

INTRODUCTION

PETROMODERNITY: OR, ALCHEMY BY OTHER MEANS

Y el pobre alcatraz muerto
sobre las ondas tornasoladas
untado de pomada betuminosa,
es una gigantesca acerina
flotando en los reflejos
de una traidora lámpara de Aladino

—Ismael Urdaneta, “La agonía del alcatraz,” 1928

Oil fooled some twentieth-century humans into thinking that the alchemist’s ultimate dream was imminent: control over the world’s material conditions. This idea is exuberantly encapsulated in ads and industrial films circulating in the United States in the mid-twentieth century. “Over space man has begun to win his victory!” declared a documentary produced by General Motors, *To New Horizons*.¹ Shell Oil’s 1945 ad “Climate in a Cage” features an image of the planet inside a laboratory. Praising the agricultural revolution made possible by petrochemicals, the ad copy explains that this “caged” climate will soon be “tailored to order.”² The documentary *Oil for Aladdin’s Lamp* (1949) even more enthusiastically asserts that oil makes possible things that are “more wonderful, more practical than anything Aladdin ever produced with his fabulous lamp.”³ The documentary continually claims that oil is miraculous, while simultaneously telling us that modern science has banished miracles. Far from an anomaly, the documentary’s faith in both scientific rigor and fanci-

ful myth embodies much of the thinking that helped establish and uphold a global oil economy: An avowed conviction in modern science and technology, accompanied by a feverish belief in oil's quasi-magical powers. This faith in the world oil would someday deliver may be the central "capital fiction" of the twentieth century.⁴ As this book explores, oil appeared most magical when it seemed to come from nowhere in particular, and to produce no debris—that is, when extraction sites such as those dotting the Venezuelan landscape remained unimagined. In this (un)imagined geography, commodities appear to emerge from the ether and move on their own accord. This vision of self-generating, free-floating commodities is not entirely an alchemist's fantasy. It is capitalism's goal. The oil industry's myths were particularly effective—even as they were blatantly contradictory—precisely because they were built upon key conceptual contradictions of capitalist modernity.

Modern forms of knowledge were able to dismiss alchemy as antiquated magical thinking and superstition because the modern economy is *alchemy by other means*.⁵ One of alchemy's key aims—be it in its traditional or modern forms—involves the abolition of material and temporal limitations in order to create an autonomous world that, distanced from natural processes, can operate only through human "laws and goals."⁶ Modernity's "pursuit of alchemy" has entailed the attempt to monetize the biosphere, rooted in "the desire for control of the earthly conditions of existence, for unboundedness and permanence, for cheating entropy and death . . . Neo/classical economic relations strengthen not just the desire but the illusion."⁷ As oil overcame many of the material limits that had constrained past economic and technological growth, it reassured twentieth-century societies that control over and the monetization of the biosphere was not a dangerous delusion, but instead humanity's rightful claim.

This book explores the myths that fueled the growth of petromodernity—"modern life based in the cheap energy systems made possible by oil"⁸—through the lens of Venezuelan oil narratives.⁹ Many of these narratives examine the untenability of the oil industry's many promises by delving into the detritus of oil production in the states of Zulia and Anzoátegui, far from Caracas, the place often imagined as Venezuela's cultural and political center. Stories that turned out to be prescient warnings were dismissed for decades as provincial and filled with antiquated anxieties characteristic of the *monte y culebra*

of the Venezuelan hinterlands.¹⁰ Their dismissal might very well be rooted in the fact that most of these texts were published between the 1930s and 1960s, a period when oil's mythical powers were accepted as verifiable truth. And yet, much like Venezuela's cultural critics, many of us might not have been willing to contend either with these texts or with the oil industry's seductive myths until a series of intertwined crises of the Earth system, commonly referred to as the Anthropocene, forced us to do so.¹¹ The Anthropocene is pushing us to do the very thing that divests oil from its magical appearance: To pay attention to its material imprint as part and parcel of our ways of life. Most of this book explores narratives about sites that the oil economy encourages us to forget: Extraction enclaves, the circulation of oil products not only as energy but also as built environments, and polluted air and waterways. These are sites largely suppressed in a Venezuelan national imaginary, constructed through a magical petrostate, and a world market fueled by oil.¹² This study further examines the role of cultural institutions in unwittingly manufacturing a sense of distance between cultural producers and consumers from the realm of energy production. This distancing is the work of unimagining community, described by Jennifer Wenzel. This work of unimagining entails rendering the environmental harm done to certain communities as unimaginable, which further works to expel these harmed communities from shared notions of nationhood, and from any sense of historical time, be it the historical processes that led to their immiseration or their ongoing existence and ability to change in the present.¹³ This is a failure of the imagination we repeatedly see in much of the reception to Venezuelan oil narratives, be they literary works or documentaries. Analyzing the ways in which critics repeatedly asserted that Venezuelan oil narratives were not really about oil, about Venezuela, or, at the very least, about contemporary Venezuela, this study shows the process through which the ongoing social and environmental problems of oil production came to be imagined as issues happening not only in a distant place but also in a distant past. Far from a given, this imagined geography and temporality needed to be reinforced in order to normalize oil production. This book focuses on Venezuelan oil narratives from previous generations precisely as a direct challenge to the common characterization of these texts as relics from another time. One of my central contentions here is the need to learn to read oil narratives (especially

older texts from marginal corners of the oil-producing world) as texts about our contemporary energy system, to abolish the safe distances that allow us to imaginatively and ethically disengage from the processes of energy production that sustain our lifestyles.

A particularly compelling example of a Venezuelan national imaginary that learned to ignore oil's material imprint can be found in *Estación de máscaras* (1964), the second novel in Arturo Uslar Pietri's unfinished trilogy, *El laberinto de la fortuna* (further analyzed in chapter 2). Álvaro, the trilogy's protagonist, wishes to one day write a novel that encapsulates the essence of oil's impact on Venezuelan society, which he describes as "la noción mágica de la realidad que el petróleo ha despertado en nosotros" (the magical sense of reality awakened in us by oil).¹⁴ Like many intellectuals from other corners of the oil-producing world, Álvaro claims that oil awakens a type of magical thinking in the local population.¹⁵ When he further elaborates his reasoning, he posits that in order to fully understand oil's magic we should ignore the sites shaped by oil extractive infrastructure, and focus instead on the psychology of the individuals affected by it: "Wells, derricks, and black pipelines can be found in many places: in Texas, in Kuwait, in Romania, in Iran. What is ours is not that, but the echo, the reflection, the emotion of oil within us."¹⁶ He posits that to understand oil's imprint on Venezuela, we must focus on the specific, subjective experiences, apart from the processes and infrastructure of oil production. Here, in a novel meant to critique the impact of Venezuela's oil economy written by the person who popularized *sembrar el petróleo* (sow the oil)—the central thesis of oil development in Venezuela—we nonetheless see a process of unimagining: A distancing between the subject and the world of oil production, easily eliding the damage and immiseration that surrounds it.¹⁷ Álvaro's proposition is the inverse of one of the central ideas proposed by this book: We need to understand our intrinsic ties to, and dependence on, petroleum's material infrastructure, as well as our perceived distance from the world of extraction. The point is not to focus on the extraction enclave as the epicenter of the oil economy. Instead, the goal is to grapple with the entanglements of our lives to the production and detritus of the oil economy, to dispel the illusions that lull us into thinking that extraction and ecological catastrophe are happening far away, in some remote corner of regions we have learned to imagine as trivial and backward.

As Álvaro describes his ideal oil narrative, he continues to insist on the need to focus on an immaterial Venezuelan psyche: “Maybe a kind of primitive epic. *The Odyssey* of the Venezuelan who cannot return to an ordinary life, lost among gods and evil ghosts. All this delirium possessing them. To be rich without work or savings. To reach everything effortlessly . . . the feeling of being able to stumble upon Aladdin’s lamp in some attic.”¹⁸ Álvaro posits that oil creates the illusion that prosperity can emerge without labor, planning, or effort. However, he attributes this sensation to a singularly Venezuelan mindset. His word choice is indeed telling: *mentality*, *conceptions*, *delirium* best encapsulated by a primitive epic, all of which points to a premodern irrationality at the heart of Venezuelan society. I do not dispute that Álvaro is aptly describing a form of delirium tied to oil. I disagree, however, with the assertion that “the magical sense of reality awakened in us by oil”¹⁹ is either an exclusively Venezuelan phenomenon, or one best told through a “primitive epic.” Far from primitive, the epic Álvaro describes is thoroughly modern and global. Indeed, Álvaro’s musings on Venezuelan society in *Estación de máscaras* unwittingly describe the same myth—down to its central metaphor—portrayed in a science and technology documentary from the United States financed by Shell Oil, and shown in mid-century educational institutions: *Oil for Aladdin’s Lamp*.

The tendency to describe a type of oil-induced magical thinking as stemming from Venezuelan culture has reinforced myths promoted by the oil industry. This has been true even in works intending to be critical of said industry, as is the case with Arturo Usler Pietri’s oeuvre. In contrast to a populace possessed by the delirious hope of stumbling upon Aladdin’s lamp, the oil industry in Venezuela has frequently been depicted as a rational, if deeply unethical, actor. This view of a delirious Venezuelan culture, in contrast to a rational oil industry, has promoted an understanding of the country’s failure to create a stable and equitable social order as stemming from a national inability to properly manage oil wealth. There is, of course, truth to the idea that national institutions failed spectacularly when it came to managing Venezuelan oil wealth. However, this focus on what went wrong in Venezuelan society and its mismanagement of its oil wealth has left little room to delve into a more fundamental question: What are the delusions at the heart of a global oil economy, and the consequences of turning these very delusions into economic