Oil Ancestors: Relating to Petroleum as Kin

Fereshteh Toosi

The artwork described below was produced on the ancestral lands of the Miccosukee and Seminole people. This place, also known as South Florida, is home to many Indigenous people, as well as Black, Brown, and Caribbean people whose ancestors lived and worked on this land against their will, while enslaved, or under the threat of violence. The work also relies on the extractive and colonial infrastructure of digital computation, which uses electronics and servers, all of which are made possible by occupying places where other beings live, or once lived.

My creative research focuses on designing live experiences for small groups, immersive performances that consist of encounter, exchange, and sensory inquiry. Much of my artwork follows the historical precedents of instructional poetry, conceptual performance, and new music composition that rose to prominence with Fluxus and other related movements in the 1960s and 1970s. Fluxus artists often incorporated domestic objects and quotidian actions into their artwork and sought to challenge the traditional hierarchy of the art world by blurring the lines between artist and audience. They created works that were participatory, often involving the audience with interactive elements.

Writing about Suriname-born Dutch artist Stanley Brouwn's work for the *Prospect 1969* exhibition, performance scholar RoseLee Goldberg describes how this type of conceptual practice evolved from earlier art forms, such as landscape painting:

> […] those who followed the instructions would supposedly experience the city or countryside with an enhanced consciousness. It was after all with just such a heightened awareness that artists had painted canvases of their surroundings; rather than passively viewing a finished artwork, the ob-

> server was now persuaded to see the environment as though through the eyes of the artist.

My creative research is dedicated to cultivating artistic connections to place through a critical social practice, which connects this conceptual and performance lineage to other precedents set by representational landscape art and landscape architecture. This work is informed by and contributes to contemporary multidisciplinary fields such as landscape studies, social geography, and environmental humanities. While I make artworks and installations for galleries and print media, much of my practice involves researching, producing, and performing media and live art, often situated in public spaces and outdoors. Examples from my past projects include a walking performance about lithium, an overnight camp for broadcasting the dawn chorus of birds, and an experimental documentary featuring food heritage stories.

Oil Ancestors, the project I will elaborate on in this essay, is a multimodal body of artworks relating to petroleum. *Oil Ancestors* invites reflections on sentimental relations to oil and the ways in which humans comprehend and feel long time frames: the deep time of fossilized matter and the future of climate breakdown. It is also a project that asks how we could begin to relate to nonliving beings, like petroleum, as kin.

For example, in a piece called *Oil Ancestors: Into the Proofer,* audiences directly interact with petroleum objects by flashing UV light on them and observing their ensuing blueish glow. Displayed on plinths are a jar of Crudoleum®—a hair product composed of crude oil—as well as prints made with pharmaceutical petroleum jelly and a small cluster of quartz crystals with oil that is naturally trapped inside. By foregrounding these objects and creating a visual allure around them, I make explicit the ways in which oil is extracted and glamorized in the production of commodities.

In the *Oil Ancestors* initiative, attention is drawn to petroleum's absolute ubiquity. Humans depend on oil for transportation and mobility; it is found in most consumer goods, from food to clothing to health products. Its extraction has defined global geopolitics and is deeply linked to the violence of imperialism and political corruption. The *Oil Ancestors* project contributes to conversations addressing petroculture by not only highlighting the materiality of oil and its omnipresence, but by also heightening the audience's sensitivity to their relations with oil.

Another of the multifarious artistic projects that comprise the *Oil Ancestors* initiative is an augmented reality (AR) audio experience available to pedestri-

ans in the Mission neighborhood of San Francisco, California (fig. 1). Listeners use headphones and a mobile phone app to listen to a soundtrack which is triggered to play (through the use of GPS coordinates) when their body is in proximity to specific landmarks. In this sound artwork, entitled *Oil Ancestors: Growth*, the practice of creating immersive experiences for participants to engage with the environment shifts from the physical to the virtual or mediated. The project uses verbal directives to guide the audience to contemplate how we are, as political scientist Cara Daggett says, "unavoidably enmeshed in dependency."

Figure 1: The 23rd Street overpass above Highway 101 in San Francisco as captured by Google Street View in January 2021.

Screen photograph by Fereshteh Toosi.

The text passage that follows is an example of a moment from *Oil Ancestors: Growth*. It is an excerpt from the instructions that listeners hear when they are at the bridge where they arrive near the end of the experience:

> We are almost at the end of this journey, as our active transit path is intersected by a busy freeway dedicated to vehicular traffic. The ancestors of the Indigenous people who currently live and work in the Bay Area were quite mobile around the place we now know as San Francisco. To get around the bay, some Ohlone people used a plant named tule to make boats because the airy thin reeds are very buoyant. In 1775, a Spanish man wrote about

> how much better the tule boats floated compared to the wooden rowing boats that the early Spanish ships had on board.

After learning about this history, the narrator asks listeners to reflect on their own experiences:

> How do you usually get around the city?
> What are the sounds of the different types of transportation that you hear around you right now?
> In the air and on land?
> Take a moment to imagine that all the vehicles fueled by petroleum and fossil fuels were suddenly gone.
> What would the city sound like?

Oil Ancestors: Growth asks the audience to contrast their lives to those of previous generations and to consider the volume and presence of the sounds of automobiles and aircrafts as evidence of human dependence on fossil fuels. While we are dependent on oil, it is often taken for granted and rendered hidden—the pipeline being a prime figure in "making oil invisible, naturalizing its presence in our lives and hiding the environmental impacts of extraction from the eyes of concerned publics" (Wilson/Carlson/Szeman 8).

Art, then, can counter the invisibility of petroleum. Art can also encourage an attunement to feeling and sentiment for matter, which is often rendered invisible and unknowable through the obfuscation of industrialization.

Figure 2: A scene from Camp BreakDown Break Down *as photographed by the author.*

The impetus for the *Oil Ancestors* project began at an event called *Camp Breakdown Break Down*, a gathering of artists in northern Illinois that took place in 2017. It was designed as a place to research, debate, and practice post-oil aesthetics and culture.

The *Camp Breakdown Break Down* mission states:

> One of the biggest challenges to addressing climate breakdown is the fact that we exist primarily in terms of oil use and the relationships it structures, every moment of every day. Constantly relating to the world in this way cauterizes individual and collective petro-subjectivities, a numbing, highly industrialized sense of self and society that can seem impossible to exit. (Bloom/Sacramento)

The *Camp Breakdown Break Down* project uses the phrase "climate breakdown" as a more specific and active description of the crisis of climate change and global warming. The project also introduced me to the notion of "petro-subjectivity," which artist Brett Bloom wrote about in his 2015 book *Petro-subjectivity: De-Industrializing Our Sense of Self*. Illustrated by a visual diagram of the many uses of petroleum, petro-subjectivity is a term that illuminates how a contemporary sense of self cannot exist outside the logic and overwhelming presence of oil.

Embracing the premise that human subjectivity is entwined with oil, *Oil Ancestors* therefore asserts that oil is also an undeniable part of our cultural inheritance. Bloom and I share an interest in environmental action that is grounded in contemplative practice. Our work is based on the understanding that regenerative cultures are rooted in deep relationships beyond the human social sphere. Without regenerative relationships, culture begins to break down.

Eco-oriented contemplative practices are often comprised of somatic and affective activities in which the audience engages in sensory experiences and meditations. People are invited to slow down, reflect, and reconnect to the layers of human and other-than-human life in a landscape. Through creative guided reflections, people learn about the Indigenous history of the land, speculate about ecological futures, and confront climate anxiety, among other outcomes. Drawing attention to the ways in which human culture and geography are entangled shifts the audience's ability to notice, witness, and transform these intersections.

The participatory art practices represented at the core of *Oil Ancestors* and *Camp Breakdown Break Down* utilize mindfulness techniques which emerged from various spiritual traditions, such as Buddhism. I initially incorporated these techniques into my artwork as a result of my own meditation practice and my studies of plant medicine and nature and forest therapy, which focus on the health benefits of plants and nature connection. While I continue to be informed by the wellness movements that I mention above, my artwork distinguishes itself from healing modalities that sometimes serve to reinforce an extractive logic, which prioritizes nature only as far as it serves as a resource for human life.

I am also influenced by the metaphysical traditions of Persianate cultures and southwestern Asia, as well as my study of animism which began while living and working in Japan from 1998 to 2000. Animism explores the relationships between humans and other beings, often through ritual practices. Acknowledging plants, animals, rocks, metals, and bodies of water as persons is the basis of many Indigenous traditions. I prioritize Indigenous philosophy over seemingly similar thought systems such as object-oriented ontology or the legal movement called the "rights of nature" which questions the popular belief that nature is a resource for humans to own, use, and abuse.

The long-term process of consulting traditional ecological knowledges as sources of guidance for my creative research began with listening to the elders of the Onondaga Nation and the Partnership for Onondaga Creek in central New York, where I produced an eco-art project called *Up the Creek!* from 2007 to

2008. *Up the Creek!* examined the history of environmental racism in Syracuse, New York, just as the region was re-evaluating a second multi-million-dollar sewage treatment facility along Onondaga Creek. I name my influences as a form of citation and gratitude, especially because the history of Western and European art includes various artists who have wantonly appropriated Eastern philosophies and Indigenous culture. As a first-generation immigrant based in the United States, I am indebted to myriad sources: from Eastern folk practices to the Western avant-garde tradition of my American art education.

Most notably, American composer John Cage studied Zen Buddhism in the late 1940s and throughout the 1950s. Cage has had a profound influence on American contemporary art. Even though Cage's writings and body of work were a significant aspect of my early studies, I did not recognize and embrace the connection with Buddhism until later in my creative career. I consider the contemplative works of American composer Pauline Oliveros and Brazilian artist Lygia Clark to be more adjacent to my current practice. Oliveros is known for her sonic meditations called "Deep Listening," a concept she coined in the 1980s. Clark transitioned from an art practice to a therapeutic practice in the 1960s and 1970s. As art historian Adrian Anagnost writes of Clark's work: "Rather than contemplation of painting or sculpture, art became an intersubjective practice rooted in affective embodiment."

Though Oliveros died in 2016, her Deep Listening Institute has trained many artists and musicians in the practice of sonic meditation. Musicologist Kerry O'Brien describes Oliveros's work as a form of activism through listening and writes:

> Oliveros's aims were clear: these works were intended to be transformational, even therapeutic, enacting lasting changes on the body and mind. While she spent years immersed in introspective experimentation, Oliveros's "Sonic Meditations" shouldn't be mistaken for escapism or disengagement. The composer described listening as a necessary pause before thoughtful action: 'Listening is directing attention to what is heard, gathering meaning, interpreting and deciding on action […] Healing can occur […] when one's inner experience is made manifest and accepted by others.'

Figure 3: Forest immersion guided by Fereshteh Toosi at Pediaios Park in Nicosia, Cyprus for the Urban Emptiness Festival in 2017.

Photograph courtesy of Stefaan van Biesen.

I invite you to have a direct experience of this embodied practice. Please pause reading for a moment to listen to an audio recording. It is available on http://oilancestors.com/device, and a written transcript of the recording follows below.

The best way to experience this meditation is not to read it, but to listen and try it for yourself.

I wrote the meditation below for the *Oil Ancestors* project after experiencing many online webinars and video conference calls during the Covid-19 pandemic. The extreme carbon footprint of the media streaming daily on electronic devices is a result of an intimate reliance on fossilized matter.

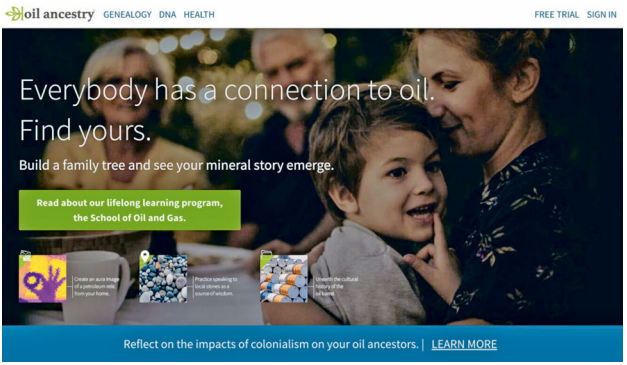
> As we begin, have your mobile phone or laptop directly within reach.
> I recommend sitting in a chair, in a comfortable position, possibly with your feet touching the ground.
> Let's go ahead and do that now.
> Take a moment to gently settle into your seat. Feel the weight of your body held by gravity.

I invite you to engage with the physical qualities of your device with all your senses.
So if you feel comfortable, you may try to do this meditation with your eyes closed.
Touch your palm to the screen. How does it feel?
Now touch the screen with the back of your hand.
Next, extend your touch to the machine's backside, its underside, and its edges.
What textures are you feeling?
What is the temperature of the different parts of this machine?
Try leaning into your device.
Bring your nose close to your device and consider how it smells.
Think about all the matter that came from underground, now contained inside this machine.
Think of the substances that were mined from the earth.
Imagine all the people who assembled this multifaceted compound mineral stone.
Which of the elements can you name, and which are unknown to you?
Consider all the places they'd been before they came into your hands.
Where will they go when this machine's life ends?
Where will they be, when you're no longer here?

Figure 4: What did you notice while doing the practice?

Photograph courtesy of Stefaan van Biesen.

Figure 5: Fereshteh Toosi's OilAncestry.com website.



Screen photograph by Fereshteh Toosi.

A spoof of the popular genealogy site Ancestry.com, https://www.oil-ancestry.com/ (fig. 5) is one of the first experiments I made for *Oil Ancestors*.

Oil Ancestors is informed by my experience as an immigrant and artist of the Iranian and Azeri diaspora. Petroleum imperialism has defined the contemporary relationship between my ancestral homeland and the U.S. The legacy of armed conflict and resource extraction also impacts many Caribbean, South and Central American countries that are represented among the immigrant diaspora in Miami, where I live now. In his seminal 1992 book review entitled "Petrofiction," Amitav Ghosh refers to this expansive geographical connection as the "Oil Encounter." In this essay, Ghosh characterizes the history of oil as an embarrassment and reflects on the dramatic possibilities yet to be addressed in literature about the oil industry:

> […] the Westerner with his caravan-loads of machines and instruments thrusting himself unannounced upon small, isolated communities, deep within some of the most hostile environments on earth. And think of the postmodern present: city-states where virtually everyone is a "foreigner"; admixtures of peoples and cultures on a scale never before envisaged; vicious systems of helotry juxtaposed with unparalleled wealth; deserts transformed by technology and military devastation on an apocalyptic scale. (30)

Perhaps it is a similar discomfort that causes apathy or ignorance about the fact that oil money funded the vacation fantasies that brought railroads to South Florida. John D. Rockefeller became one of the wealthiest people in U.S. American history after founding Standard Oil, which was once the largest petroleum company in the world. Rockefeller's business partner, Henry Flagler, used his oil company earnings to build railroads and hotels throughout Florida. One of these hotels is now a part of Flagler College campus in Florida. During Henry Flagler's development of Florida, swampland and limestone were transformed under the cruel labor systems of convict leasing and debt bondage.

Elia Vargas is an artist and scholar whose recent work centers on the history of early American petroleum industry and refiguring oil as media. Vargas and I share an interest in destabilizing an anthropocentric understanding of oil. Vargas writes:

> As new energy regimes and new critiques of the Anthropocene emerge, it is crucial to continue examining how the ontological status of oil as a fossil fuel persists. Why is it taken for granted that oil—an earth material that exceeds anthropocentric categorization—is represented exclusively as fuel? (n.p.)

Oil Ancestors considers ancient fossils, rocks, and minerals as part of our collective heritage. Although the project is not able to avoid the industrial function of oil, it asks the audience to consider extracted matter, sentimentally, apart from our human use of it as fuel and energy. Rather than theorizing about this categorization, the *Oil Ancestors* project poses the following questions:

> How can we practice relating to petroleum as kin?
> Is oil merely a fuel source and material for humans, or could it have other reasons to exist?
> Who is oil and what does oil desire from us?

The questions listed above serve as the overarching framework for *Oil Ancestors*. But to make these questions accessible to broad audience engagement, it helps to begin with familiar sentiments such as hope, fear, dread, and rage as they constitute different aspects of eco-anxiety. With the goal of encouraging a positively sentimental attitude to ecological history and culture, *Oil Ancestors: Metaphysical Hotline*, is a conversational performance for an audience of one (fig. 6). During the phone performance, the audience is placed in the role of an ancestor to a character from the future. Each call is uniquely shaped by their responses to concerns and questions about the future.

The phone call is approximately 30 to 40 minutes in duration, and it is based on a protocol called "The Work that Reconnects" by Joanna Macy. Macy is a popular author and Buddhist scholar whose research is informed by systems theory and deep ecology. "The Work that Reconnects" is a methodology she developed in response to her experiences as an environmental activist. Impacted by the anti-nuclear movement of the 1980s, Macy designed a series of group workshops to encourage hope as a process for finding, and offering, responses to global issues in times of crisis.

Figure 6: Promotional graphic for Fereshteh Toosi's Metaphysical Hotline, *an immersive telephone theater experience about environmental crisis and climate change.*

Image courtesy of Kelly Gallagher.

Below is the transcription of a scene from *Oil Ancestors: Metaphysical Hotline.* It was performed live and the participant's spontaneous responses were documented through an audio recording:

> *Stella, a young person from the far future*: There are just so many things about your time that are hard to believe. And so, I just thought it would be good to check in with somebody about them. Like, they tell us that in your time,

there are still people building houses on the ocean, in places like Miami and Virginia Beach and New York City, even as the sea level is rising. Of course, we know that history, but they say you know about it, too, just as the high-rise condos are being built. And they say that in your time, there's a small group of people who are richer than all the richest kings, while billions of other people don't have enough food, or houses, or clean water. And they tell us that in your time they keep approving new pipelines, even though they know it's bad for the water. And that plants and animals are going extinct because land is being cleared. And we know about that too. Because gone is gone. But they tell us that you know about all those things while they're happening. Is that true? And if it is true, what is it like for you to be living through this time?

Participant: Yes, it's true. And it's really sad. It feels like that we're alive, but also constantly mourning what we're losing now and what we know our lives are causing to be lost in the future. Yeah, I think it's really difficult, and it feels difficult for those of us who want to change things and to try to participate in ways that challenge and take down these structures. It feels really difficult to be able to do things like that. Because I think the people who are making these decisions and have all the wealth don't really think about future generations, or care about future generations.

Stella: That sounds really hard. But you sound like you care. So when did you first understand that life as you know it with a small group of rich people like Rockefeller and Flagler and all those people just making money off the land wasn't going to be sustainable for future generations? Like how did you realize that humans would have to live in a totally different way for life to continue?

Participant: Oh, gosh, I probably figure this out around when I was in college, and realizing how much waste I create, even though I feel like I am not doing the things that Rockefeller and developers do. But just realizing my own footprint and how that contributed and contributes to these problems, but also starting to understand histories of systemic oppression and how they continue. People like to think … we like to think that they've stopped, but that they're continuing on, and continuing to have these effects on all of us.

The final quote is a reflection shared by someone after they completed the experience:

> I loved the very first thing you said that, you know, every living thing, past and future, lives in our DNA. And as then you were sort of talking about the experience—This is this little comment about pandemic times, but like there was a part of me that's like, "wow, I'm going to be connected to the future." And it was a really—it was a sort of heavy emotional concept in parts. Because I don't feel connected to anybody right now. Right? I feel like totally isolated and desperate for community that I don't have right now. And it was very powerful to think about, like a familial connection to some future being.

In imagining themselves as ancestors in a post-oil society, participants enter a relationship with oil wherein they are encouraged to take responsibilities to make such a speculative future possible. Rather than staying in a position of climate devastation, individuals are asked to consider themselves within deep time—an extending stretch of time that can sustainably continue.

In response to the acceleration of ecological destruction and climate breakdown, there is an urgent need to shift away from short-term thinking and develop a greater capacity to understand longer perspectives on human existence.

Oil Ancestors aims to engender affective relations to geological history and the long-term consequences of geological extraction. Many Indigenous philosophies are already grounded in the long-time frames which *Oil Ancestors* evokes. The opening scene of *Oil Ancestors: Metaphysical Hotline* begins with a quote from the Iroquois Constitution, an Indigenous declaration of democratic principles that came long before the U.S. Constitution and Bill of Rights:

> Look and listen for the welfare of the whole people
> and have always in view not only the present
> but also the coming generations,
> even those whose faces are yet beneath the surface
> of the ground—the unborn of the future Nation. (Murphy)

Inspired by this worldview, *Oil Ancestors* is cultivating care and stewardship for future generations, greater emotional and sentimental connections to non-human matter, and reverence for the long-time frames that are necessary for substances like petroleum to form.

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