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Narratives of Extraction: Environmental Humanities, Oil and Mining, and the Politics of Sacrifice Zones

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the cultural, political, and ecological dimensions of resource extraction through the lens of environmental humanities, focusing on oil and mining industries and their relationship to environmental sacrifice zones. It explores how extraction is not merely an economic activity but a socio-ecological and cultural process shaped by narratives, infrastructures, technologies, and power relations. Drawing on concepts from political ecology, extractivism, environmental justice, and critical geography, the study analyzes the ways in which extraction narratives construct value while simultaneously producing environmental degradation, social inequalities, and spatially concentrated harms. Through discussions of oil histories, mining landscapes, material imaginaries, vocal ecologies, and environmental injustices, the paper highlights the experiences of communities affected by extraction and the contestations surrounding sovereignty, risk, and resistance. The interdisciplinary framework combines ethnography, narrative analysis, archival research, and Geographic Information Systems (GIS) to reveal how knowledge, power, and environmental impacts intersect across extractive frontiers. By examining case studies from diverse regional contexts, the paper demonstrates how extraction generates enduring social and ecological legacies that extend beyond the life cycle of commodities. Ultimately, it argues for ethically responsible approaches that prioritize environmental justice, community voices, historical accountability, and reconciliation in addressing the unequal burdens and benefits of extractive industries.

Keywords: Environmental Humanities, Extractivism, Sacrifice Zones, Environmental Justice and Political Ecology.

INTRODUCTION

Fossil fuel extraction often unfolds through a series of local disaggregations across diverse time, space, and technical-ecological contexts [1]. Ethnographic attention to these modes of extraction and their cultural representations in the petroleum and mining sectors reveals a range of extraction narratives that pinpoint how a material economy forms, how it justifies itself through images of value, and how its legacies unfold long after the commodity has moved on [2]. Examination of oil extraction discloses three distinctive extraction narratives, an oil-centric narrative that focuses on plants, pipes, and disposal; a machinery-centric narrative that foregrounds installations for drilling, pumping, and refining; and a technopolitical narrative that reveals the mobilization of assemblages of infrastructures and resources across time and space [3]. Cultural expressions and technical apparatuses articulate a derived material imaginary that cultivates a specific ecological relationship. Mapping this relation helps to assess the vulnerability of communities and environments to catastrophe, pollution, and climate change in precisely located sites under the extensive reach of a transnationally operating commodity sector [2]. A second case on mining traces how labor regimes and knowledge production fluctuate along a spectrum from artisanal and informal extraction through technically regulated, industrial-scale operations to closures and ghost towns [1]. From a socio-technical perspective on materiality, mining landscapes thereby transform under different economic conditions, carrying shifting symbolic weight, signifying alternate values, and yielding varied legacies

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that follow knowledge and technology across time [2]. A third thematic focus on discrete stories and geospatial narratives invites comparison of complementary, competing, and contrasting accounts to articulate contending logics of value and diagrams of harm across disparate communities facing the socio-environmental risks tied to resource extraction [2].

Conceptual Foundations: Environmental Humanities, Extraction, and Sacrifice Zones

Environmental humanities examine the interrelationships among cultural production, political economy, and material flows [3]. Political ecology investigates socio-environmental interactions at different scales and levels, together with their impacts on people, economies, cultures, and environment [2]. Extractivism describes the appropriation of nature's resources flora, fauna, fossil fuels, or minerals, contributing to human survival and development across scales and locations [3]. Different cultural narratives attribute ontological significance to extractions, designating the right to administer such processes and assigning values to remaining components. These narratives operate through tractor and cable to extract water and sand from quarries or through pipeline and railway to transport fossil fuels, eliciting distinct socio-environmental consequences [4]. The notion of sacrifice zones 1 areas experiencing disproportionate environmental burdens emerges accordingly, whether through positioning wild natural sites, indicating thresholds for changes, or discerning misalignments between adjacent lattices [5]. Cultural, economic, and material flows traverse extraction areas, engendering distinctive socio-environmental vulnerabilities and challenges [6]. Consequently, closely linked political and cultural boundaries foster systemic disconnections in water governance. Perceptual and narrative consideration of absence and decay challenges conventional attention to emergence and feedback. The cultural politics of extraction complement and deepen material examinations [7]. Following the articulation of those insights, ongoing ruptures exploring the relations between extraction and culture (media, practice, or cognition) rather than material flows warrant pursuit [8]. Tracing the characteristics of such historical narratives enables examination of broader resonate concerns within the cultural politics of extraction discourse. Specific intervention sites, including historiographies of oil and mining, thereby provide focal resources [9].

Histories of Oil: Narratives, Technics, and Ecologies of Extraction

The concept of "oil" encompasses more than just a physical substance; it has become entwined with a series of technics, sociotechnical arrangements, infrastructures, narratives, and ecologies [1]. As an object, oil exists only in specific formats and arrangements, while notions of oil remain present even in the absence of oil itself. The histories of oil also serve as an entry point into the exploration of how extraction interacts with other processes [2]. Narratives that detail the origin, travel, storage, and disposal of oil alongside the infrastructural and technical ecologies comprising the associated arrangements facilitate an analysis of extraction in conjunction with other technical, spatial, ecological, and temporal dimensions [3]. These narratives, considered "longue durée" (Braudel, 1990) accounts of oil's trajectories, comprise part of the broader approach termed hydropolitics (V. A. V. A. D. D. A. D. E. I. P. A. L. R., 2014), an essential axis of research in the environmental humanities and political economy that develops alongside technoscience and extractivism [4]. The exploration of contemporary oil histories draws on a range of archival sources such as government documents, corporate reports, promotional materials, and scientific articles; diverse media, including images, literature, documentaries, and podcasts; and notes based on field visits to sites associated with Alberta's oil infrastructure and trajectory [5]. The governing preoccupation is with both oil and extraction, yet the underlying research question focuses on understanding the implications of oil, extraction, and their interrelation. Various archival, media, and observational practices are used to survey the origins, infrastructures, dispersal, environmental implications, and life stories of different oils, including crude and synthetic varieties [6]. Each consideration emphasises the social, political, economic, and cultural dimensions of the specified object, reinforcing the premise that oil and extraction constitute socio-ecological-technical formations rather than solely exposed materials [2].

Mining and the Material Imagination: Labor, Landscapes, and Legacies

Mining and the Material Imagination explores labor, landscapes, and legacies related to resource extraction in varied settings across the globe [5]. The examination of the interplay between extraction and imagination begins with a consideration of appropriated media along the so-called "Colombian Coffee Axis," where globalized market dynamics intersected with local conflict and violence during the country's late-20th-century armed struggles [6]. Knowledge circulates as well through contemporary ethnographic inquiries into the precarious lives of transnational oil-palm workers in Indonesia and migrant labor regimes in the Canadian oil sands [7]. The difficulty of narrating long, dangerous journeys to reach destinations known primarily for their violence is addressed through a study of transnational biographies and materialities that assemble a more responsive geography. Resource riches also inform the movement of other people. Fieldwork tracing regional development and long-distance commuting in Western Australia's Goldfields documents claims to an "uneasy" wealth that escapes the usual busy contingencies of mining fissures that may speak to the core of extraction itself. Resource

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extraction indeed shapes both landscapes and imaginations [8]. The operations of site, the trafficked volume of commodities, and ancillary materials such as water, infrastructure, fuel, or sound are interrogated through coal mining and biodiesel proliferation in Colombia and soybean cultivation in Brazil [9]. The materiality of mining's legacy, economic linkages that stretch far enough to warrant the label of "post-extraction," and the excluded matters of closure, rehabilitation, and the suspension of flows remain further topics that complicate and enrich the geographical imagination of the field [7]. The question of what material imaginaries acquire when they follow extraction coverage through industry-saturated reportage, archival study, and diverted routes constitutes another essential dimension [9]. Media canvassed ranges from scholarly publications to trade magazines, health and safety directives, corporate and governmental documents, civil-society communications, and art installations. The temporal depths approach a longue durée of multiple millennia [10]. Towards these scales voices begin to emerge, reiterating the fleeting recognition that what ought to happen before extraction proceeds, however much that varies from place to place remains an unanswered query [3].

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Vocal Ecologies: Communities, Narratives, and Contestations

Vocal ecologies refer to the practices, stories, and contests concerning the voiced and unvoiced. The voiced can be spoken words but also the colours, textures, and brightness of one's environment [4]. The unvoiced encompasses the inaccessible, the repressed, and the unrecognised. In the context of extractivist regimes, vocal ecologies refer to the continued articulation of community voices, demands for Indigenous sovereignty, and community-driven action against industry and state [5]. These vocal ecologies are enriched by stories, requests, and contests extracted from the field, where competing narratives of value, harm, and resistance are shared [6]. Narrative, in turn, refers to verbal and visual stories shared in-person and through social media, documentation and legal submissions exploring the spoken and unspoken dimensions characterising socio-environmental interactions articulated in the absence of voice, text, and image [7]. There exist several analogue and digital spaces where these community records and stories circulate, shaping cultural production, counter-narrative, and civil society actions across regions [8]. Instagram analysis illustrates the temporalities governing these records and their interaction with other media [9]. Underlying a contrasting local tempo is a transitory and contemporary tempo linked to larger sociotechnical systems, the anthropocene, climate, and global extractivism [4, 1].

Fractures of Justice: Environmental Injustice, Risk, and Sovereignities

The distribution of risks and exposure to hazards varies systematically across social categories, often resulting in environmental racism [1]. Regulatory frameworks sustain distributional inequalities, creating environmental sacrifice zones associated with fossil-fuel extractivism [5]. Claims to territorial sovereignty, whether asserted by Indigenous communities or industry, further influence the geographies of energy extraction and associated dangers [2]. Environmental-justice frameworks inspire a range of actions addressing industrial risks: the cessation of extraction, state-controlled management, monitoring, or compensation [3]. Governing institutions, local, regional, or national often fail to account for and rectify socio-material disparities. Even post-extraction restoration falls short of achieving justice [4, 5]. Territorial claims related to extraction mobilize distinctive forms of sovereignty claims that other groups, notably Indigenous Peoples, are also asserting [6].

Methods and Interdisciplinarity: Ethnography, Narrative Analysis, and Critical GIS

The methodological hybridity and epistemological dilemmas of inter- and transdisciplinary research has prompted scholars to adopt a variety of data-collection techniques to study diverse forms of extractions, both during the fieldwork phase and beyond [7]. Fieldnotes, archival documents, statistics, maps, photographs, aerial and satellite images, art, maps, and media narratives continue to be used to interrogate the relations between specific forms of extraction, larger configurations of capital, and policies revealing how socio-material arrangements associated with resource extraction reproduce past inequalities [8]. Such connections have been explored by examining a broad range of cultural products and discursive registers in addition to scholarly writing, including ethnographic interviews, literary texts, archival sources, community-based participatory videos, and Geographic Information Systems (GIS) [9]. To question how resources become values and sketch broader fiscal regimes, the political ecologies of oil and mining have been articulated through narrative analysis, the analysis of the materialities and technics of extraction, and critical GIS [10]. The opening fieldwork has provided an opportunity to explore how environmental and mining actors inscribe different types of knowledge within oil and sulphur geographies and how such knowledges circulate between popular, expert, governmental, and informal arenas with the aim of mapping social forces and historical trajectories shaping conditions of extraction and conceptions of socio-environmental justice [6, 7].

Case Studies: Regions, Corporations, and Policy Implications

Extraction practices are integral to the political, social, and economic fabric of some nations and regions, and significant corporate, governmental, and popular investments are made in various extractive projects [8]. Given the wide-ranging multidimensional consequences of extraction, the ways in which the topic is framed also assume

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importance, whether in the context of environmental, social, justice, or sustainability as notions of risk, territoriality, critique, or rights [9]. The extraction of oil and mineral resources directly and indirectly sustains population groups in many places and continues to motivate investment and activity throughout the extractive sector, mining, development, and supply chains [10]. Regional socioecological systems, including water, soil, flora and fauna, and the climate, intersect meaningfully with economic and health questions associated with many extraction activities. Locating oneself within these relations opens up entry points into discussions of extractive projects worldwide [11]. Case studies of Guatemala's mining policy 8 and Canada's oil and gas sector 9 demonstrate ways of grasping political economies of extraction and of tracing consequences of extraction into many other domains. Such focused interventions invite attention to structures and practices through which extraction is articulated and contested and to questions related to fostered imaginations that shape and respond to these dynamics [12, 13].

Ethics, Memory, and Reconciliation in Extraction Frontiers

When considering extractive frontiers, one encounters memory politics, ethical responsibilities, and reconciliation models. Accounts of extraction and its impacts are mediated by the narrative frameworks at play [10]. Engaging with the experience of extraction opens avenues for considering the responsibilities borne towards both the past shapes of these narratives and their durable consequences, as well as models of response [11]. Within this nexus, three forms of engagement surface: memorialization of sacrifice zones accompanied by identifying selective or partial remembering of associated histories; reparations or compensation linked to the material consequences of extraction and complicity in substantial harm; and commitments to alternative futures that enact responsibility towards and in light of these pasts [12]. The urgent need for responsible engagements across extractive frontiers is underscored by the multiple, overlapping, and often conflicting accounts shaping public conversations and policy directions [11]. The positions entailed in these accounts include those of extraction-facing communities in the context of corporate activity, broader civil society, state actors, international agencies, and colonialism-decolonialism struggles. Making progress toward ethically responsible positions involves actively attending to the emerging accounts of extraction's unevenly distributed benefits and detriments across regions and actors, including water usage and contamination; bulk commodity materialities such as mine tailings and waste; fossil fuel energy sources; and the commitments underpinning extraction exercises [13]. In parallel, examination of structural conditions and forces that shape account selection, prioritization, and overarching framings facilitates identification of opportunities to extend, amplify, or support voices, amplifying the chances of responsible approaches taking a more widely recognized form [12, 13].

CONCLUSION

Resource extraction remains one of the defining forces shaping contemporary socio-economic development, environmental transformation, and political contestation. As demonstrated throughout this study, oil and mining activities extend far beyond the mere removal of natural resources; they are embedded within complex networks of infrastructures, cultural narratives, power relations, and ecological consequences. Environmental humanities provide a critical framework for understanding these interconnected dimensions by revealing how extraction is simultaneously material, political, cultural, and ethical. The concept of sacrifice zones highlights the uneven distribution of environmental burdens, where vulnerable communities disproportionately experience pollution, displacement, health risks, and ecological degradation. These injustices are often reinforced by regulatory systems, corporate interests, and historical inequalities that marginalize local and Indigenous voices. At the same time, vocal ecologies and community narratives demonstrate the resilience of affected populations and their efforts to challenge dominant extractive logics through resistance, advocacy, and alternative visions of development. The interdisciplinary approaches discussed in this paper, including ethnography, narrative analysis, archival research, and critical GIS offer valuable tools for tracing the social and environmental consequences of extraction across time and space. They reveal how resource extraction leaves enduring legacies that persist long after economic activities cease, shaping landscapes, memories, identities, and possibilities for future development. Moving forward, meaningful responses to extraction-related challenges must prioritize environmental justice, accountability, and reconciliation. This requires acknowledging historical harms, amplifying marginalized voices, addressing unequal distributions of risk and benefit, and fostering sustainable alternatives that balance economic needs with ecological integrity. By integrating ethical responsibility with critical analysis, societies can better confront the complex realities of extractive frontiers and work toward more equitable and sustainable futures.

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