“It’s all one ghetto” : narrating the petrochemical plantation in HBO’s True Detective

Abstract
The first season of HBO’s 2014 anthology series True Detective has garnered much critical and popular praise for its generic innovation and intertextuality. Informed by recent work in the burgeoning field of petroculture studies, this essay argues that True Detective’s representation of Louisiana’s oil industry is an understudied yet integral feature of the show’s narrative of corruption, exploitation, and the erasure of personhood. While the detective plot fails to uncover and hold accountable the perpetrators of the occult murders that terrorize Louisiana’s bayous, the series’ ubiquitous petrochemical landscapes register the cumulative violence of industrial pollution as it segregates African American communities and slowly erodes the coastline. Drawing comparisons to the literary mode of plantation fiction and its themes of paternalist authority and pastoral nostalgia, this essay argues that True Detective replaces the trope of the plantation with the trope of the petrochemical. Through the “petrochemical plantation,” the HBO series links Louisiana’s antebellum histories of slavery with its “oily” futures, making legible the region’s longue durée of exploitation.
Discussing the True Detective season finale, 'Form and Void,' means discussing the importance of the show’s meticulousness and attention to detail. That aspect, the idea it was somehow laying Easter eggs everywhere for eagle-eyed viewers and True Detective theorists to point out on message boards is why new life was breathed into an obscure collection of 19th century horror literature, and why the program itself somehow managed to become the most poured over mystery since Lost. It’s hard to argue that the detectives’ confrontation with Errol Childress amongst the accumulated detritus and appropriately labyrinthine corridors of Carcosa was anything but satisfying – finding and punishing Dora Lange’s killer was, after all, the initial goal of the narrative.