

Helios 1: Simon Orpana's *Gasoline Dreams*

May 2021

Welcome to *Helios*, an *EH* interview series about new research in the energy humanities and the creative processes that bring it to life.

Our inaugural interview features with Simon Orpana, an artist and researcher from Hamilton, ON whose work renders sophisticated concepts and complex histories into arresting graphic narrative form. Fans of Icon Books' "[Graphic Guides](#)" will appreciate Orpana's ability to create compelling visualizations that retain the integrity of their source material.

EH editor Caleb Wellum sat down with Simon over Zoom on April 9 to talk about his new book with [Fordham University Press](#), his process for turning ideas into images, and the life-affirming wastefulness of art.

Caleb Wellum (CW): You've created a diverse body of work. Can you tell me a bit about your past work and whether you see a common thread running through it?

Simon Orpana (SO): I've been making alternative comics since high school. In the early 2000s, in the process of doing a PhD on skateboarding and gentrification, I started making comics on more political and social themes. In 2016, I published a graphic history, with Rob Kristofferson, called [Showdown!](#) about the 1946 strikes in Hamilton that established industrial unionism in Canada. Lately I've been working on posters and cartoons on social issues, such as May Day, renovictions, and responses to COVID. I guess a common theme is using comics to engage with social, political, and historical realities.

CW: What's your new comic called and what's it about?

SO: It's called *Gasoline Dreams: Waking up from Petroculture*. It's a 200-page graphic investigation of how our reliance on petroleum shapes culture, relationships, politics, history, and economics in the era of global climate change. It draws from a great deal of scholarship in the Energy Humanities and engages with popular culture. A central focus is the fantasies, or the structures of enjoyment, that keep us attached to fossil fuels. Most of us know, at some level, that we need to radically change our ways, and yet barriers to this lie in deep-seated habits and subjectivities that we largely take for granted.

CW: 'Structures of enjoyment' is an intriguing term. What do you mean by that?

SO: I'm borrowing that from Raymond Williams' term 'structures of feeling,' which I used in the book. A better term might have been 'structures of enjoyment' because it evokes the immediate enjoyment that we get from everyday practices like driving. Driving is a common experience that depends upon a host of technologies, infrastructures, and relationships. The threat of NOT being able to drive creates all kinds of social and political unease because driving is one of the primary enjoyments offered us as modern subjects. I love getting in my car. I feel like a real person. If I'm depressed, I get in my car and drive around and I'm like *Oh yeah, the world is now designed for me*. I just have to step on the gas. I can go wherever I want. That's a structure of enjoyment that we take for granted; we become habituated to it.

CW: Yes, habituated physically and also psychologically.

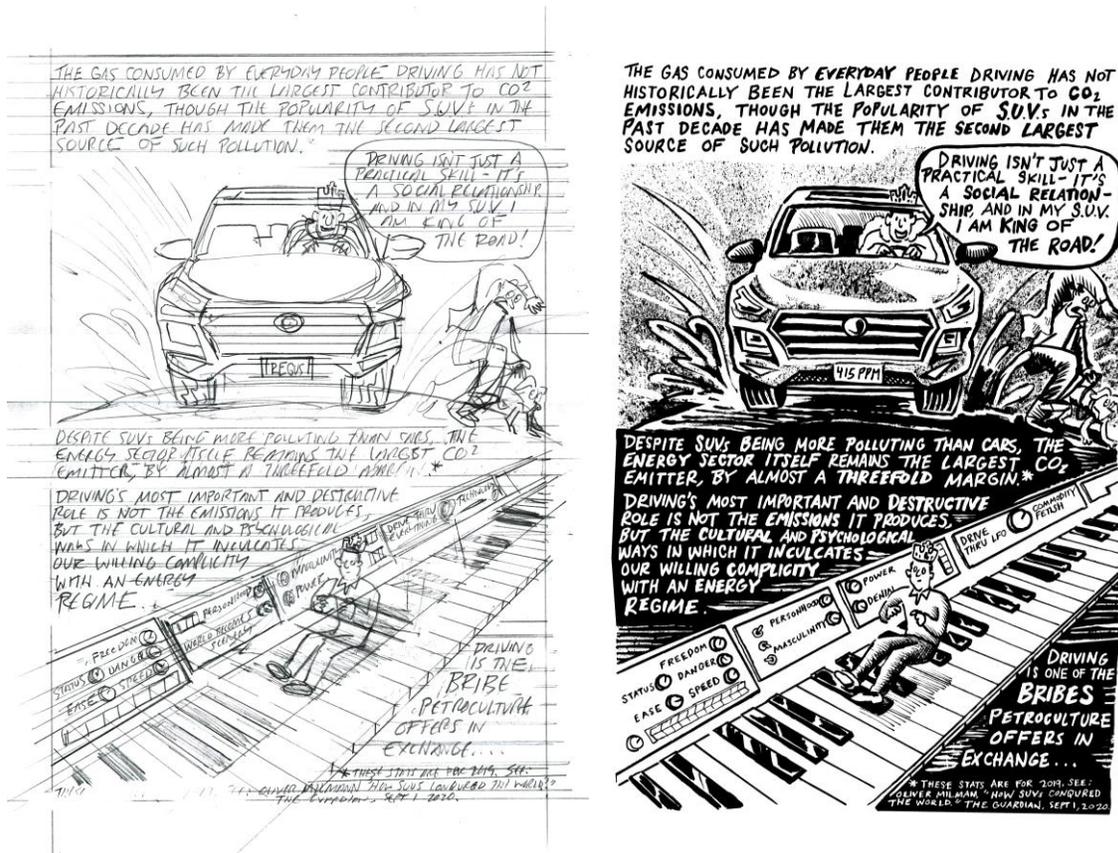
SO: Exactly. Driving is a portion of vast fossil energies that ordinary people are given to enjoy directly. And this enjoyment helps win our complicity with petroculture.

CW: What was your artistic and intellectual process for writing *Gasoline Dreams*? Did the text come first and then the images? Do you start with a particular image or idea and work from there?

SO: I start by reading and hashing out the ideas in essay form. Then I boil that down into a comic book format, which involves handwriting a version of the text and quotes to include. This creates a very rough draft—squares and circles and word balloons—to see how it all might fit on the page. Then comes the crucial step of figuring out imagery. At this stage there's a kind of associative logic at play, where sometimes the images start to shape and divert the written text. I might have wanted to go one way, but the images are pulling the text in a different direction, so you have to go back and adjust the text. It's a kind of tug of war between images and words. It takes you places that you might not have gone.



Image © Simon Orpana 2021



From rough draft to final ink drawing. Images © Simon Orpana 2021

CW: For a hybrid medium like this, do you have particular audiences in mind that perhaps a fully text-based monograph wouldn't reach?

SO: That was part of the impetus behind the project: to make academic research accessible and useful to people outside the academy. Comics are one way to do that. *Gasoline Dreams* is definitely aimed at students and would be very useful for university and high school courses. But there is also an ambition to reach a wider audience with the kind of work Energy Humanities researchers are doing. I hope the book inspires people with the notion that building a new world out of the wreckage of petroculture requires the skills, ideas, and energies of everyone.

CW: I would imagine you have a little more freedom than a text-based academic monograph in terms of the kinds of stories you can tell or the way you can express arguments.

SO: I think so. I love research and writing, and I also love making art, so it does allow for an intersection of those things. And you can put yourself in a comic in a unique way. It's a key part of feminism, for instance, to include yourself in the story and not try to pretend you're removed from your conclusions and process. There's a long tradition of this in alternative comics as well.

CW: Can you say more about what the visuality of the comic form enables compared to texts?

SO: I originally wanted to call the book *Petrocultures of Everyday Life* as an homage to Michel de Certeau and Henri Lefebvre. But that's a mouthful. *Gasoline Dreams: Waking Up from Petroculture* speaks more to my interest in psychoanalysis and viewing popular culture as a collective dream. When you're making or reading a graphic narrative, I suspect that you're using similar brain functions of association and imagistic thinking that lets one dream at night, where you conjure up a world out of the scraps of daily experience. Comics also assemble a world out of scraps. I don't often draw just out of my head, but start by gathering reference images from archives, photographs, and popular culture. And so, if the goal is to engage with the dream world of petroleum—its fantasies, desires, and anxieties—the medium of comics can do this on the same terrain by tweaking and transforming these materials.

CW: In addition to interpreting collective fantasies and anxieties, *Gasoline Dreams* visually represents difficult concepts and the thinking of different researchers and philosophers. What kind of challenges did that pose?

SO: Synthesizing everything was a challenge. At one point I had about 120 pages done, mostly engagements with the authors that I'd been reading, but it didn't really hold together as a book. And then I thought, well, I'm pretty good at analyzing popular culture. It's what I'm trained to do. What if I take some of that theory, history, and economics, and illustrate it with some popular culture texts that people might be more familiar with? So, I went back and inserted interpretations of film and



television as a running theme to knit the book together.

CW: Is there a particular panel or sequence from the book that you're particularly proud of as an artist or a scholar?

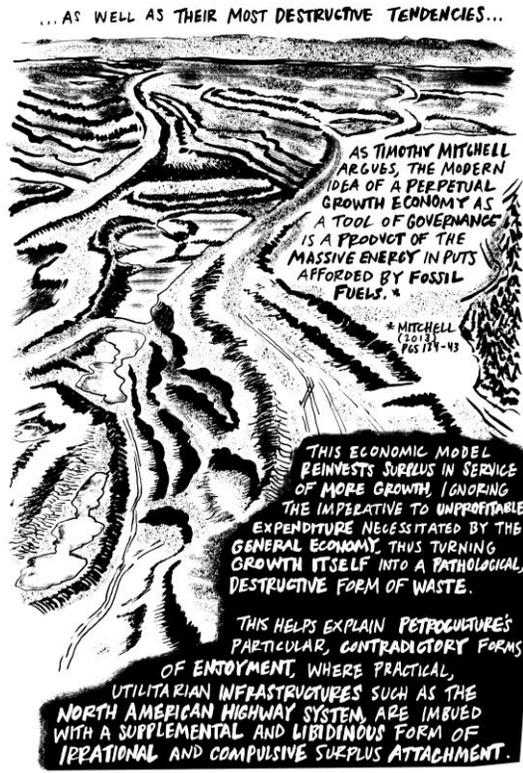
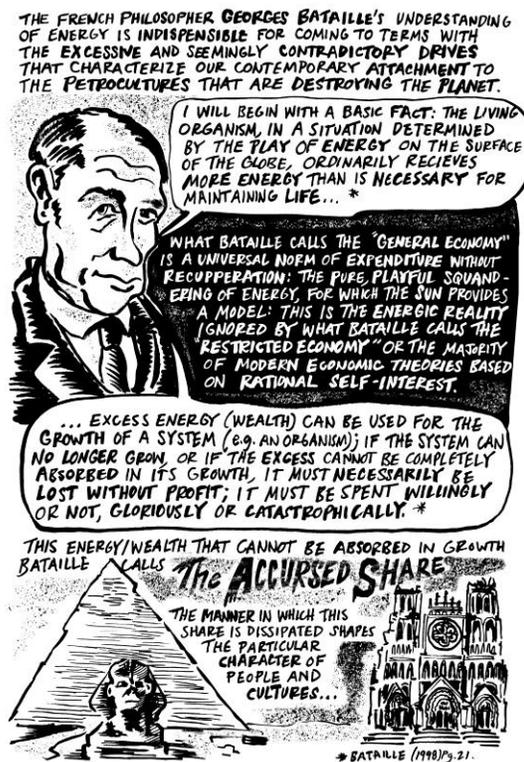
SO: One that comes to mind is the chapter about scenario planning, which is a mode of governance and planning for the future that emerged directly out of the petroleum industry. It was developed by Shell in the 70s and it's now a mainstream part of corporate and even governmental culture. So, I made that section by illustrating one of the future scenarios that contemporary petroculture is actually considering. Bill Gates and Rex Tillerson are like, yeah, this is a good idea, let's put some aerosol into the sky to block the sun—that will reverse global warming and make the sky grey and give everyone asthma.

CW: What could go wrong?

SO: It's a crazy idea, but it shows the extent to which people are willing to buy into technological fixes rather than thinking about changing economic and social structures to which we've become accustomed.

CW: You inserted yourself into the book saying that comics are an inefficient way to express ideas and research because they take so much time to do. There's a political point there that you bring up. How did your choice of the form relate to the political perspective you're advancing?

SO: That was towards the end of the book and I was pretty tired. I was thinking 'there's got to be an easier way to do this.' But what I think makes a comic book, or any book, interesting is the excessive amount of energy that goes into it, right? Georges Bataille talks about a general economy of energy based on abundance. On the macro level, there is always more energy than an individual or system can use for maintenance and growth. And that energy, according to Bataille, must be squandered. In human societies this translates into a choice between willfully squandering resources—by giving them away, for instance—or being forced to destroy them through wars and catastrophes. Petroculture is at odds with this process: it always tries to recuperate excess and make it productive again, leading to catastrophic forms of growth—a protracted war, really—that we are now experiencing in crises like global warming. Bataille says, well, we can keep pursuing war to the end, or we could re-learn how to waste energy intentionally. One way of doing that is through art, literature, and other things that don't have an immediate use but in fact make life better precisely through useless consumption. Making this book, I started asking 'why am I doing this? I'm just drawing every day. Why do it?' But it made a beautiful book. I'm proud of it. It's nice to read. It's nice to look at the pictures. And it will introduce readers to ideas they may not have heard of because petroculture doesn't really want people to think they have the power to shape and change the world.



Images © Simon Orpana 2021

CW: Is there anything else you want to say about the book or about the process or what you hope comes of it?

SO: It was a difficult book to make because of the subject matter. It's depressing to confront the reality of the predicament we are collectively in. Climate change isn't just another in a series of crises that specialists and scientists can fix for us. It's an existential crisis. All the discourses of 'technology will save us,' or 'carbon trading will save us'—these are palliative measures to avoid confronting the existential trauma deepening around us. So, to make the book I had to sit there with that trauma for a while and it was really bleak. Yet I think there's an end to that. It wasn't just depression. Towards the end of the book, I was really struggling with what to say about all this. I realized, well, the world we have now is not that great. We have a lot of problems and this is an opportunity to make a better world. It might seem like the end of the world, but that's maybe just another reflex of a petroculture that wants us to think there is no other possible world. Once I got over that hump, I thought, you know what, this is actually kind of hopeful. It means there's an opportunity for everyone to participate in remaking the world. I don't know if that comes through in the book, but that's how I felt by the end of it.

Gasoline Dreams: Waking Up from Petroculture will be published on September 7, 2021 by Fordham University Press. It is [available now for pre-order](#).