



# Fuel and Feminism: Oil, Women, and the Urbanization of Nature in *State of Happiness*

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## Abstract

The first season of the television series *State of Happiness* (2018) depicts the advent of the Norwegian petroleum industry between 1969 and 1972. To contextualize the chain of events that preceded and followed the discovery of oil in the North Sea, but also for dramatic purposes, the TV series foregrounds the lives of two young women, which imbues the series' narrative of growth with feminist tropes. Enquiring into the character arcs of the gendered figures in the series' historicization of oil, this article problematizes how *State of Happiness* alludes to the emancipation of Norwegian women to legitimize the urbanization of the North Sea and local farmlands for a contemporary audience in the heyday of energy transitions.

## Keywords

Oil, women, urbanization, feminism, Rogaland, Stavanger, Lykkeland, petro-masculinity

## Introduction: Remembering the sea change

Ask the viewers what the first season of *State of Happiness* (original title: *Lykkeland*) is all about, and they will likely say «it's about the history of Norway's oil industry.» They will probably also mention that it is a good television series. Aired on Norway's national television channel NRK1 in late-2018, the first season consisted of eight episodes and soon garnered a significant following in Norway and abroad. Winning five national Golden Screen awards (including best TV drama) and two awards (music and screenplay) at Cannes International Series Festival marked the first season as a media success and qualified the production of a second season, which was released simultaneously to the writing of this paper in January 2022.<sup>1</sup> *State of Happiness* is about oil and more precisely about the discovery of oil in the North Sea. But the series is equally dedicated to displaying the transformation of three families, particularly two young women called Toril Torstensen and Anna Hellevik (played by Malene Wadel and Anne Regine Ellingsæter) who live in and around the city of Stavanger between 1969 and 1972. My reading highlights how the portrayal of these characters, borrowing from the words of Nancy Couling, displays «an overwhelming ecology of oil penetrating all levels of Norwegian society» (2021:121) and invites the audience to see oil as «an agent of chemical *and* social metamorphosis» (Buell 2012:290, emphasis in original).

Following on from this, I suggest that *State of Happiness* is an example of environmental storytelling, that is, a discursive practice of ecological reorientation in the light of a given environment's shifting power dynamics. Here, the fate of the two young women in the series can be considered elementary for a study of how oil has changed Rogaland's farming and maritime cultures and, consequently, people's relationship to land and sea as components of coastal Norway's environment.

The series has surfaced in a time when calls for a green transition to a post-oil future, in accordance with the objectives of the Paris Agreement and the European Green New Deal, has picked up momentum in Norwegian politics. How can *State of Happiness* be read in the context of the contemporary environmental debates regarding energy transitions? Several analyses, see for example Nils Asle Bergsgard and Anders Vassenden (2015), have surveyed how the petroleum industry transformed the economic setting and cultural climate of Rogaland as well as the whole country of Norway. The visual historiography of *State of Happiness* depicts the process of this transformation with rhetorical strategies that revisit the ambivalence of Norwegian national identity and its international image. Despite Norway's promotion of a green profile, the Norwegian oil industry's incremental expansion continues, and its outspoken advocates still use various rhetorical strategies to ensure legitimacy for future drillings. As Julia Leyda indicates regarding Norwegian petro-guilt:

It is impossible to view *State of Happiness* without sensing the irony that complicates its presentism; viewers today immediately recognize the significance of its petro-narrative in light of contemporary national and global struggles over ecological ethics. By putting audiences in the shoes of ordinary Norwegians at the time who saw only the gains to come, who did not yet realize the negative consequences of oil extraction, the narrative straddles the divide that separates them from today's advantage of hindsight and allows viewers to indulge in a vicarious innocence now foreclosed (forthcoming).

Here, one can contend that Norway's crusade for a green transition is today as much bound up with telling stories about alternative futures as it is about renegotiating a problematic past (i.e., becoming an oil-producing welfare state), which has led the state of Norway into irrefutable complicity with global warming and the sixth mass extinction.

As much as *State of Happiness* allows the audience to think with oil, it does little to think without it. And perhaps this is by no means its purpose. In this article, I want to explore how the series frames the viewer's complicity with oil (and with the changing nature of land and sea) through highlighting the oil industry's contribution to the urbanization of Norwegian women. Reading *State of Happiness* as an environmental story, I argue that the series exposes how the production of cities (here Stavanger) and regional development stipulates the emergence of new natures for both human and non-human actors. The emergence, or transformation, that this article teases out can be seen as what Maria Kaika and Erik Swynedouw have called the «urbanization of nature» which is «the process through which all manner of natures are socially mobilized, economically incorporated (commodified), and physically metabolized/transformed in order to support the urbanization process» (2014:2). To better understand the environmental implications of this process on the nonhuman landscape, I turn my attention to what I read as a transformation of human characters that parallels the social, cultural, and economic landscapes brought forth by the oil industry in the series.

Tracing the flow of oil and grasping its implications seems like an impossible task once we consider its planetary (even extra-planetary) movement and plural manifestation, in the form of an array of petrochemical products. Nevertheless, Carola Hein reminds us of the

significance of local contexts for understanding the hybrid nature of oil and its myriad cultural manifestations as petroleumscales:

These spaces of oil differ from each other according to geographic, political, economic, social, and cultural local context, while still being intimately connected. Exploring the particularities in their local detail is more than a single person can research (2021:vii).

I bring attention to the local petroleumscale that *State of Happiness* re-animates and show how it is saturated with gender dynamics, in particular, how the series renegotiates the past through feminist tropes that glorify the urbanizing effect of the petroleum industry. The series presents a petroleumscale in which the figure of the young woman is employed to stabilize the ambivalent and disconcerting agency of oil in the Norwegian cultural imaginary. I am concerned with reviving those aspects of local ecology that has to be sacrificed in favor of the series' feminist narrativization.

By inquiring into how the urbanization of nature is mirrored by the shifting positions of Toril and Anna, I want to give credit to the North Sea and the local farmlands as subaltern actors, whose character arcs (their emerging «new nature») is at the heart of Stavanger's metamorphosis during the 1970s from a fisherman-peasant city to a secular-leaning oil capital. Interrogating the depiction of young women enables me to conceptualize how the series assembles a frame of reading through their personification and urban gestures that *naturalizes* the oil industry as it simultaneously *urbanizes* farmland and the sea.

### **The state of happy men?**

The center stage that *State of Happiness* gives to women also calls attention to underlying worldviews in the narrativization of the petroleum industry that Cara Daggett associates with the term «petro-masculinity» (2018). Linking misogyny to climate change denial, Daggett indicates how «fossil fuels also contribute to making identities» (2018:29) and provides examples of how oil consumption becomes a mode of expression that desires to protect and boost hegemonic masculine identities, especially in situations where said identity is destabilized and exposed to scrutiny. In the article, Daggett responds to feminist philosopher Kate Manne's call for moving the focus «from decoding the misogynist's worldviews to detailing the suffering of its targets» (2018:43) and effectively puts this reconceptualization of misogyny into conversation with ecofeminism to «analyse all the other modes of violence committed in the name of policing the norms of white Western patriarchy,» including the «violence against the planet and its oceans, creatures, waterways, and mountains» (2018:43). With this in view, the emergence of women as labor force in *State of Happiness* can be interpreted as an insurance for white patriarchal rule and the hegemonic masculine identity that owes much of its rampant power to the burning of fossil fuels and the reduction of human and non-human bodies to objects of consumption.

My reading wants to lay bare the petro-masculinity that permeates the series' feminist narrativization by tracing its derogatory symptoms on the bodies of women and the material and semiotic texture of farmland and sea. Furthermore, this analysis alerts me to my own position. I write with a male body, and I associate with the narrative of *State of Happiness* through my own life experience growing up in the petroleumscale of Tehran in all its tense embeddedness in the geopolitics of oil. I moved to Norway from Iran to study post-oil urban imaginaries and environmental storytelling. Had I moved to the *State of Happiness* from a less happy state? My aerial relocation from one petro-culture to

another has allowed me to assume critical distance by the virtue of estrangement, and it has exposed me to the tacit reverberations of masculinity and eurocentrism in the storying of oil.

By pointing to the masculine reverberations of this extractivist enterprise, I do not aim to reduce the ecological crisis to an essentialized gender category, but my perspective teases out both the fast and slow violences that oil continues to engender in the name of growth, progress, and even happiness. As described by Andrew Nikiforuk (2012), oil proportionally replaced human labor with the production power of mechanical slaves in the 20<sup>th</sup> century to the effect of multiplying the exploitation of disenfranchised bodies and popularizing mastery and consumerism. This consumerist productivity and the «atrophy of the imagination that blockades transformative action» (Wilson 2018:377) can only be effectively transformed by alluding to the subdued agencies of the human and non-human bodies that are continuously instrumentalized and marginalized in favor of patriarchal rule. In this light, thinking with Sheena Wilson on the intersection of oil, women, and neocolonialism helps us to trace petro-masculine desire by considering how the feminist subtext in *State of Happiness* works to:

...justify our current oil consuming lifestyles as an issue of women's rights through basic rhetorical strategies that reinforce women's relationship to petroleum products in consumer terms and that recuperate the female body as a canvas on which to spectacularize and perform politics (2014:258).

In my reading of *State of Happiness*, I explain how Anna and Toril are deployed as metaphors for the new natures of sea and land and as a canvas on which a specific rendition of happiness is spectacularized. Nevertheless, the gendered characters may also be read as destabilizing the representational regime that masks and perpetuates petro-masculinity and the environmental harms of the capitalist growth ideology that equates happiness with affluence.

### **The illegitimate child of the North Sea**

In episode 1, entitled *Treasure Hunt*, we learn that the 17-year-old, unmarried Toril Torsensen is pregnant. The father of the child, Frank, is a US American Shell executive who has decided to leave Norway since the hope of finding oil in the North Sea is dwindling. Her secret pregnancy is a disaster for her and her family as they are members of a local Christian community that shuns premarital sex and does not welcome children born outside marriage. To save face, Toril's parents try to force her into marrying a local fisherman from their Christian community who has agreed to act as the father for the child. During the first season, this plotline of attempting to *legitimize an illegitimate child* frames the story of the Norwegian oil industry and its incorporation into the Norwegian cultural imaginary. Toril's pregnant and birthing body is juxtaposed with the North Sea, which is believed by Phillips Petroleum, a US American oil company, to be pregnant with oil.

As the series begins, Toril and the North Sea are portrayed as simultaneously going into labor, and the child that is to come is controversially fatherless. This subtle, yet significant, juxtaposition that molds the dramatic structure of *State of Happiness* foregrounds a problematic disposition surrounding oil extraction, but also the female body. According to Stacy Alaimo:

The pregnant female body is an ideologically hazardous terrain due to the centuries-old articulations of woman/body/nature as passive matter, a resource for active human minds and cultures. An entire constellation of pernicious practices and assumptions emanate from the melding of woman as nature, nature as woman (2010:104).

Toril's vulnerability becomes a dramatic device that risks locking her inside an essentialist image of a young, helpless woman in search of a father figure who can save her from the consequences of an emotional and spontaneous decision. However, as the series progresses, we witness how she challenges the patriarchal structures that deny or usurp her agency and desire. Toril resists slipping into the traditional category of a docile and passive woman and mediates the series' feminist tropes as the dramatization of her struggle prompts the viewers to react to the economic anxiety of traditional stay-at-home motherhood. Her pregnancy and the birth of her child outside marriage happens within a material-semiotic entanglement of human and non-human agents that are at work to transform Rogaland's internal and external affairs. Here, I argue that the urbanization of Toril anticipates a new nature of the North Sea. The legitimization of her child goes hand in hand with a redefinition of the mother's role in society. As Sheila Jasanoff indicates, «the ways in which we know and represent the world (both nature and society) are inseparable from the ways in which we choose to live in it» (2004:2). If the series can be said to stabilize oil in the cultural imaginary of the viewers, it does so by dramatizing the shift in the epistemological approach to the North Sea in allusion to the life of a *happy* mother.

In episode 1, a pregnant Toril runs out of the church after her parents reveal their plan for her arranged marriage. The scene is indicative of Toril's desperation to elude the traditions that illegitimize her future child and patronize the vitality of her desire for wage labor. The escape immediately comes with a heavy price. Toril's father, who is less persistent than her mother in forcing Toril to marry someone she does not love, runs after her only to end up in a fatal car accident. Toril is inflicted by a devastating guilt for her father's death and later punishes herself by submitting to marry the fisherman.

The drunk driver behind the wheel is Christian Nyman, the son of Fredrik Nyman, the secular owner of a fish-canning factory where Toril works. Christian is one of the key characters, a scuba diver whose talent proves to be influential in the discovery of oil at the bottom of the North Sea. At the scene of the accident, Christian lies about being sober. The death, or unintentional killing, of Toril's father construes the demise of local cultures and a depreciation of intergenerational relations as *accidental* and by so doing subtly cancels out local tradition in a manner reminiscent of Joseph Schumpeter's concept of «creative destruction», that is, the driving force that «continuously revolutionizes the economic structure from within, incessantly destroying the old one, incessantly creating a new one» ([1942] 1994:83).

Towards the end of the first episode, when Toril reluctantly marries the fisherman because of the guilt she feels for her father's death, the camera tilts up to show a passing helicopter carrying Christian towards Ekofisk, the platform whose name will soon go down in history after the discovery of oil. The helicopter's top-down and indifferent position toward the church building and the sea puts Christian in an unparalleled position of authority that promises the mastery of technological progress conjoined with hedonistic secularism (which Christian personifies in sheer contradiction with his name) over religious frugality. This reflects the doctrine of the enlightenment wherein «[p]rogress in science and technology was the new creed, a statement of hope, the new socio-political gospel» (Huesemann and Hue-

semann 2011:150). As such, the destruction of the old in the face of the new is presented as a non-negotiable matter.

Despite her inability to forgive herself for the death of her father and knowing the stakes of mothering a child conceived outside marriage, Toril finally chooses to leave the fisherman after the birth of her child, whom she names Marius. This causes her to become condemned by her mother and to be expelled from the safety net of the local religious community. It is worth remarking how the figure of Toril is woven into a fierce confrontation between the new and the old, with implications for the conceptualization of the North Sea and the analogy of the unborn Marius and the soon-to-be-discovered oil reserves. From this view, *State of Happiness* effectively casts Toril to perform creative destruction (Schumpeter, [1942] 1994) as she embodies the divorce of the North Sea from the domain of the traditional maritime culture. I explain in the next section how this is complemented by Toril's symbolic «forgiveness» of the destructive drive of techno-laden petro-masculinity.

### The figure of the forgiving mother

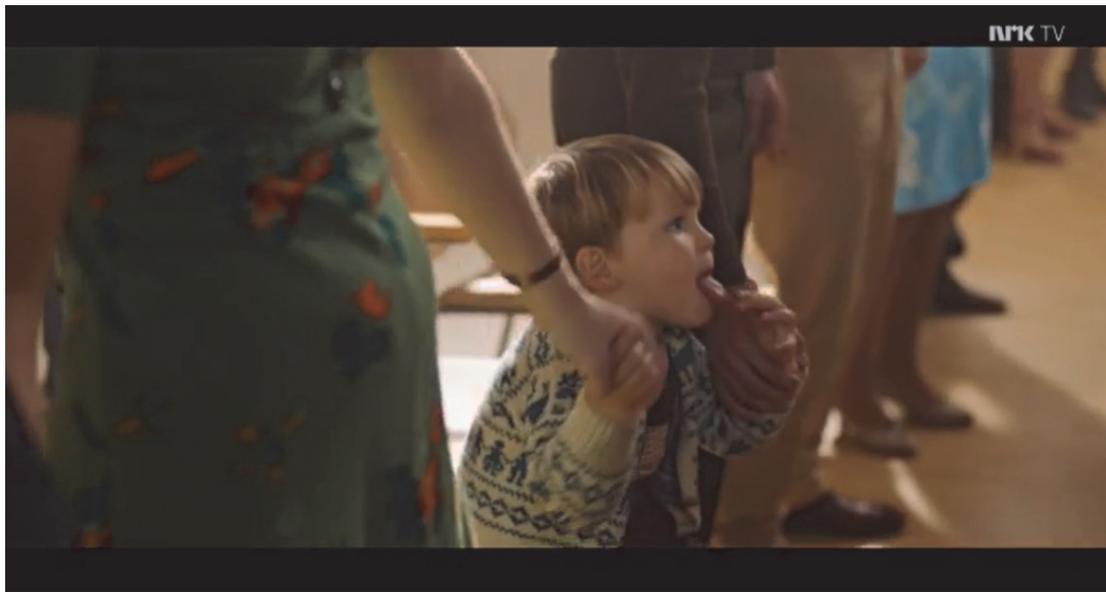
The coming-of-age of Toril and her embodiment of an urbanized motherhood rests upon the expansion of the welfare state. This is made evident in her ability to collectivize the practice of childcare rather than depending on biological or religious father figures who reinforce the gendered roles and private territories traditionally assigned to birth-giving bodies. In the same vein, the oil industry reconceptualizes the fecundity of the sea so that the new constellation of oil agencies can adopt petroleum as a legitimate member of the local ecosystem.

From the third episode onwards, Christian, who secretly feels guilty about the car accident, starts caring for Toril and Marius by providing them with a home and a social support network that enables Toril to remain in the work force. In the final episode of season 1, Christian surprisedly learns how his guilt-driven care has made Toril fall in love with him. Through this love, Toril performs a forgiveness that mobilizes the religious sentiment ringing through the series, as Toril is repeatedly depicted in prayer, asking God for forgiveness. In episode 7, this sentiment of forgiveness most interestingly aligns with the series' affirmation of creative destruction and petro-masculinity when Toril tells Christian that she eventually feels forgiven for having a child out of wedlock, because she says: «I made the best out of the situation I was in» (35:51).<sup>2</sup> However, she feels she can never be forgiven for her father's death. This triggers the guilt in Christian, who abruptly confesses to his drunkenness when running over Toril's father. His disclosure puts Toril in a predicament since her ability to do her best in creating a life for herself as a homeless single mother rests upon the help of someone whom she now knows is responsible for her father's death. The series script makes this all the more ironic by having Toril name her son after her father, as if a new Marius takes the place of an old one, consequently turning Christian into the caregiver of a child named after the person he has killed out of carelessness.

Toril's love for Christian seals the story of forgiveness in the final episode of the first season. Christian's profession as a scuba diver, and the film's depiction of his instrumental role in Ekofisk's historical breakthrough, paints him with privilege and exceptionalism, and the representation of him as an agent of destruction is finally absolved through his ability to win Toril's heart. This plotline serves the purpose of cultivating our forgiveness for the cancellation of traditions while preparing the ground for ridding oil of notions of illegitimacy, as highlighting the progressive effect of the petroleum industry on the status

of Norwegian mothers renders its destructive side forgivable. By the end of the first season, the viewer is invited to forget that Christian has killed a man and avoided trial. Consequently, the death of Toril's father becomes bizarrely trivialized.

Furthermore, in episode 7, Toril seeks forgiveness from the fisherman for leaving him embarrassed in the eye of his religious community and destroying his social life. However, this trajectory of forgiveness is reversed when Toril, accepting an invitation from Frank (who has returned to Norway), brings the isolated fisherman and Marius to the English-speaking Baptist church in one of Stavanger's neighboring towns, Randaberg.<sup>3</sup> The Baptist preacher welcomes everyone, even those whose faith «is a little bit shaky» (Eps. 7, 44:20). One image captures Toril, Marius, the fisherman, and Frank, holding hands (Fig. 1) and ready to be blessed by an imported (hence globalizing) church culture which is portrayed as more forgiving than the Christian community Toril's family belongs to.



**Fig. 1.**  
Toril, Marius, the fisherman, and Frank holding hands.

One mother, three fathers: the biological father and the first/rejected stand-in father, holding hands, facing the pastor who is kindly inviting all the people in the church into his fatherly embrace. It is in this excess of father figures that Marius, whom in my readings has come to signify the newly emerged oil, becomes fatherless and who is consequently adopted by an expanding welfare system subsidizing, among other things, childcare institutions (Fig. 2). In this narrative the dynamic has reversed: Toril is shown as the savior of the poor fisherman, who now seems grateful for a re-invitation into society.

## Julegaven ble til 13 millioner barnehageplasser



Lille julaften 1969 fikk det norske folk beskjed om at det var gjort et gigantfunn i Nordsjøen. Under to år senere var produksjonen i gang. Ekofisk er fortsatt det største feltet på norsk sokkel, målt i daglig produksjon. Foto: KJETIL ALSVIK/CONOCOPHILLIPS

De første 40 årene har Ekofisk-feltet produsert olje for 1791 milliarder kroner. Dette tilsvarer rundt 13 millioner barnehageplasser.

### Fig. 2.

«The Christmas gift became 13 million kindergarten places.» Photo: Kjetil Alsvik. Source: Hilde Øvrebekk Lewis, Aftenbladet 2012.

Thus, Toril can be said to have forgiven the killer of her father and the biological father of her child, whereas she is also forgiven by the rejected fisherman. The sentiment of forgiveness in *State of Happiness* functions twofold by simultaneously excusing the destruction of the old and inviting the arrival of the new. In this sense, the series, and the feminism it hinges on, does less to legitimize the child/petroleum and more to naturalize the urbanization of the North Sea by glorifying the expanding welfare state's promise of a new urbanized motherhood. This seems to be an essential narrative move to welcome the illegitimate child of oil into the North Sea's new ecology.

### The exuberance of Anna

The most salient character of *State of Happiness* is Anna Hellevik. She is the persona that braids the characters together, like the oil that silently lubricates the cogs of the series. Coming from the farm of Hellevik, she is engaged to Christian Nyman but later becomes romantically involved with Philips Petroleum's Texan lawyer, Jonathan Kay. In the series' petro-capitalist milieu, where capitalism is blatantly promoted by the oil executives, Anna becomes an agent and simultaneously the locus of the urbanization of nature. The audi-

ence witnesses the transformations of Rogaland's ecology and its power dynamics mainly through Anna, who works as the secretary of Arne Rettedal, a real-life Norwegian politician and later mayor of Stavanger. Rettedal, whose name now adorns the university building I can see from the window of my office, was knighted in 1993 in recognition of his influential role in establishing the petroleum industry and the uplifting of Rogaland to a global hub for energy trades. Anna, from her position as secretary, witnesses and mediates the secret life of men in power, including the secret about Christian's intoxication during the car accident. The positioning of Anna as a witness, and occasionally in the middle of negotiations between men representing Rogaland's old and new nature, works as a rhetorical strategy for *State of Happiness* to mediate urbanization, progress, and the desirability of globalism through the figure of a woman.

In addition to Anna's in-between position, her *energetic* participation in urbanization is accentuated. We barely see Anna at leisure. She is a restless character, almost a workaholic, rushing from one place to the other and spending the time in-between learning other languages and literacies that can expand her political agency. With a spirit of entrepreneurship and skillful networking, Anna moves information between Rettedal, her love interest Jonathan, and the Nyman family and thereby performs a gendered agency that occasionally induces the men of oil with small doses of social justice while naturalizing a new mode of energetic mobility and labor.



**Fig. 3.**

A fashionably dressed Anna drives the tractor that belongs to her family farm.

In episode 5, Anna is driving a tractor (Fig. 3) creating an impressive portrayal of girl power where the combination of her increasingly classy clothing style and a sturdy machine that belongs to her family farm is a clever *mise-en-scène* that signals gender trouble, class struggle, and transition all in one frame. Furthermore, it signals the proportions of the energy that Anna dedicates to work. Highlighting «exuberance» (and then an anticipation of catastrophe) as a prime identifier of the age of fossil fuels, Frederick Buell explains how «[o]il, once systematized, began transforming social life sending out tentacles into people's private lifeworlds to change them in what seemed, to many (but not all), exuberantly positive ways» (2012:283). According to Buell, this transformation manifested as the glorified emergence of

the progressive individual and normalized capitalist work ethics, that is, «historically specific forms of capitalist triumph and oppression, of environmental domination and destruction, and of human liberation and psychic and bodily oppression» (2012:280). Anna embodies this oil-fueled exuberance, progressiveness, and speed, adding delight and naturalness to it, by adorning it with urbanized feminine garments. Hence, the youthful energy and desire for work that Anna, as well as Toril, embody are deployed to naturalize narratives of growth, upscaling, and speed, which were all aspects of the extraction culture that accelerated with fossil fuels. Cara Daggett (2019) delineates the reciprocity of fossil fuels and capitalist definitions of work that still prevail in modernized societies. She makes convincing arguments for considering feminist post-work politics to find «new ways of valuing energetic activity» (2019:12), all in the manner of departing from structures that re-enforce petroleum dependency and the exploitation of human and non-human bodies.

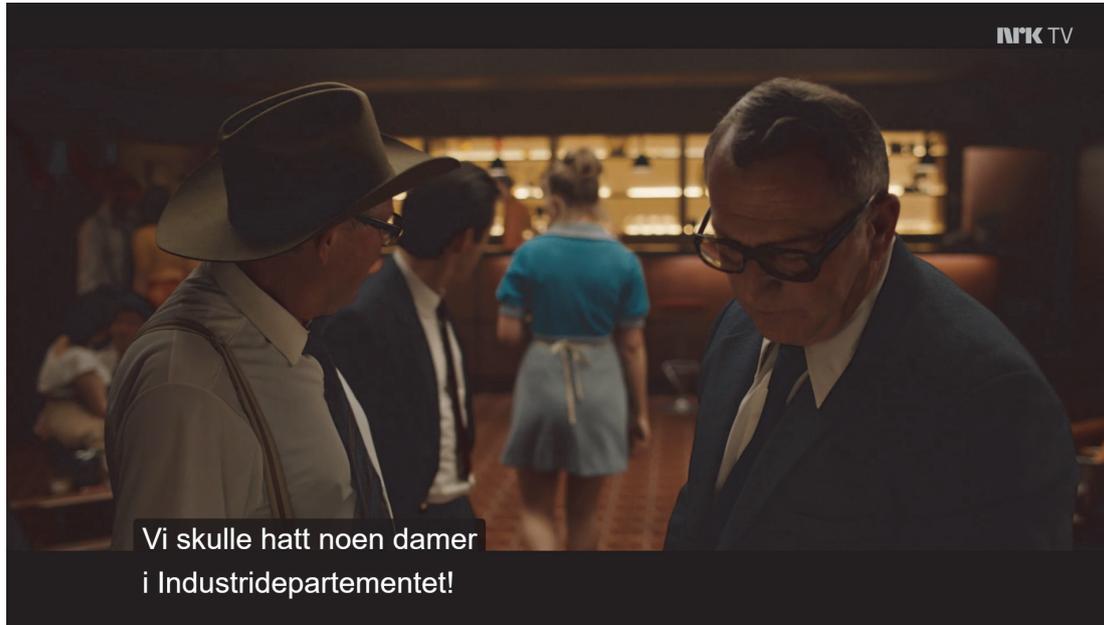
In the first season of *State of Happiness*, the energy inherent to fossil fuels overshadows the landscape such that the somatic power of people, in the form of a female labor force, becomes less of a topic of scrutiny. The way in which the younger characters in the series devote themselves to paid, and sometimes risky, labor serves to normalize how localized and gendered bodies are made expendable and complicit with national, and especially global-scaled, labor markets and their petro-masculine impulse for domination. To acknowledge the complicity of feminism with the oil-fueled urbanization of both human and non-human bodies is important. According to Sheena Wilson:

The age of oil is rife with ironies that have resulted in both feminist advances as well as the reinforcement of long-standing patriarchal conceptualizations of woman as object and as property, popularized through the pervasiveness of the female image as it has been recuperated by capitalist, consumerist, neoliberal discourses of the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries (2014:248-249).

*State of Happiness* glorifies these feminist advances primarily by displaying women's emancipation from unwaged domestic labor while remaining more subtle about exposing the oil culture's petro-masculine work ethics. Oil is presented as a fuel in the engine of feminism, as it enables the performance of a new form of citizenship and urban womanhood while the figure of working women is deployed to legitimize the process of urbanization. Vetla Vetlesen (1975) has pointed out that the inscription of women as urban labor force in Norway was a self-motivated act of denaturalizing traditional forms of unwaged domestic labor. Yet I would argue that it was equally the result of a coercive petro-masculine apparatus at a time when the global oil industry's obsession with exponential growth was in demand of more labor force and equally in need of legitimizing the extraction culture. To understand how *State of Happiness* depicts the translation of the North Sea and the farmlands into energy landscapes, it is helpful to enquire into how it captures and conceptualizes the energy of young women in favor of constructing normative forms of non-domestic labor.

To the extent that the series cast Anna to mediate the changing nature of farmland, it is primarily by way of dignifying her exuberance and work ethics that the narrative achieves this purpose. From this view, Anna becomes a figure for turning farmland, but also youth, into unquestionable capital and lends into a regime of energy extraction that is inflicted upon the sea, the farm, and their human inhabitants alike. This process is complicated by the feminist framing of Anna's energetic labor and what Wilson described as the problematic complicity of feminism with the project of petroleum-based modernity. From Wilson's perspective (2014), the image of feminism has been abused by oil industries to conceal the face

of petro-masculinity that continues to patronize local and Indigenous economies by accusing them of violating women's right to emancipation. *State of Happiness* aligns itself with a specific historical narrative that highlights oil as an empowering force that has allowed white women to participate in the growth economy. In episode 7, it is unapologetically suggested that sexualized women, conjoined with alcohol, North American fashion, and music, played a role in seducing visiting politicians from the Storting's industry committee to support Stavanger as the oil capital of Norway (Fig 4).



**Fig. 4.**

The camera aligns with the male gaze on Toril's body as the character of the Norwegian politician Arve Johnsen (2<sup>nd</sup> from the left) says «Sometimes I wonder if we ought to have some ladies in the department of industry» (Ep. 7, 23:59).

This framing points to abusive motivations of incorporating women as labor force into an economy that was already corrupted by misogynistic sentiments and preoccupied with usurping the energy of youth. By dramatizing Anna and Toril's urbanization, *State of Happiness* idealizes a specific form of exuberance and empowerment, exclusive to white Norwegian women, that disingenuously glosses over the petro-masculine tenet of the urbanization of nature. Toril's labor, and Anna's restless devotion to a social democratic growth economy, is seen as emancipatory (and hence acceptable) while the extractivism and systematic slow violence that the emerging social condition of labor enforces upon female bodies, and simultaneously on land and sea, is overlooked.

### **Hellevik without Hellevik: The conceptual translation of land**

In several episodes, Anna appears as an English-Norwegian translator, but what is more interesting is how *State of Happiness* employs her as a conceptual translator of land, more precisely, as someone who interprets land as something with global, rather than local, signification. Her effort in offering the Nyman family's summerhouse (Garnodden) and later her own family farm (Hellevik) to the burgeoning petroleum industry are the events that high-

light the peculiarity of her socio-political agency. It is through these events that the series foregrounds the figure of a woman to demonstrate the dissolution of the old nature of farmland through a deconstruction of a place-based local identity. The urbanization of nature, as seen through Anna's interaction with the lands she helps to sell, entails reinterpretations of Norway's stringent coastline and land-use regulations and their emphasis on empowering local communities. As such, she plays an instrumental role in helping the oil industry to stretch its territory into rural areas, which essentially transforms their cultural connotation and points to oil as an energy form with globalizing force.

Anna often highlights what resembles social democratic values as she exuberantly embodies urbanization and seems to be in full agreement with her mentor Rettedal, who says that «most people do not understand anything before it is too late» (Ep. 3, 28:35). She is a firm believer in the accelerated globalization that the petroleum industry will trigger, however, in a way that dismisses local cultures. Oil, in her view, is what endows a region on the verge of economic collapse and apathy with jobs, wealth, and activity. Anna's emphasis on the lack of life and activity on the farm, which necessitates its resuscitation, recalls William Cronon's analysis of the moral trajectories of historical narratives of the Great Plains. Cronon explains how the stories involved in the writing of environmental history:

...are designed so that the plot and its changing scene – its environment – flow toward the ultimate end of the story. In the most extreme cases, if the tale is of progress, then the closing landscape is a garden; if the tale is of crisis and decline, the closing landscape (whether located in the past or the future) is a wasteland. As an obvious but very important consequence of this narrative requirement, opening landscapes must be different from closing ones to make the plot work. A trackless waste must become a grassland civilization... (1992:1370).

In the same vein, in *State of Happiness*' historiography of Rogaland, Anna helps to set the stage so that the farmland is framed as a wasteland anticipating transformation and progress by national and trans-national interventions. Anna has grown up on the farm but has strong ties to Stavanger and the urban lifestyle due to her engagement to Christian. Though, it is her romantic involvement with Jonathan that highlights her aptitude for cosmopolitanism or, more meticulously, for a patriotism in dialogue with a rampantly globalizing market. Anna's character offers a vantage point onto the new nature of land emerging in Rogaland's dawning petroculture, which the series delivers through an erasure of the farmland's local signification.

Through the series we witness Anna's effort to assimilate the urban culture, as conveyed by her choice of urban clothing and occasional shame for her family's rustic lifestyle. During one visit to rural Dirdal, after failing to convince the locals of the benefits of selling their land to the oil industry, she says to Christian with despair that «the farm is valuable, only for the entrepreneurs, not for anybody else» (Ep. 5, 28:44), and later how «nobody understands a thing and I am trying to move this place out of the stone age» (29:55).<sup>4</sup> Anna's assertion essentializes rural communities in Dirdal as homogenous and fixed in time (in a far past, the Stone Age). This attests to Anna's lack of sympathy for the locals' long-term relationship to the land and her indifference to the identities nested in communities of small-scale farmers. As such, it is through the character of Anna that *State of Happiness* portrays how the process of globalization displaces communities after designating their habitat as futureless wastelands or a «shit farm» (as Anna calls it during a quarrel with her father in ep. 2, 3:55). In all this, Anna becomes the agent of translating her family farm into a «sacrifice zone», where «sacrifice», according to Hugo Reinert, «shorthands a modality of destructive spatial

violence that operates — and justifies itself — within an economy of anticipated returns» (2018:599).

Anna sees Dirdal as static and stuck in a past age because her restlessness and the temporal scope of the series makes her and us negligent of the rural landscape's slow social and material transformation. In other words, the globalist urbanism that Anna favors advances a placelessness and an unbelonging that suffocates the more-than-human agency of land by deprioritizing material engagement and devaluing rural farming communities.

When Anna finally convinces her family to negotiate with Norwegian Contractors about buying the farm, she is depicted as the *in-between* at the negotiation table (Fig 5), embodying the asymmetric negotiation between rural and urban conceptualizations of land, characterized by local and global ownership, and masculinity and petro-masculinity respectively.



**Fig. 5.** Anna sits between her father (right) and the representative of Norwegian Contractors (left).

The representative of Norwegian Contractors displays a form of ownership that reduces the land to mere property and an object of management, symptomatic of oil-fueled global capitalism. It presents a new form of remote domination that fiercely contrasts with the farmer's intimate land stewardship. At the table, sitting between symbols of the global and the local, Anna is readily dressed for the urbanization of nature. At odds with her parent's humble garments, her clothing style is far from neutral. It is already imbricated in a global story of urban consumerism, virtually the same as «advertising campaigns promoting consumer lifestyle as the key to happiness and satisfaction» (Wilson 2018:383). The dichotomy and the tension that the negotiation scene creates is visually resolved for the viewer as Anna's clothing promises the viewers the stimuli and style and the «anticipated returns» (Reinert 2018:599) that the petroleum industry will bring about. In this way, her femininely gendered figure confirms the silent conquering of urbanism and the doctrine of petro-masculinist progress, and her appearance illustrates Wilson's critical remark of how «women's images, and women as a concept, are widely recuperated to drive consumerism and to serve national petropolitics and imperial expansionist aims» (2018:398). Her father insists on his belonging to the place maintained by the community of small-scale farmers, while Anna embodies what Kathryn

Yusoff has described as «a process of alienation from geography, self, and the possibility of relation» (2018:40).

The stereotypical representation of Anna's father as old, stubborn, and resistant to change leaves little reason to disagree with urbanism as an inevitability. Akin to the fisherman, the father/farmer is depicted as a lost cause, and farmlands are disturbingly void of stories. The denunciation of the farm and the denial of its vital function as a ground for identity-making is another example (after the death of Toril's father) of how *State of Happiness* uses the feminist trope of castrating a father figure in the portrayal of the women's performance of emancipation. The power dynamic between Anna and her father is unbalanced as the bounty of Hellevik is shown, without prior explanation, as unreliable and meager, and hollowing the farm of added or intrinsic value is a process of denaturalization that precedes the urgency for a globalist urbanization of nature.

Anna's lack of local identity is registered in *State of Happiness* by muting the farmland's cultural significance, which is bound up with its depiction as a non-place, bereft of the stories that would endow it with life and dynamism. Max Liboiron (2021) accentuates this shift in relating to place, or rather displacement, by differentiating *land* from *Land*:

For us, land (the more general term) refers to landscapes as a fixed geographical and physical space that includes earth, rocks, and waterways; whereas, 'Land' (the proper name) extends beyond a material fixed space. Land is a spiritually infused place grounded in interconnected and interdependent relationships, cultural positioning, and is highly contextualized (2021:5).

The embodied reciprocities that had sustained generational timescales through oral cultures of rural areas get little attention and even less respect in Anna's approach to her family farm. In other words, the farm is contextualized in a way that highlights few traces of interdependent human-non-human relationships, which eventually serves to justify urbanization. Anna's father initially contests his daughters' incentivization of the family's displacement and does not want to easily give up the kinship he has maintained with this «Land» as a small-scale, God-fearing farmer. However, at the negotiation table, Anna is working as a translator of *Land* into *land*.

Hellevik, the family name that discursively equates the family with the land they inhabit, is the proof of Anna and her father's kinship, and the family and the farm's reciprocity. Toril gives her son the name of her deceased father in a gesture of maintaining kinship in spite of death and broken family ties. By contrast, Anna is motivated by anonymizing the farm by removing her family name from the land. Even though the land deal is later discarded, we see the land's cultural agency injured by Anna's indifference to the farm's capacity for storytelling and local identity building. Her attempt to reintroduce value to the land by marketing it as a possible home for the petroleum industry, shows how *State of Happiness* espouses the *Land*'s conceptual translation by employing the figure of a woman, in a similar vein as the new North Sea was delivered to an avid audience through the birth canal of Toril Torstensen.

### **Is the post-oil world unhappy?**

Our research methodologies are oil-soaked and habituated to extractivist worldviews to the degree that avoiding critical self-reflectivity will only serve the problematic prolongation of a globalist monoculture with the ontological and epistemological cul-de-sac it imposes on the energy transition. Studying the different ways in which petroleum is put to work in *State of Happiness* can give us clues about how to think with oil, as a catalyst for new natures,

while avoiding the pitfall of othering oil, or masking our indebtedness to it. In other words, it helps us challenge our dependence on petroleum by exposing the various characteristics we enact to reproduce that dependence on an everyday basis. This is important as we require more thinking tools to identify the sacrifices that all forms of modern subjectivity need to endure in order to phase out the toxic, and simultaneously life giving, industry of petroleum.

As my investigative reading of the narrative strategy of *State of Happiness* shows, the series cast young, white, independent women as emblematic of happiness only after establishing forgivingness of destruction, exuberant progressiveness, and placelessness as values that feature coastal Norway's new nature. Besides re-enforcing a worldview that treats happiness and affluence as synonyms, these values do not threaten but naturalize the extractivist rationale of petro-modernity that reduces farmlands and the North Sea to objects of domination and commodities. Furthermore, I have explored how oil undermines certain gender norms while consolidating others and how the salience that *State of Happiness* gives to women serves to gloss over the oil-boosted masculinity, or petro-masculine logic, that frames the series and counterproductively glorifies a consumer-capitalist rendition of feminism.

My hope is that exposing traces of this logic in *State of Happiness* and poking holes in the narrative of petro-masculinity's inevitability could engender what Bart H. Welling calls «reinhabitory petronarratives» (2018:442), that is, modes of environmental storytelling that motivate a regenerative rather than a paralyzing and dialogue-ending approach to our complicity with oil and help us «collaboratively imagine and collectively move toward socially just – decolonized and feminist – energy futures» (Wilson 2018:378). Such narratives will grow from a hospitality toward the ignored agency of nonhumans and the disenfranchised bodies that elude the heteropatriarchal panopticon. It is in such company that we can approximate less exclusive and more sustainable interpretations of happiness.

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### **Notes**

- 1 *Gullruten* is the Norwegian title for the national Golden Screen awards where *State of Happiness* was celebrated in 2019.
- 2 All cited dialogues from the film (with the exception of the pastor's words in the church) are translated from Norwegian into English by me.
- 3 According to a page on NRK's website, dedicated to fact-checking some of the elements of the series, the first formalized Christian congregation for foreign workers was established in 1971 and the number of English-speaking churches in Stavanger grew to four in the same decade. See <https://www.nrk.no/kultur/lykkeland--fakta-og-fiksjon-s01e07-1.14324066> (accessed 21.04.2022).
- 4 It must be mentioned that Anna's character development in the second season boosts her criticism for the unchecked rush for more and more oil extraction and she becomes an advocate for de-acceleration.

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