


6-11-2019

Shale Play: Poems and Photographs from the Fracking Fields by Julia Spicher Kasdorf and Steven Rubin

Kelly Shepherd

Northern Alberta Institute of Technology

 Part of the [American Studies Commons](#), [Environmental Health and Protection Commons](#), [Environmental Monitoring Commons](#), [Literature in English, North America Commons](#), [Natural Resource Economics Commons](#), [Oil, Gas, and Energy Commons](#), [Photography Commons](#), [Poetry Commons](#), and the [Water Resource Management Commons](#)

Follow this and additional works at / Suivez-nous ainsi que d'autres travaux et œuvres:

<https://scholars.wlu.ca/thegoose>

Recommended Citation / Citation recommandée

Shepherd, Kelly. "Shale Play: Poems and Photographs from the Fracking Fields by Julia Spicher Kasdorf and Steven Rubin." *The Goose*, vol. 17, no. 2, article 21, 2019, <https://scholars.wlu.ca/thegoose/vol17/iss2/21>.

This article is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Goose by an authorized editor of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact scholarscommons@wlu.ca.

Cet article vous est accessible gratuitement et en libre accès grâce à Scholars Commons @ Laurier. Le texte a été approuvé pour faire partie intégrante de la revue The Goose par un rédacteur autorisé de Scholars Commons @ Laurier. Pour de plus amples informations, contactez scholarscommons@wlu.ca.

Dispatches from the Sacrifice Zone

Shale Play: Poems and Photographs from the Fracking Fields by JULIA SPICHER KASDORF and STEVEN RUBIN

Pennsylvania State UP, 2018. \$24.95 USD

Reviewed by KELLY SHEPHERD

Shale Play is a collaboration between poet Julia Spicher Kasdorf and photographer Steven Rubin. Both are professors at Pennsylvania State University, and in the book's introductory notes, both describe their personal observations as hydraulic fracturing, or fracking, was rapidly introduced to rural Pennsylvania. The subsequent poems and photographs give the reader a glimpse into what happened next: how life changed dramatically for the people in these economically depressed areas, and how fracking impacted, and continues to impact, the land and people. This book is a documentary work about the counties and communities that were built upon the Marcellus Shale Formation. The Marcellus Formation is the largest natural gas field in America and one of the largest on the planet.

An oversized hardcover collection, *Shale Play* resembles a coffee table book or a travel book, but its content is more bleak than beautiful. The photographs are aesthetically pleasing, colourful and well-composed, but their subject matter is somewhat less than enticing. The overall tone of the book is sadness, as many of the narratives and images explore themes of helplessness and loss. In an agricultural region already accustomed to dangerous industrial work and pollution—the area was previously known for coal mining—people struggle to make a living in the stagnant local economy. While the introduction of

fracking brought some jobs, most of the money came from leasing gas and mineral rights to land. The benefits of these arrangements are shown to be dubious at best, and in some cases they've turned out to be downright nightmarish.

The poem "A Mother Near the West Virginia Line Considers the Public Health" is a first-person account of the horrific impacts of fracking on a family whose farm sits on leased land:

we let the gas rights go,
just didn't see this coming. . . .
.....
One day we come home to find pink
ribbons tied in the field. Then
bulldozers.

They put four shallow wells and a
Marcellus well on a five-acre pad
seven hundred feet
from our porch. The workers come in
by the busload. (16)

The disturbing environmental and health-related effects of these developments are discussed alongside the social ones:

When crayfish died in our spring, we
knew the methane had migrated.
Now you can light it on fire. (16)
.....
My older boy had the nosebleeds and
rashes.
I couldn't keep him inside all the time.
(17)

.....
Once the brine tank vented for forty-
five minutes. My horse's eyes swelled
shut,

and one eye went blind. They've had
the nosebleeds. There's a big gum

tree
near the well that loses its leaves in the
middle of summer. (18)

This particular poem is illustrated with a close-up image of bubbling water: the notes explain that this had been a spring, where the horses drank; now the methane content makes it undrinkable. The methane bubbles didn't appear until after the drilling began.

Water is mentioned frequently throughout this collection, because of the extraordinary amount of water the hydraulic fracturing process requires (an estimated 4.5 million gallons for a single well). Residents quoted in several poems express their concerns over the quality of their drinking water, a dwindling fresh water supply, and the effects on biodiversity. One photograph shows a gas station advertising water, pumped from a nearby river, for sale.

There are other health-related impacts discussed, and concerns over strangers coming to live and work in what are otherwise small, quiet towns and rural areas. "Along Hope Hollow Road, a Grandma Talks on the Phone" describes a mysterious fog that seems to make everyone in the area sick (51); "At Jersey Mills, a Ridge Runner from Way Back Remembers the Wild Life" discusses the influx of workers from mostly southern states and the changes they bring with them (61).

As these long poem titles suggest, much of the book's material comes from interviews and conversations; Kasdorf's writing is notable for its use of individual voices and colloquialisms and its frequent references to local people and places. Some poems are based on archival materials, letters, and the memories of elderly community members.

Rubin's photographs are similarly candid and sometimes heartbreaking. Several focus on the individuals involved in community meetings, protests, and legal proceedings: the people in these pictures are discouraged, exhausted, disheartened. Lush green farmland and forests are juxtaposed with drilling rigs and pipelines; individual studies draw the reader's attention to truck culture, local signage, and details from the daily lives of rig workers.

While it does strive for balance—it's acknowledged that there are no better options forthcoming for this region, and that some people do benefit from the fracking industry, after all—the overwhelming feeling of *Shale Play* is grief. This book is important because it bears witness, and it laments.

KELLY SHEPHERD has a Creative Writing MFA from UBC Okanagan, and an MA in Religious Studies (with a thesis on sacred geography) from the University of Alberta. His second book, *Insomnia Bird: Edmonton Poems*, was published by ThistleDown Press in fall 2018.