

SPRINGS

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CRUDE ENCOUNTERS

Amelia Fiske and Jonas Fischer

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Encountering crude oil out of place: Wind your way through the forest, grasses skimming against your legs, the chatter of squirrel monkeys above your head, to come upon a swimming pool-sized pit of old crude leftover from oil extraction decades ago. Covered in plants and debris, vines from the trees reach down to brush the surface of oil that has lost its luster. Take a step out onto fallen logs and branches—a wobbly ledge to stand on—and you gaze at the waste pit. The guide slowly submerges a long branch. It moves downward until it hits the ground, one, two, sometimes three meters below, indicating the depth of hydrocarbon waste held in the pit. Donning a latex glove, you reach forward to touch the oil brought up from the bottom of the pit. Black and incandescent, it glints in the light. Squish it between your fingers, smell it, contemplating the interconnections of the substance—the transformation of the remains of organisms from a different epoch, the way it fueled your own arrival at this very pit, its sociopolitical reverberations throughout the region.



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Over the past decade, hundreds of people from outside the Ecuadorian Amazon have come to know about contamination in the region through “toxic tours,” in which a guide—usually local environmental activist Donald Moncayo—takes participants to contaminated sites. Toxic tours in the Amazon have been closely aligned with the plaintiffs in the longstanding *Aguinda v. Texaco* lawsuit and often include opportunities to meet with locals who offer firsthand experiences of contamination and struggles for justice.

Donald's toxic tours convince through personal and anecdotal knowledge. He weaves stories of everyday encounters with contamination together with a critique of the relations between power, pollution, and justice. He highlights not only the enduring presence of contamination in waste pits and streams but also the ways toxicants travel: the waterways that carry them, from streams to rivers; the families that live in the surrounding area; the agricultural products grown in contaminated Amazonian soil for national and international markets. Toxic tours are a sensory engagement with contamination, encouraging participants to contemplate their position in relation to oil production and consumption, from the cellphone in their pockets to the airplane fuel that allows many of them to get to the Amazon in the first place.





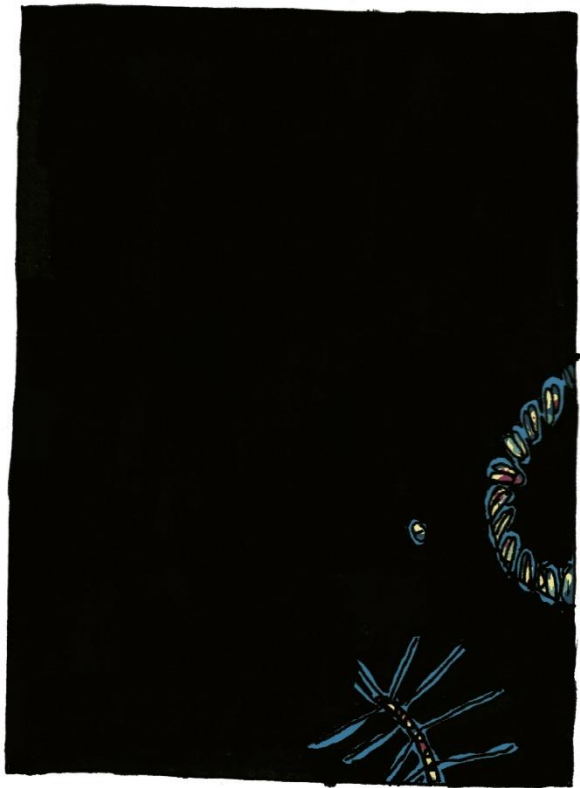


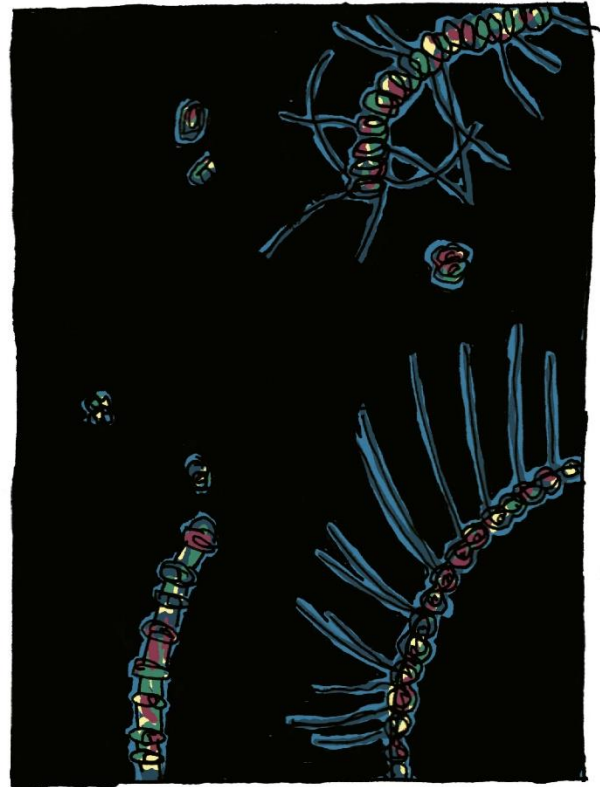
















This article is adapted from Fiske and Fischer's forthcoming graphic novel, *Toxic: A Tour of the Ecuadorian Amazon* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press). Click [here](#) to learn more.



Amelia Fiske is a cultural anthropologist. She completed more than two years of ethnographic research on oil production in the Ecuadorian Amazon as part of her PhD at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, US. Her work is situated at the intersection of cultural anthropology, science and technology studies, graphic art, social medicine and bioethics, and the environmental humanities. Amelia came to the RCC as a visiting scholar in 2017.



Jonas Fischer has always been fascinated by comics and drawing. He holds an MA in design from the Muthesius University of Fine Arts and Design in Kiel, Germany. Fischer has worked with several scientists to visually document their practices and findings for the public.



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