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Stephanie LeMenager, *Living Oil: Petroleum Culture in the American Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), xi+263pp.

LeMenager's book *Living Oil* provides a dense and thoroughly researched historical-cultural account of the importance of oil (or petroleum, the umbrella term which LeMenager uses to refer to "a diversity of nonsolid hydrocarbon resources" including oil and gas; 6) to twentieth century American culture. It makes a valuable contribution to the environmental humanities by directing its attention to a ubiquitous and, for modern culture, indispensable resource that usually 'hides in plain sight' and has found only infrequent recognition in cultural studies so far. Taking oil as its starting point, LeMenager's analysis examines the "foundational role" oil/petroleum has come to play "in the American imagination" (4), tracing the interdependency between an American cultural sensibility (expressed in everyday life as well as cultural artefacts) and the extractive industry.

Oil provides not only an energy resource but is found in a wide variety of artefacts, and thereby becomes itself "a medium that fundamentally supports all modern media forms" (6). LeMenager's contention is that modern Americans (a claim that could be extended to other petro-cultures around the world) experience daily existence as deeply steeped in oil: not only "living oil, breathing it and registering it with [the] senses" but also perceiving their immediate surroundings through petro-media (6). However, the contemporary moments of "peak oil" (expressing the assumption that we have reached or already passed the peak of maximum global oil supply) and "tough oil" (referring to the increasingly risky forms of exploration such as ultra-deep drilling and hydraulic fracturing that are needed to tap into new oil reserves today) present a challenge to American petro-culture and its aesthetics and create nostalgia for twentieth century "so-called easy oil" (15) and the comfortable lifestyle it provided for (mostly middle-class) Americans. LeMenager introduces the term "petromelancholia" to express this "unresolved grieving of conventional fossil fuel reserves" (16). Her critical exploration of the omnipresence of oil in US culture is guided by a "critical commodity regionalism" which focuses on the oil-rich states of California, Louisiana and Texas. Expanding from this regional focus, LeMenager's study excavates how the "national narrative of the twentieth-century United States" is tied in with the nation's history of oil exploration (14).

Living Oil's four equally long chapters follow a loose chronology from the 1920s up to the present. Each chapter looks at a variety of cultural forms, among them magazines, photography, documentary film, memoirs, poetry, novels, Hollywood movies, museum exhibits and educational bus tours sponsored by Big Oil. The first two chapters

elaborate on American petroleum culture, on how oil shaped the American imagination and how it finds expression in petroleum aesthetics. The third chapter focuses on contemporary petromelancholia, and the fourth comprises LeMenager's readings of three oil museums' projections of petro-energy's possible future.

Chapter 1, "Origins, Spills", posits the 1969 oil spill in the Santa Barbara Channel as an "origin story" that underscores the ambiguous position oil occupies in the American imagination. The spill constituted a "traumatic" experience for the local, well-off Santa Barbara community (21) as it confronted them with the ecological destructiveness of petroleum culture and their complicity in the environmental damage it causes. LeMenager uses the Santa Barbara spill to trace the fault line that developed between the burgeoning environmentalism of the 1960s and the New Left that criticised the environmental movement for its lack of radicalism. In addition, the chapter expands on the potential hypocrisy of middle-class environmental culture emerging from and forming an intricate part of petromodernity. As LeMenager remarks on "the strange transience in public culture of oil spills," which stems from the national imaginary's deep saturation in oil (22, 65), she simultaneously foregrounds oil media's potential memory capacity. Her discussion of photography, print magazines and the internet as ways of conveying petro-culture's devastating effects and staging environmental protest foregrounds the archival function of these cultural forms which thereby provide a counterpoint to the inherent "lack [of] continuity" of spill stories (56).

In the following chapter on "The Aesthetics of Petroleum", LeMenager contends that in petromodernity "'oil' has become synonymous with the world [...] we know" (68) and is that which ultimately provides "happiness" within the logic of the North American petro-lifestyle (66). Petro-culture's hedonistic pleasures depend on fossil fuels and LeMenager's reading of classical US road novels, such as *Lolita* and *On The Road*, reveals modern car culture to be a case in point. In addition to literary texts, LeMenager examines popular films, among them *There Will Be Blood* (the movie version of Sinclair's *Oil!*) and *Fahrenheit 451*. Arguing that film shares an ambivalent relationship with oil, she points out the entertainment value of oil which is rooted in its aesthetic contiguity with "shit and sex" due to its biophysical properties (i.e. excess, energy, viscosity, etc.) (92). The central argument of the chapter is that oil created "overlapping media environments" (70) which are so encompassing that it is difficult to imagine an "outside" to petro-culture. Nevertheless, there are cultural forms that engage with the omnipresence of oil and "the inescapability of petroleum infrastructures" and these do so in the form of either "petrodystopias" or "petro-utopias"/"petrotopias" (71, 75).

The third chapter, entitled "Petromelancholia," addresses the nostalgia for twentieth century "easy oil" in the context of today's conditions of peak oil and tough oil. Petromelancholia is most explicitly evoked in contexts of disasters, for example BP's Deepwater Horizon blowout in 2010, which reinforce the recognition that contemporary oil exploration entails ecologically adverse externalities. LeMenager sketches out the simultaneous but conflicted emotional investment in, on the one hand, a modern lifestyle reliant on fossil fuels and, on the other, ecology and explains how melancholia

for modernity converges with environmental melancholia. LeMenager discerns the experimental genres often used by environmental justice activists, such as videography or blogs, as particularly relevant in this context, not only because they hold the potential to represent ecological endurance but also because they function as a means to create empathy and sociality. Similarly, she argues, the novel provides a means to disclose the often abstract and obscure but nevertheless material dimensions of oil as an energy resource. Finally, pointing toward the petro-industry's global reach, LeMenager leaves US territory and includes Nigerian writer Helon Habila's novel *Oil on Water* in her discussion.

Living Oil's final chapter turns to oil and energy museums in order to discuss possible oil futures. The chapter comes to the conclusion that, despite tough oil and the melancholic attachment to "conventional oil" (i.e. pre-peak oil), oil exploration still figures as the dominant future narrative. Presenting three case studies of oil museums in California, Alberta, and Texas, LeMenager shows that the "operational aesthetics" remains a guiding principle for science and industry museums, including oil museums. Within this aesthetics, ultra-deep drilling, fracking and the techno-managerial fixes to the ecological damage these technologies entail continue to sustain America's petromodernity.

In the epilogue, Stephanie LeMenager confronts the topic of conceptualising "alternatives to Tough Oil World" and paths to "energy sustainability" (183). She stresses the role narrative and literature hold in this process, especially in terms of the "narrative recovery" of "oil's material effects" and the creation of "coherent [oil] narratives" (193, 184) as well as in terms of imagining "counter-narratives" (195). I agree that these are immensely important points to make, especially with respect to evaluating literature's function in a "Tough Oil World." For me, however, two related problems would have merited further elaboration:

1) If American culture (or, for that matter, any other petro-culture) is so fully immersed in and permeated by oil, how can the challenge of imagining a way out of oil—which LeMenager sees as a task for the humanities in particular—be successfully met? LeMenager touches upon this predicament at various moments in her book and admits that the end of petro-culture is arguably one of the most difficult things to imagine.

2) Throughout the text, LeMenager only hints at the connections between petro-industry, capitalism and neoliberal globalisation. Yet, these connections are arguably of fundamental importance. If "oil has become synonymous" with American modernity (68), it indeed must also be understood as a metonym of the economic system which it fuels. Specifically in the parts of the book where LeMenager turns to other national contexts, such as Germany or Nigeria, her account could have profited from a more explicit elaboration of neoliberalism as the underlying economic and political regime.¹

¹ I am happy to note that I had the opportunity to raise and discuss these points during the EASLCE webinar on "The Cultures of Energy" hosted by Dr. Stephanie LeMenager in December 2014. A video of the session is accessible to EASLCE members via the EASLCE webpage. With respect to the question concerning capitalism, LeMenager explained that for her, oil was the most predominant medium of rapacious American capitalism and the dimension through which its ecological effects became most

In this context, it would also be interesting to analyse to what extent the specifically American petroleum aesthetics that LeMenager discusses in her book have been exported (through popular media and capitalist globalisation), incorporated, adapted, and transformed in other cultures. Of course, this is a question that very much exceeds the book's focus as defined in its subtitle (*Petroleum Culture in the American Century*), but it might nevertheless point toward a future project engaging with the omnipresence of oil in our contemporary world.

The irony of creating a book about oil which, as an instance of petro-media itself, is deeply steeped in oil is not lost on LeMenager. Consequently, she closes *Living Oil* with a "Life Cycle Assessment" that calculates the energy inputs required to produce the book (201-209), thereby also prompting the reader to consider her/his own investment in modern petroleum culture. *Living Oil* is an insightful and thought-provoking book that offers an overdue contribution to the history of oil from a cultural studies perspective. The personal experiences and observations that LeMenager intersperses make for an accessible reading experience; at the same time, the subtlety and complexity of her analyses require a sustained engagement. So, it is a book to keep and not to resell, as LeMenager requests unsatisfied readers to do on the final page.

explicit. She said that, consequently, *Living Oil* essentially was about American capitalism (see video recording from minute 54:10 onward, <http://www.easlce.eu/category/video-webinars/>).