scholarly work on Canadian petropoetics, and for solidarity with workers' organizations such as Iron & Earth that advocate for a just energy transition that is good for workers and Indigenous peoples.[10]

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author wishes to thank the anonymous peer reviewers and *Canadian Literature* editors Christine Kim and Brendan McCormack for their incredibly insightful and helpful feedback on this article.

NOTES

1 Sourayan Mookerjea describes Canada as a petrostate, which he defines as "a polity that is subordinated and restructured according to the needs of either the Big Oil multinationals or the global political economy of oil or both" (331).

2 Recent poetry collections written by oil workers include Dymphny Dronyk's *Contrary Infatuations* (2007), Naden Parkin's *A Relationship with Truth* (2014), Lesley Battler's *Endangered Hydrocarbons* (2015), and Lindsay Bird's *Boom Time* (2019). For a timeline and analysis of oil-worker poetry in Canada, see Unrau.

3 See Wenzel, "Afterword: Improvement and Overburden."

4 Italics in quotations throughout this article retain the original emphasis of their source.

5 For citations of all reviews, see Unrau, p. 95.

6 Lynn Keller cites Jonathan Bate's *The Song of the Earth* (2000) as the first use of the term *ecopoetics* (10). Bate describes ecopoems as "imaginary parks in which we may breathe an air that is not toxic and accommodate ourselves to a mode of dwelling that is not alienated" (64), but Jonathan Skinner defines ecopoetics as being concerned with practices of dwelling not in an idealized natural world but rather in the compromised ecologies that humans actually affect and inhabit. *Rig Talk* is ecopoetics in this expanded sense;

it anticipates what Keller calls "poetry of the self-conscious Anthropocene" (*Recomposing*).

7 This statement must also now be read in light of George Elliott Clarke's recent collaborations with and defense of Stephen Kummerfield [now known as Stephen Brown], a white poet who was convicted of manslaughter and served a short sentence for the 1995 murder of Pamela George, an Indigenous woman and poet. Clarke shows here that Henderson's privileging of class over race is not neutral; recent critics of Clarke, including Misty Longman (Saulteaux) of the ta-tawâw Student Centre at the University of Regina, have likewise argued that academic freedom should not be privileged over respect for missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls and their families (see Allen and Bridges).

8 Unknowingly, it seems, Dave references Philip Levine's poem "What Work Is" and its exploration of an epistemological break.

9 Oil work, as what Andreas Malm has called "*primitive accumulation of fossil capital*" (291), is predicated on the prior and ongoing accumulations of settler colonialism, racism, and patriarchy (see Coulthard; Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*; Federici).

10 See ironandearth.org.

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