

Petrocultures

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The environmental humanities as well as literary and cultural studies have only begun to analyze, within the last decade or two, the inextricable link between energy history and cultural history, and have alluded to how specific kinds of fuel have created specific manifestations of culture. In their research, scholars have mostly focused on the significance of oil as the dominant or "hegemonic" form of energy in the 20th and early 21st centuries, a form of energy "that organizes life practice in a more fundamental way than we've ever allowed ourselves to believe" (Szeman 230). They agree that oil has fundamentally shaped Western modernity in regards to its economy, politics, and culture—so much so that they speak of "petro-modernity," "petro-capitalism" or "petro-culture." Think of, for example, the rise of automobility and its ensuing infrastructure, the film industry, plastics, agricultural products, cosmetics, or consumer culture in general, which fostered our still cherished ideas of individual freedom, progress, and affluence. In the following lines, I will briefly introduce three ground-breaking essays in the early debate about oil before I look more closely at four in-depth studies of "petroculture" in order to provide an overview of the topics and development in this new field of the environmental humanities.

The first essay is Amitav Ghosh's "Petrofictions" (1992), in which he points out the gap between the ubiquitous influence of oil and its absence in America's cultural consciousness. He notices that there is no American novel on the "Oil Encounter" between the US and the Arabian oil producing countries (which he examined in his review of Abdelrahman Munif's five-part cycle of novels entitled *Cities of Salt*). Ghosh writes that one of the reasons for this absence is that oil smells bad because of the foreign entanglements surrounding it. Another reason is that there is no literary form at present that can express the multilingual, heterogeneous Oil Encounter (139; 142)—the latter argument has been challenged by petrocritics in the ensuing years.

Another early essay on the particular shaping influences of different forms of energy (wood, tallow, coal, whale oil, gasoline, atomic power) is Patricia Yaeger's *PMLA* "Editor's Column" from 2011 in which she suggests a new periodization of literature based on the forms of energy in use. She coined the term "energy unconscious" in literature and other media to expose the mostly hidden role oil has played in particular lifestyles, cultural assumptions, or social ideals. Imre Szeman finds such a new periodization problematic because there is often a particular energy mix in a society. Furthermore, the differences in energy use not only within a society, but also between different nations, make social systems very complicated. Nevertheless, he agrees that

"energy periodization *can* open up new ways of figuring and analyzing literature in relation to the world in which it is produced" (224).

A third ground-breaking essay, Frederick Buell's "A Short History of Oil Cultures," from 2012, highlights how the material features of oil and its uses take on political, as well as cultural importance, from the formation of oil-capitalism to modernist culture. He argues that in the early 20th century, "exuberance" about the diverse potentials of oil and a faith in progress was dominant, but that in the second half of the 20th century, critics began to see the "catastrophe" in the effects of oil such as environmental crises, geopolitical instability, and terrorism. Buell lists a number of novels and films to support his ideas about the cultural reflections of oil's ubiquity in our society.

One of the first book-length studies about the imbrications of energy and culture is Stephanie LeMenager's insightful monography *Living Oil: Petroleum in the American Century*, from 2014. In this book, she takes a close look at the deeper meanings of petroculture: its material manifestations, symbolic representations, aesthetics, and ambivalences. Her wide range of topics include, among others, museum exhibits (oil museums in Los Angeles, Alberta, and Texas), travel narratives, poems and novels, films, photography, and fragments of memoir. Partly autobiographical, but to a large extent scholarly critical, LeMenager seeks out how exactly "[w]e experience ourselves, as moderns and most especially as modern Americans, every day in oil, living within oil, breathing it and registering it with our senses" (6). This experience, she points out, causes very mixed emotions: we are happy about the benefits of our modern life such as women's lib or the favorable conditions of publishing which to a large part result from the easy availability of oil energy, but we deplore the dark underside of oil such as oil spills or the social and environmental effects of oil capitalism. In short, LeMenager wants to find out why oil is so bad and why we still love it. One of her answers is "the mystified ecological unconscious of modern car culture, which allows for a persistent association of driving with being alive" (80). In her intriguing reading of novels such as Upton Sinclair's *Oil!*, Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*, or the film *There Will Be Blood*, she illustrates this connection.

In her interpretations of the various forms of petroculture, LeMenager practices what she calls "commodity regionalism," trying "to find a point of view from which to frame the *everything* of oil" (11). She believes that the transnational property of petroleum is often most visible in regional sites of capital production. The region reveals the effects and emotions inherent in the *everything* of oil, i.e. how people feel about being steeped in oil, materially as well as aesthetically (12-14). LeMenager also writes about the paradox of writing about oil while using it in all the steps of producing her book. How can one evade this dependency on oil? She has no definitive answer, but believes in the function of art to initiate a retelling of our material and cultural ways, and of being in the world which can best be found in "hybrid works of environmental justice and narrative art" (193) that reimagine renewable futures (194).

Also in 2014, Ross Barrett and Daniel Warden edited a collection of twenty essays titled *Oil Culture*. The book is divided into five sections, each devoted to different phases in the development of cultural interpretations of petroleum. The editors's underlying

assumption is that oil is foundational and pervasive in our society, saturating modern social life and thought, but that it is at the same time absent from our consciousness. It is their goal to expose oil's diverse manifestations and thus to contribute to (and to extend) the historical, theoretical, and thematic horizons of cultural scholarship on oil (xxiii). The contributors focus on many different cultural representations found in advertising, film, novels, photography, short stories, TV series, scholarly books, magazines, and journals, thus providing insight into the oil saturation of our modern society. The first section concentrates on the early American oil industry, including the use of whale oil; the second is on cultural projects that fueled and contested the formation of a modern system of oil capitalism in the middle of the 20th century; section three is devoted to oil in the context of the global system of oil capitalism during the second half of the 20th century (as in postwar Saudi Arabia, the Niger Delta or the Gulf of Mexico); section four explores exhibitions and other public displays of oil representations; section five finally looks at possible futures with and without oil. This collection of articles (many of which had already been published elsewhere) contains a wealth of information about the discourses of oil studies and the many ways—as Allan Stoekl writes in his foreword—of oil as a natural-cultural artifact, making it an ideal subject for ecocriticism.

The third book-length work under consideration is by cultural theorist Imre Szeman, one of the leading figures in the environmental humanities and, more particularly, in the energy humanities. In his latest book *On Petrocultures: Globalization, Culture, and Energy* (2019), he argues that "the presence of oil is amongst the central forces shaping human life—if not *the* single ur-force to which all other narratives can be connected" (178), i.e. narratives such as globalization, nationalism, and capitalism. He is convinced that oil had not been introduced to a previously existing social, political, and cultural system, but contrarily, that this system was directly created by the easy access to oil and that capitalism as we know and live it, is an oil capitalism. His goal is to develop a critical theory of energy, i.e. "an alertness and awareness of the damage that concepts can do when heuristics are mistaken for (whether accidentally or deliberately) facts of nature" (9), and he calls for nothing less than "*a refashioning of the theories of the forces that animate the social and the subjects within it*" (10, italics in the original). His final aim is to abandon fossil fuels in favor of greener energy sources, especially in times of global warming. This would not just imply a technological innovation, it would require a transition in culture, society, and politics that would lead to energy justice, to a politics of freedom, democracy, and equity, and to a healthier natural environment (18).

Szeman has developed his ideas in the twelve essays that make up *On Petrocultures*, covering a period of almost two decades. Some essays are only indirectly related to oil, such as chapters one, two, three, six and seven which deal with concepts of "national allegory," the functions of globalization, culture, and the humanities or the concept of the "creative class." They do provide intriguing thoughts on politics and culture, however, which are directly related to petroleum and which reveal the injustices in the oil capitalist system, such as the very unequal distribution of the advantages of petroleum. Chapter 4 (2007) examines three dominant narratives about oil: strategic realism, techno-utopianism, and apocalyptic environmentalism. Szeman calls for a leftist

discourse on oil capitalism which "we have yet to find" (109). In chapter 8 (2013), he looks at *how* we can know about oil by interpreting several examples of oil representations, such as in Burtynsky's photographs of the Alberta oil sands. A more recent essay is chapter 10 on "Conjectures on World Energy Literature" (2017) in which he revives his demand that we re-define our existing social relations, structures, and behaviors (221) in order to expose exactly how oil as our source of energy has shaped our way of life. He finally argues, like LeMenager, that even literature can be seen as an outgrowth of fossil fuel use, challenging us to question the material and ecological weight of literature itself (234).

I want to finish this review on petroculture studies with *Fuel* (2018), where Heidi Scott delivers what the subtitle of her book promises, *An Ecocritical History*. Just like other petrocritics, she bases her research on the idea that the supply of a particular kind of fuel has specific influences on a given culture, its landscapes, cultural values, ambitions, fantasies. The sources of fuel she looks at are biomass (grass, wood, charcoal), fossil fuels (coal and petroleum), and primary energy (renewables like wind, water, sun, atom). Her historical overview not only provides information about the materiality of fuel, but by reading a wide variety of literary texts from the 19th century up to today (mostly American and British writers), Scott demonstrates how fuel has shaped human experience in any given period. For her, literature is a unique vessel to study the ramifications of fuel, because it is "potentially experimental, imaginative, speculative, political, ecological, and activist-oriented" (19). In her chapter on "Oil Ontology," she explores how oil has formed the American continent as well as American self-definition. Her literary source texts are, among others, Sinclair's *Oil!*, Kerouac's *On the Road* and Edward Abbey's *Desert Solitaire* and *The Monkeywrench Gang*. For Scott, these texts explore the exuberance and the skepticism or even catastrophe of automobile culture, such as the myth of the open road and the experience of time-space compression, the allure of continuous consumption advertised on billboards and roadside attractions. A subchapter on the attractions and pitfalls of the suburbs (think of daily commutes, land loss, waste of fuel for cars, driveways, and lawn mowers) are a logical addition to the study of the significance of road culture in the US.

Scott provides a wealth of source material about the history of fuels in their specific context, using a wide range of literary texts to underscore her factual information. In times of global warming and a growing awareness that we have been wasting energy to the detriment of our planet, she envisions a future with more sustainable energy sources, more muscle power, and savvy technological inventions. Becoming aware of how we (our own bodies, our desires, our ideals, and values) have been shaped by oil is a first step in initiating a necessary cultural and social turn for the future—a conviction she shares with the authors of all the texts that have been introduced in this review essay.

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