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Research Note: The Resources of Fiction

GRAEME MACDONALD

“I should have thought of it before, it’s too late now.”

Italo Calvino, *The Petrol Pump*

The opening sentence of Italo Calvino’s 1974 story “The Petrol Pump” expresses a regret wearily familiar to 21st century energy-angst. Published in the backdraft of the 1973 global oil crisis, the ethical thrust of the tale is galvanised by a narrator reproaching himself for not fuelling his car when filling stations are closing. Initial indecision whether to make a dash for gas to enable a “necessary” car journey out of town mutates into anguished reflection on an inability to resist the systemic conditions of modern petroliia. The narrator’s dismay at the discovery of his gasoline junkiedom is deepened by self-castigation for insufficient consideration to intensifying resource-pressure:

The gauge has been warning me for quite a while that the tank is in reserve. They have been warning us for quite a while that underground global reserves can’t last more than twenty years or so. I’ve had plenty of time to think about it, as usual I’ve been irresponsible. (170)

Nonetheless, an open station is located and the tank duly filled. The tale ends with the vehicle exiting the forecourt, leaving the reader to consider the consequences of such conscientious inaction. For the present-day reader, the ironic emissions of Calvino’s story linger: what to do, when the car has long bolted from the station? From an age of extended (yet always already depleting) “global reserves” this prediction is wayward at best; formed by familiar combinations of alacrity, wishful thinking and ingenuousness. In retrospect, as fossil-fuelled automobility discovers vast new markets across the globe, that “or so” stings the probability concerns of peak-oil with a waspish irony in its seemingly casual projection. In spite of Dr Hubbert and despite its fundamentally non-renewable “nature”, petroleum has continued to find a means and a relatively undisturbed way.

From an environmental perspective, of course, the sentiments expressed above, disconcertingly remain salient. Calvino’s slight narrative of the necessity of energy reflects, like only fiction can, on the fiction of energy’s necessity. Like most politically

effective literature, “The Petrol Pump” utilises speculation and supposition in subtle yet provocative ways. The conflict between the imagined ecological and economic consequences of Calvino’s narrator’s sorry actions, for example, is underscored by the shifting pronouns in the above excerpt; emphasizing the extent to which the individual regards his nascent petro-conscience as both privately compromising and publicly ineffectual, and therefore somehow excusable. Here, in short, is a prescient example of the ingeniousness of the privatisations and privations of oil-based modernity, where the sheer pervasiveness of oil in contemporary social infrastructures works as hard as ever to create a general structure of feeling surrounding its *inevitable* use (and misuse). The focalization also exemplifies what is now recognized as the privatization of energy guilt, resting the primary burden of ecological response to the problems s/he sees as causing in the individual, in both their “choice” of energy consumption and their “green” ethical behaviour.¹

Such irony should be instantly recognizable to contemporary scholars exploring correlations between culture and energy resources, from a perspective platformed by the ramifications the ’73 oil shocks continue to provide for the world energy-system and its geopolitics. It is conveyed by the provocative sleight of that “as usual” in the above cited paragraph, and driven by the essential paradox imaginative scenarios of energy’s limits continues to generate. These are accentuated within a post-peak, “ecologically modern” environment of “abundant” unconventional and “alternative” energy, amid technologically and geographically expanded resource frontiers.² It is an irony punctuated by the politics of an incipient environmental movement that backdropped “The Petrol Pump” in the early 1970s, a politics that remains crucial to interpretations of the present energy competitive world system. In 2013, export and demand for fossils continue to increase, despite widely verified evidentiary warnings that at least two-thirds of *known* carbon reserves must remain in the ground to control global warming (IEA Outlook). This, it is generally agreed, is simply not going to happen. Despite a high degree of “official” international consensus about this intensifying planetary process, implementation of radical de-carbonizing agendas has not generally transpired in the actions and policies of states and listed companies preoccupied by maintaining – and indeed increasing – supplies of oil, coal and gas. Duncan Clark and Mike-Berners Lee describe a stupefying duplicity enacted across

¹ Of course, neo-sustainability arguments pressed into service by corporate and political agencies worldwide maintain that environmental “crisis” is a future-deferred event, however relative the dispute over its temporality and inevitability. A counter-argument insists we are already experiencing that crisis in the present.

² That “alternative” signifies “not oil, gas or coal” reveals the definitive dominance of fossils in the world energy matrix.

the globe, where “green” but “nervous” (41) governmental administrations, remain “more concerned about what they have to lose” (85) from carbon restriction proposals and continue to encourage and enable the extraction of fossil fuels, maintaining (and indeed accelerating) the century long upward trend of the carbon curve and initiating what has been termed the “carbon-bubble”: where numerous monetary schemes and mechanisms, especially the stock market – perhaps the most threatening ecological system of our times – remain critically invested in fossil futures, to the likely detriment of a sustainable planetary future.³ Calvino’s story, it appears, retains its sardonic bite.

Such a situation is characteristic of what Frederick Buell describes as the “exuberant-catastrophic” oil society we inhabit (291). The short-lived era where oil was almost universally celebrated as an emancipating, “good” substance has long receded. Whereas the appreciation of oil’s benefits has not disappeared, it is perpetually haunted by degradation and disaster, forcing extensive contemplation of ways and means of moving beyond its threatening horizon. What, if any, is cultural theory’s role here? Decrying the renowned energy expert Vaclav Smil’s lament, in his 1994 book, *Energy in World History*, for what he regarded as a “huge conceptual gulf between energy and culture”, Buell argues that “energy history is significantly entwined with cultural history”, but in so doing notes “no effective response” has, to date, been made to try to bridge this gulf (274). The recent emergence of “Petroculture” as an increasingly prominent international sub-field of academic study and cultural practice bears promise the gap should and can be reduced.⁴ Its aim: to claim a space for critical, literary and artistic engagements with what has largely been a geological, political-economic and corporate substance, measured and valued by petrodollars and combustion power rather than (or indeed alongside) aesthetic modes of representation, image and narrative. By asking questions about oil within the entire energy landscape, the burgeoning work now emerging in this field is helping to recast the fundamental orientation and relationship of cultural forms to a material life sustained and underpinned by hegemonic forms of energy extraction, production and consumption. It is still in an early enough theoretical phase to generate reflexive queries such as Andrew Pendakis’s: “is there an aesthetics of oil or are its cultural manifestations too diverse and localized to be usefully generalized?” (8). The affirmative answer to this question relies, in part, on the way one elicits and frames the examples of what constitutes petrocultural production,

³ As Bill McKibben notes, in 2012 oil company assets and share values, as well as the financial futures system relied on approximately \$27 trillion priced unextracted carbon (2,795 gigatons) to be used eventually, much of it to be burnt.

⁴ See in particular the international research cluster at www.petrocultures.com. The inaugural conference took place in Edmonton, Alberta in September 2012.

of which more below. What *is* certain is that the alacrity of the concerns over energy and its constituent forms has endowed this field of study with a salient cultural relevance to be broadcast and more fully theorized.

Extracting Culture

I want to propose in this inquisitorial essay that a significant area of “effective response” lies in attempts to energize interpretations of cultural production, specifically literary fiction. Fiction, in its various modes, genres, and histories, offers a significant (and relatively untapped) repository for the energy aware scholar to demonstrate how, through successive epochs, particularly embedded kinds of energy create a predominant (and oftentimes alternative) culture of being and imagining in the world; organizing and enabling a prevalent mode of living, thinking, moving, dwelling and working. In industrial modernity this has been largely reliant on the extraction of fossil fuels. The extent to which this energy regime has both fostered and been reliant upon a culture of extraction is of increasing interest. Yet what is recognized as extractive cultural production remains questionable. As I will point out later in this essay fictional awareness offers more than stories about energy types and systems. It establishes a means to contemplate – and possibly to deconstruct – energy capital’s formidable representative skills, notably its narrativization of the “natural” necessity of oil to our functioning social systems. Oil’s sophisticated signifying-systems have been central to maintaining its position as the fetishized ur-commodity of modern globalized capitalism. While we can easily identify the ways in which certain formal and thematic concerns ensure Calvino’s succinct story’s recuperation into the evolving subgenre of world petrofiction, we must also understand how this also a tale explicitly driven – like all storytelling – by the formalized essentialism of energy in culture and society in general, albeit in a variety of abstracted forms.

In establishing the character of the relation between the global regime of energy extraction and production, and its fictional abstractions, cultural theory has its work cut out. One way for it to begin is by considering how and why the ironic entanglements of ecological modernity can be simultaneously sustained and exposed by the fictions that circulate around energy, not only by the fanciful projections and stories created to reveal or counter energy crisis, but also in a reaffirmation of fiction’s formal requirements and stylistic capabilities: its narrative energetics; its psycho-social dynamics; its requirements for causality, impetus and productivity in plot and character development and its chronotopic ability to straddle and traverse multiple times and spaces. Narrative requires power to become powerful. It can change speed, alter force, utilise digression, and in so doing proves a forum to reflect on matters of efficiency and the rationale for certain modes of energy and power. This is supplemented by fiction’s degrees of reflexivity: its awareness of its speculative (and often antagonistic

and inverse) relationship to time and the Real. A five-page story of one man standing at a petrol pump contemplating his compulsive selfishness can thus stir examination of humanity's current entrapments within and exacerbation of the deleterious effects of the phenomenal opportunities afforded by oil and gas in the petro-privatised culture of late globalized capitalism. Along the way, it can find time to muse not only on the development of the service economy and its relation to flexible labour regimes, but also the nature of its connection to the birth, life, death and resurrection of all forms of organic life on a planet thousands of years before and after the relatively short and explosive oil-era. These are expertly hinged by a twin-engine irony generated by relative levels of short termism (the use of dramatic suspense) and long-termism (imagined, "off-page" inevitabilities), in addition to deliberate register shifts and genre switches. We ask: will the narrator be able to fill his car in time to make his journey? But we also ask: will that journey, made feasible by the undoubted liberating opportunities of petrolic life, exacerbate the seemingly intractable dread problems surrounding energy (ab)use in the contemporary world system? The story ensures we answer yes on both counts.

In the protagonist's fears for the running of his car (and thus his way of life) "The Petrol Pump" also reveals fiction's basic reliance on propulsive devices; elementary units of charge that power action, event and consciousness, calibrated by laws of narrative motion and impressions of kinetic and potential energy transference. (These need not necessarily involve constant or *actual* motion or much, if any, movement – think of Beckett's minimalism, or the generic predicates for entropy in Naturalist writing). Like the laws of thermodynamics, fiction relies on momentum and transference; absorbing and exuding, circulating, conserving and converting energy and resources, not only on the level of narrative, metaphor and content but also in formation, production, dissemination and reception. (Is it churlish to point out that you are, after all, reading this on once-oil or once-wood?) The question, however, of how the remarkable energy *of* fiction is inextricably connected to the (often entirely unremarked and unremarkable) energy *in* fiction – the stuff that makes things *go* and happen in literary worlds – goes mostly unstated. This despite the spectacular products and results of primary and secondary energy conversions being visible throughout literature's modern history: imagine, say, *Anna Karenina*, *Things Fall Apart* or *One Hundred Years of Solitude* without coal-powered locomotives! Contemplate Conrad's novels without wind or steam. Consider the sprawling fiction of twentieth century suburbia – relating psyches, bodies and worlds saturated in oil-based products – suddenly shorn of plastics, deprived of automobility or domestic electric power, bereft of pharmaceuticals, denied the cheap food supplies of prime-moved fertilizer!

Necessary if inconspicuous, forms of energy may have remained a latent feature of literary fiction had contemporary culture's promulgation of sustainability as a pre-

dominant and debatable concern not intensified. This has challenged literary criticism to take a deeper and sharper discerning of the physical and aesthetic forms and variants of energy resources, fuelling and powering actions, events, storylines and textual structures throughout the history of fiction (and by extension, throughout culture and material history more generally). Emergent modes of energy research and criticism seem to disavow assertions such as Smil's that "timeless artistic expressions show no correlation with levels or kinds of energy consumption" ("World History and Energy" 559). They reach instead for a "fuller analysis" sought by Edward Casedy and Peter Grossman, involving "a sense of the social and philosophic context in which energy technology and resources are used, and a keen appreciation of what energy issues mean to the way we live and to the world we live in" (8). The questions asked in emergent modes of energy research and criticism are thus fundamental to the constitution, categories, methodologies and demographics of the literary field: does literature shape and shift in accordance with the dominant energy forms of the era it registers? Might it somehow play a role in *reproducing* (or, indeed, *resisting*) – perhaps inadvertently or unconsciously – a predominant energy culture? How does literature *use* energy and vice versa? Are literary modes – like social formations – brought about by developments in fuel or resource use to a far greater extent than we have previously considered? "What happens", as Patricia Yaeger asks, "if we sort texts according to the energy sources that made them possible . . . what happens if we re-chart literary periods and make energy sources a matter of urgency to literary criticism?" (306). Can we think, for example, of modernism outside an oil-electric context? Of Realism without steam or coal? Romanticism without wind or water?

To begin to answer these questions we have to become more adept at divining the specific fuel(s) literary modes run on. This does not necessarily entail following *only* work explicitly concerned with energy resources (though this might be a start!), despite the number of particular texts from world literature that can be considered "energy classics", such as Émile Zola's *Germinal* (coal, 1885), Fyodor Gladkov's *Energy* (hydroelectricity, 1932-38), Miguel Ángel Asturias's *Hombres de maíz* (1949) and *Banana Trilogy* (food, 1950-60), Henri Queffélec's *Combat contre l'invisible* (nuclear, 1969) or Gene Wolf's *Book of the New Sun* quartet (solar, 1980-83), Abdelrahman Munif's *Cities of Salt* quintet (oil, 1984-89), to name a few. To these (where, frustratingly, the topic and concept of energy remains rather incidental to established critical inquiry) we could add numerous others, in addition to myriad literary registrations of wood, wind, whale oil, paraffin, electricity, tidal water, biofuel, GM foods, etc.

Such work would be substantially supplemented by an interpretive strategy that considers ways literature can reveal energy's "hidden" ubiquity. A strongly developed strain of petrocultural theory focuses on the way in which the means and effects of oil are structurally occluded from its mass of consumers, making it less apparent as

an *explicit* object in social life and thus a specific topic in and for cultural production. For Peter Hitchcock, oil produces the most “violent” logic of all energy forms and in doing so militates against alternative imaginative forms of representation. Oil’s powerful “symbolic order” works influentially to present an inviolable discourse as to its prerequisite role in real life, its “omnipresence” creating a sheen of dependency “that paradoxically has placed a significant bar on its cultural representation.” In this view, oil’s “real” fictive power is such that literary fiction cannot hope to articulate it in realistic terms:

In general, oil dependency is not just an economic attachment but appears as a kind of cognitive compulsion that mightily prohibits alternatives to its utility as a commodity and as an array of cultural signifiers. ...I view the problem as primarily dialectical in the broadest sense, rather than as one of cultural expression by itself. (“Oil in an American Imaginary” 81-82)

Considering appropriate means of culturally expressing oil’s domain, the editors of a special oil-related issue of the journal *Imaginations* somewhat echo Hitchcock in viewing the problem as one of pervasive mystification. This is a result of the collusion of corporate secrecy and consumer repression typical of late capitalism, however “ecologically responsible” it declares itself:

the problem of visualization, of the proliferation of determinate, useful maps of our economic lives, is not specific to oil, but one politically structural to a system that is at once spectacularly consumerist and fully globalized on the level of production. However, it could be argued that oil is a uniquely occluded substance: not only does its exchange value engender an enormous corporate project of hiding, an explicit machinery of deception and spin, its pervasiveness, its presence, everywhere, perhaps singularly christens its position as “hidden in plain sight.” (Wilson and Pendakis 5; qtn from Szeman and Whiteman 55)

There is room for counter-argument here that would note two basic points: 1) that such an “everywhere-felt-but-nowhere-seen” condition is geo-culturally uneven; symptomatic of the uneven international division of labour, regulation, and ownership of oil capital; 2) that we *are* in fact extremely aware of oil issues, most especially in the over-consuming Global North, where environmental membership and activism is relatively high and influential. As I and others such as Michael T. Walonen have argued, these points are somewhat qualified by a comparison of international petrofiction (and other cultural work, such as documentary photography) from the various spaces of the world oil-system, notably that registering the experiences of those living and working in those “concealed” or peripheral zones of extraction. Subject to varying regulation, oil’s local presence and visibility is fairly explicit here and, some would

argue, openly “taken” rather than “secreted” away. Nonetheless, in the general, world-systemic terms in which oil and climate must, ultimately be framed, the oil-occlusion argument is compelling. It maintains the peripheral geography of fossil-fuel extraction on land and water, combined with what Rob Nixon has called the “slow” or “invisible” violence of its atmospheric and environmental effects, has always effectively “offshored” features of its transacting, refining, transmission and emission across the “advanced” productive economies of the Global North in particular (2, my emphasis). In this sense oil perfectly illustrates ecologically challenged modernity’s Janus-face. What could be eulogized by the road-tripping narrator of Nabokov’s *Lolita* as the “honest brightness of the gasoline paraphernalia” (153) of post-war America has darkened into a petro-reliant world persistently disturbed by what Buell describes as “a large portfolio of dread problems” (274). Despite these being increasingly difficult to ignore, Imre Szeman notes an obdurate “foundational gap” preventing public action on dirty energy’s predilection for crisis, a gap created by:

the apparent epistemic inability or unwillingness to name our energy ontologies, one consequence of which is the yawning space between belief and action, knowledge and agency: we know where we stand with respect to energy, but we do nothing about it. (“Literature and Energy Futures” 324)

We might heed this as a challenge for cultural theorists to take up: how can achieving meaningful action over the problems (and opportunities) of oil entail *knowing* oil better? The overwhelming majority of climate scientists now acknowledge that solving the problem of human-caused climate change must place less emphasis over the exactitude of the science than its communication and awareness. Most certainly this involves rethinking how to discern and locate the cultural life of emissions and their representative properties within a larger social/energy matrix. But once we discern the 500MW reactor in the corner of the parlour or the derrick in the drawing room, what then?

To reiterate: if we are to realize that historical events, economic relations and political formations are created and sustained by energy resources available and accessible at any particular time, and that such events and formations in turn, create *and are in part reproduced* by a specific energy culture, then reframing fiction as a crucial cultural resource historically suffused with energy, in form and substance, might require an altogether bolder and more ambitious interpretive approach. This would not only insist upon the crucial significance of energy awareness as key to discerning fundamental relations between cultural structures, energy use and predominant modes of production, but also posit the daunting yet exciting assertion that *all* (or perhaps *any*) fictional work is a veritable reservoir for the energy-aware scholar. We might see this as following Said’s theory of contrapuntal reading. If we all “live” an extractive

culture, regardless of our cognitive connections or geographic proximity to refineries, mineshafts and drill-zones, then our cultural production should reflect that, regardless of how abstract or distorted the projection. How this can be critically extracted and subsequently refined becomes the point of focus, meeting the challenge Hitchcock issues concerning energy's peculiar "cultural logic": how to interpret it as "a very mode of referentiality, a texture in the way stories get told." ("Oil in an American Imaginary 87)

In spite of legitimate concerns it may be unworkably elastic or over-determined, a "deep-energy" methodological perspective is, in fact, already underway in some sub-fields. Thermodynamic readings of the narrative and social concerns of the nineteenth and early twentieth century novel, for example, are well established.⁵ Electromagnetic expressions of force and speed, and a consciousness of newly mechanized motion, find their way into textual understanding of the technical and topical dynamics of the late realist novel and subsequent modernist movements from Vorticism to Futurism. Enda Duffy, writing on the importance of mass electrification to early twentieth-century life and consciousness can legitimately claim that "the shock of modernism . . . also relates to the shock of electric-shock therapy" (410). Where, then, are analogous pronouncements on later cultural moments and movements? Despite being stock full of fossil fuel's refinements, most fiction set in oil-gas-nuclear-renewables era modernity awaits similar energy-based elicitations. The accelerated mobility and intensified compressions of space and time enabled by carbon-driven capitalism, and petro-technology in particular, have altered the shape and geography of literary plot, not to mention the available global constituencies of character, custom and style, as they have massively altered global spatial, media and economic orders. Oil, like coal, clearly has form, but to what extent has this been fully recognized? How can we appropriately interpret its discretion, in order to connect it to the larger frameworks of energy I have discussed above?

As a newly recognized subfield, petrocultural criticism tentatively has sought to explore what Yaeger (summoning Macherey and Jameson) calls an "energy unconscious" (309). If, despite being up to our eyeballs "in oil", we fail to register the level of its insinuation across social and political life – and thus across the spectrum of aesthetic production, then the type of lesson presented in Calvino's story's remains environmentally critical. This is punctuated by the setting: the most repressed and forgiving arena in most of our regular dealings with petroleum is the gas station; a space of wilful forgetting, aided by ever-quickenened transaction strategies. Its multiple consumption opportunities do not stand in the way of a hasty exit. Here, we come into our closest contact with the substance we rely upon most for transport and mo-

⁵ See for example the work of Tina Young Choi or Allen MacDuffie.

bility, yet everything is in place to keep it out of sight, to protect our bodies from its touch and smell – and keep our eco-conscience in abeyance.

From the gas station experience upwards the principal definition of the “cost” of oil has been domestically economic, a point that needs understood partly as a *cultural* phenomenon produced by a specific mode of neoliberal political economy. Neoliberalism is an oil system, ironically enabled and sustained by on-stream petro-revenues and dramatic falls in post 1970s barrel prices (from the early ’80s switch to monetarism in Reaganism/Thatcherism, to the rise of the Oil and Gas Tsars of the post-communist Soviet Union) and heavily invested in both technological and commodity capacities with the fictive capital structures of electronic financial modelling systems. Finding the energy in cultural production, especially in a service-led context is partly imbricated in understanding the *social* and *economic* fictions of energy created, inhabited and reproduced within any petroculture, but particularly acute in the sphere of neoliberalism. These sediment and systematise prevalent conceptions of the necessity of various forms of exhaustible resource and work to maintain and often intensify the levels of investment placed upon them.

Part of the point in theorizing energy as cultural is, therefore, to expose and determine reasons for our acculturation to its hierarchy of material (and, increasingly, immaterial) forms and the manner in which they dictate fundamental aspects of social life and organization. If, as is often remarked, in an age of consumer sovereignty, we don’t really think *enough* about how we expect and trust the lights to go on when we flick the switch, then how is this related to what Owen Logan calls a “supply-side aesthetic”: the manner in which the consumer identity we inhabit reproduces the way we (fail to) perceive and portray our predominant energy infrastructures (105)? How we think conceptually of waste, expenditure, and remaining amounts has also, according to Logan, become “undialectical”, a point exemplified by the tendency for developed oil societies to offshore or export or make limited ethical claims on the associated pollution and waste, excising it geographically or temporally, as a problem of *elsewhere*, of the future, or by governmentalizing ineffective recycling programmes. Clearly how we “consume” rather than “use” and, crucially, *extract* fossil fuels makes us act and think about it in an uncritical, defective way.⁶ This is aided by the effective brand-management of the oil and gas corporate over the last twenty years or so. This suffered some relapse in the difficulties of BP, which, prior to the Deepwater Horizon

⁶ Duncan Clark, for example, argues that despite a fall in US emissions, partly due to shale gas fracking, a consequent increase in US coal exports have led to a rise in its carbon extraction and burning. His argument is that carbon measures should automatically be globally based, and on *extraction* rather than national emission rates (“The Rise and Rise”).

disaster was oil's most PR-savvy representative, but has, like big oil generally, rediscovered its mojo. In all these scenarios, an energy imaginary *beyond fiction* underpins fossils as epitomizing a future of security, efficiency, and, even "sustainability." "Unconventional" fossil fuel is represented as technologically innovative and thus largely positive, a "solution" to projected needs. Cheap or thin oil and gas is, thus, heavily mediatized in favour of on-going enclosures and expanded realms of extraction, legitimizing extended regimes of fossil accumulation. In this scenario the very concept of modernity as founded upon and reliant on depletion-based resources is ignored for a holding-pattern vision of a bountiful future.

Oil's emancipatory role in habitual experience is repeatedly vaunted in this incorporating system of petro-acculturation: how *could* we live without it? This has often been presented more as overwhelming threat than earnest challenge, particularly by those interested in retaining oil's dominance, who consistently remind us of the deep spread of oil products – and their socio-economic benefits – across modern life. Mathew Huber also confirms this mixture of fatalism and faux-pragmatism as a logical form of "petro-privatism" consonant with neoliberalism, a political-economic ideology oil and gas companies have thrived within ("Refined Politics" 306). This is underscored by Peter Hitchcock's "Everything's Gone Green: The Environment of BP's Narrative", which argues "BP's desire to move 'beyond petroleum' means more rather than less oil exploitation (104). Hitchcock's penetrating account of how oil companies have attempted to environmentally modernize by utilizing the power of narrative in corporate rebranding exercises.⁷ "Going Green" is perceived here as an exploitable extension to energy generation, rather than a replacement for (in)exhaustible carbon chasing. Perhaps only the petroleum industry could work so profitably to turn the perceived end of a crisis-bound substance as a crisis in itself, transformed into market opportunity.

Petrofiction and Beyond

Aided by the subtending practices of culture-project sponsorship, oil's representative conversions of "polluting" energy into "productive" or "good" energy are a prime example of the challenge, but also the opportunity, facing dialectical interpretive responses. We might, on some level, expect the wide scale naturalisation of non-renewable or "dirty" energy in carbon-anxious modernity to present a formidable

⁷ A number of cultural activist pressure groups campaign against the ingratiation of big oil in cultural institutions. In the UK, Platform London ([www.http://platformlondon.org](http://platformlondon.org)) and Art Not Oil (www.artnotoil.org.uk) have been increasingly prominent in their objections to oil sponsorship of the Tate Gallery, the 2012 Cultural Olympiad, the Royal Shakespeare Company and the Edinburgh Arts Festival, among many other cultural events.

blockage to “alternative” energy’s cultural perception and representation, yet petrofiction’s emergence as a truly “global” subgenre demonstrates literature’s capacity to energise purviews; confronting and repositioning the potent social and economic signifiers “naturalising” energy and contemporary petrolic living in general. It has conjoined with powerful modes of anti-resource-colonialism and eco-criticism (the bass notes of petrofiction) in seeking to heighten our planetary energy consciousness.

Introducing a volume of reviews of petrottexts, Imre Szeman argues these works

highlight the important role played by oil in contemporary society and the importance, too, of narrative in shaping the ways we understand, respond to, and engage with our oil ontologies ... there is, finally, a move afoot to puzzle out the implications of our dependency, as much metaphysical as material, on a slippery substance that connects technological futures with prehistorical pasts in ways that cannot but be difficult to conceptualize. (“Introduction” 3)

Certainly, our time of environmental dread has brought the critical momentum to elicit the long and deep significance of various forms of energy to literature and vice versa. The identification of fiction concerning and concerned about energy – not only with its limits and secure supply but also with concomitant themes of exploration and (over)production, capacity and consumption, and subthemes of conversion, distribution, and commodification – has also grown, albeit incrementally, in the period since Calvino’s story. An energetic form of criticism has also begun to construct a solid platform for the elaboration (and in many ways the re-categorisation) of a whole history of literature concerned with the history and future of the planet, amidst the geopolitical and biophysical machinations of global warming and the contemporary world carbon-nexus. The degree to which this work can exert traction on the established manner in which rising gas or domestic heating prices shake general volumes of energy indifference is interesting for students of the impact of cultural forms. Nevertheless, if, as Szeman and others emphasize, an energy awareness has *finally* begun to spread through the Arts, Humanities and cultural analysis generally, key questions arise: to what degree are conventional modes, not only of ecological literature (“the environmental novel”, the “ecopoetic imagination”, “ecocriticism”) but of literature in general limited in both style, approach, and purview? Have they enough sources and resources to deal with the size and scale of the “urgency” Yaeger (see above) emphasizes? Finally, how and why is the *form* of our dependency a critical matter?

As the most recognizable strain of “energy art”, petrofiction has its specific subconcentrations in exuberant (and damning) extraction narratives, local and transnational stories of oil’s development and its dramatic transformation of space, place and lifestyle. To these we can add tales of corporate corruption and petro-despotism; spill

and disaster; the conflict between oil capital and labor and even the “drama” of barrel prices and fictive petro-capital enacted across international territories. But in what ways might the fiction of drill-bits, mineral rights and gushers relating the *process* of oil fail to reflect its wider material and ontological spread, as well as Hitchcock’s “primary” dialectical form? Should not “petrofiction” be seen as much a fiction of “alternatives” or replacements to oil, both past and future, as it is about the super-commodity oil has become? Is not oil-based culture, by virtue of the (un)certainly of supply and ecological limits, (however much they may be continually shifting or postponed), always already a *post-oil* culture? Alternatives to oil dwell within and alongside oil culture, albeit in a rather spectral fashion, as absent presences demanding attention to their inevitable – or belated – appearance. Cultural production has configured these in various manifestations and interpretive manoeuvres, although by no means are alternative energy sources as explicitly acknowledged as oil. This is changing. As the prime energy form governing contemporary social forms drains away, we might expect new forms of resource fiction to become increasingly insistent. Whither hydrofiction? Windpoetics? Nuclear drama?

Petroleum culture is consistently haunted by its eventual depletion. A post-oil element is detectable in oil texts from the nineteenth century onwards, but since the 1960s a recognizable form of petrofiction has been driven primarily by depletion-anxiety. Here, contemporary fears about resource-wars and climate collapse (among many others) are reprocessed in apocalyptic narratives of floods, population wipeout, continental starvation, solar exhaustion, and bioenvironmental degradation. Scratch the surface of most dystopian narratives and types of resource cataclysm appear.⁸ Much of this work ponders the momentous eventuality of a world without large quantities of flowing oil – gasoline in particular. The zombified afterlife of petroleum in numerous post-apocalyptic, carbon-fretful narratives emphasizes how hard it is to let go. Constituencies remain hooked on its scant (and thus unevenly distributed) deposits. Think, for example, of the petro-desperation of the barbarian motorcyclists encircling the embattled renegade oil refinery in George Miller’s film *Mad Max 2* (1981), or the allure of the bitumen-shattered highway, navigated by a tattered oil-company map in Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* (2006), or the corpses strewn around gas pumps in Justin Cronin’s vampire-apocalypse novel, *The Twelve* (2012).

As post-oil culture mourns the passing of cheap and easy oil it speculates on the elevation of its potential alternatives. Oil is limited but not *totally* missing in novels

⁸ Conversely, no one seems to question the seemingly abundant (and presumably “clean”) levels of post-fossil energy powering the vast spaceships and megacities of utopian fiction, especially the multiverse energy worlds of Space Opera. These can be safely consigned as “idealist” by petro-realists.

like Sarah Hall's *The Carhullan Army* (2007) or Paolo Bacigalupi's *The Wind-Up Girl* (2009), for example, but their respective relation of a neo-communalist, new-diggers England and a flooded future Bangkok exemplifies an emergent multi-resource novel. This renders a world of mixed old and emergent new fuel and energy "choices" created from necessity-bound relations of anticipated fossil depletion and generalised resource shortage. Concentrations of food, wind, hydro, dung, wood and muscle (animal and human) – natural and biogenetically engineered – show how a imagined future projection of *less* doesn't necessarily imply a scarcity of energy, but emphasizes its control and expenditure as a capitalised resource throughout the modernity it helps establish, yoked to the surplus logic of powerful interests, pressed into the service of capital and (neo)empire. Capacity becomes relative, as opposed to absolute. The persistence of uneven access and private distribution networks ensure that regardless of its non-polluting properties, wind or sprocket-borne power remains, rather like future-Bangkok's illegally burnt animal dung, a "shit" form of "filthy" energy when tied to forms of conflict, corruption and oppression.

Consciously or otherwise, it is significant that the fictions of future energy-scarce scenarios contain salient caution about an almost-post-carbon future of "alternatives" that does not necessarily herald a renewables utopia. In doing so they reveal the *nature* of any society as bound-up with a specific energy mode and particular system of social power. This opens up a vista towards the long view of energy's commodification within the capitalist world-system, where, regardless of its degrees of "cleanliness", it has always been tarnished by powerful systemic organization, controlling price, access, distribution, and consumption. The predominating spectre of supply-anxiety in late-capitalism has ensured that it is rare to see an imagined future where *less* energy is automatically "good". Though the logic and chronology of speculative fiction's energy scenarios may be future-set, its contemporary cognition is as energy-conscious challenge, via either allegorical interpretation or verisimilar credibility, as a world of the possible; a shape of things to come (or as they *are* for the billions of fuel-poor on the planet) under the irrepressible logic of contemporary petro-finance and on-going carbonisation. So much (or, perhaps, so *less*) for the future.

Undoubtedly, speculative fictions of future energy landscapes present uncomfortable contemporary questions. At the very least, in visions of a world with less oil, it offers glimmers of what transition might entail. A problem, however, may lie in potentially unexpected consequences of their progressive eco-cynical vision and generic familiarity; bolstering a fossil-politics opposite to what might be intended. "Look", an oil-company spokesperson can claim, "at the barbarous, chaotic world without oil"; the perfect riposte to any radical imagining of a non-polluting replacement. It could be argued that our preoccupations with scarcity have perpetuated a present situation where abundance remains desirable. The literary fiction of inevitable fossil depletion

nonetheless provides the means for its critics to confront the fictions – social, literary, geological – of on-going abundance we face in the present. Why is it, for example, that imaginary futures of less always seem to run – implicitly or explicitly – on the drama of “more”? Involving the objective of regaining or recovering maximal (usually “dirty”) energy systems we critique as unworkable in the present? As I remarked above, the historical examples of most petrofiction reminds us that themes and issues as depletion anxiety are embedded within the enthusiastic pursuit of expanded extraction. A dialectical relation has always configured cultural, political and economic notions of energy’s limits within patterns of development and desire generated by perceptions of its (real and imagined) limitlessness. In fact, the social fiction of unhindered and waste-free energy flow – always already a degraded notion in a systemic culture of non-renewables – unconsciously pervades most, if not all cultural production from the coal age onwards.

Oil Fantasies...

A point that cannot go unmentioned here: given the available extent of under-nuanced depictions and professions of oil’s dispersed ubiquity, amid perpetual supply-anxiety animating environmentalists, governments, oil corporations and private consumers alike, petroculturalists perhaps haven’t paid much attention to the constructive story where such a superlative mode of energy *has been and remains* a “necessary”, essential and ameliorative force in modern human history. Looking back at “The Petrol Pump” now, from the century long and continuing “success” of oil, a question arises: has contemporary eco-culture’s default setting of the condemnatory registering of “dirty” energy been one-dimensional? Has it not realised fully why hydrocarbons have been “celebrated”, or adequately qualified their powerful attractions? To get beyond “dirty-oil” we have to better comprehend and distinguish its powerful, emancipatory attractions.⁹ To reiterate: imagine a hospital without pharmaceuticals or plastics, a food supply without fertilizers. What would an oil-free utopia that would dispense with these look like?

⁹ This pertains, again, to reappraising cultural perceptions and the acculturation of particular energy forms. Consider, for example, a sport such as Formula One Racing, a pursuit I personally find objectionable on many grounds, not least its contribution of a massive carbon footprint. I recognize, however, its seductive, enthralling aspects: speed, danger, competition, design and technology – and how the copious and economic burning of fossil-energy contributes to these as appealing elements to a large amount of people. Does, therefore, the task of theorizing energy not require rethinking what constitutes and defines speed, force, power, competitiveness, etc.? And, following this, how automobility is socially organized, culturally generated, historically contextualized?

However oil's "usefulness" is perceived, it is clear that much of the culture-world is hooked on relating its devastating qualities at the expense of its evident material and infrastructural qualities. Can cultural and theoretical work help to evolve distinctive replacements for these? To this degree our criticism, like our technology and terminology, might not be sufficiently refined. But interpretively skilled cultural practitioners prove crucial – not solely in decoding and countering the signifying prowess of oil capital, but in framing the social and planetary "story" of oil and narrativizing alternative energy signatures and structures in a form and space outside orthodox or vested representations.

I have argued that in order to detect energy's cultural properties, fictional resources could be read more energetically. One way of managing this involves considering how to rethink why certain texts are deemed *literally* "about" oil, electricity, coal, etc., and others less so. Most fiction dealing explicitly with energy, whether as problematic or enabling force, typically involves a coming-to-energy-consciousness, often in the context of plots about energy rights or fuel discovery and resource deprivation. The "lightbulb" moment in Calvino's story occurs in the forecourt of a new type of "self-service" filling station. In retrospect, it is instructive that its narrator's petro-anxiety is paralleled (and somewhat mitigated) by the enthralling promises of an incipient age of consumerism. This is packed into a moment of false consolation where he considers how it is that the burden of oil consumption and its excision fall on him as he performs – with all the consumer "choice" of an addict – the final labour of the energy company that profits from his purchase: pathetically, he "works" the pump and injects the hi-octane "poison" into his thirsted vehicle. He sublimates his shame and resentment by resorting to an overtly sexualised populist road-fantasy – the ultimate fiction of an oil-based cultural life. The genre morphing is deliberate, recalling Ryszard Kapuscinski's much cited statement, in his *Shah of Shahs* (1980) concerning the "illusion of a completely changed life" that the "anaesthetizing" effects of oil offers. "Oil" writes Kapuscinski, "is a fairy tale, and, like every fairy tale, is a bit of a lie" (35). This famous observation remains ever relevant, and inhabits Stefanie LeMenager's recently expressed concern, that if relations between cultural work and oil might enable a way to realise the transition to another energy order, they must confront the deeply embedded aesthetics of petroleum in our lifeworlds. A major part of this is "the larger emotional geography of automobility": the manner in which car culture reproduces an "affective context" manifest in the way we organize and navigate our material worlds, from our built environments to our work timetables, consumer goods, leisure choices, etc. "In brief", claims LeMenager, "we have to consider the consequences of loving sprawl" (60-61).

In its oblique registration of a post-supply-side ontology, "The Petrol Pump" is a rare example of a way to expand the established parameters of what we can define as

“petrofiction” in the way LeMenager describes. Some petro-stories are driven by reflection on what characters do not know (or indeed care) about the life and designs of oil: relating the corporate secrecy of oil companies, or occasionally questioning how (and from where) energy forms “magic” their way to engine or household. Tortured by his inability to overcome the ramifications of his fuelled-up hypocrisy, Calvino’s narrator at least acknowledges the contradictions punctuating relations between energy, capital accumulation, and environmentalism in modern service culture. These relations an energy-conscious fiction and criticism might seek to further extrapolate and represent in all manner and modes of fiction where energy supply is either *not* recognized or simply taken for granted. There comes a time, however, when this ignorance is unsustainable:

All of a sudden I’m seized by a craving to get out of here; but to go where? I don’t know, it doesn’t matter; perhaps I just want to burn up what little energy is left and finish off the cycle. I’ve dug out a last thousand lire to siphon off one more shot of fuel. (174)

As the urge to leave the scene of the crime transmutes into a cathexis to Hollywood/car ad fantasy, the story relies on its reader to see through a recognizably poor attempt to deflect guilt. This hollow agency – acknowledged by the protagonist – is ultimately intended to instil recognition of oil’s duplicitous character, and very much aimed at the environmentally aware reader’s (relative) ethical sensibility. Here, fiction’s constructed ambivalence and advantageous access to consciousness and speculative scenario highlights duplicity in the romantic engineering of energy’s illusions. Once we exit the shameful (fictional) realm of the forecourt – the intimate space of our oil encounter – are we who occupy the real free to forget “bad” energy and continue the mundane fantasy of its “special” effects across modern life? At a rhetorical stroke, fiction exposes the fictive life of oil. But how does it engineer a properly energized response? To imagine a world where oil use “doesn’t matter” is to live literally in another world. Calvino’s story wryly parodies the absurdity of desiring a limited, destructive resource, but doesn’t know how or where to go without it. The ironic use of a carefree, cheap metaphor of driving off into the sunset self-reflexively exposes what Szeman has called the “fiction of surplus” that both literary *and* material life seem stuck within; unable to countenance a world of less or “easy” energy, despite impending lack (“Literature and Energy Futures” 323).

The fantasies of oil culture continue in part because, as I have noted, oil *is* fantastic. That it is often misrecognised (or indeed mis-used and abused) as such is part of the problem. The surplus imaginary continues in “environmentally-responsible” late capitalist culture, often in the earnest acknowledgement of the “problem” of energy. Mass-market fictions offer potential here, to consider an alternative energy-imaginary

even if only by revealing its dominant and residual forms. Hollywood, for example, enthusiastically embraces “dirty” energy’s pay dirt. The greenwashed plots of recent fantasy blockbusters, from *Avatar* (2009) to *Avengers Assemble* (2012) to *Batman: The Dark Night Rises* (2012) revolve around the miraculous technological discovery of cheap, limitless but *clean* and “ecological” forms of energy. Such films present inevitable conflict over its production and acquisition by either state or private interests. They even query the dubious (super)heroic efforts required to realize them. The question of why a quantitative (or even free) replacement for “bad energy”, offering similar power and capacity is required isn’t really on the agenda. For why would mass entertainment forego the virtualised drama of crisis for a more philosophically nuanced approach to energy’s value, or even offer a more revolutionary concept or utopian suggestion about an alternative system of use and distribution? The spectacle of flat environmentalism is now a preset-stance in the circulation of global cultural commodities, where a liberal-humanism *in fiction* can be espoused by corporate culture-producers, who, regardless of the degree to which they see themselves as somewhat apart from the “bad” energy corporate remain heavily co-opted into the cultural and economic hegemonies of petrolife. “Less” can only appear dramatically sustainable for a finite amount of time within the actual world-system, where energy’s cultural capital is remarkably aligned to culture’s energy capital.

Conclusion: where’s the alternative?

The consolidation of petroculture as a critical means of reconceptualising energy enables reflection on the usefulness of *all* kinds of fiction – from across genres and literary history – for pressing political questions and eco-philosophical reflection in an energy-challenged present. The subtext of Calvino’s story questioned the supremacy of fossil fuel in the 1974 context where “is there any other choice?” was a legitimate but rather novel query. It returns in the warming era where unconventional energy, oil, coal and gas are resurgent, and large areas of the earth await pockmarking by new drilling projects. How does this cast the warnings and anxieties of depletion expressed in most petrofiction? Does not fracked gas or thin oil mark Calvino’s piece as a product of an *outdated* era of high “peak” anxiety? Might the deferral of “peak” oil culture hinder the development of new subgenres in the literature of energy?

However we choose to meet these conundrums, late energy criticism must make it apparent that it can’t all be about petrol. Literary history has a considerable stockpile of energetic potential. Fiction has circulated and conveyed resources of heat, light, relative speed, force and motion long before *Don Quixote* registered wind-power in 1605. From its rise to cultural prominence in modernity, the Novel is replete with moments where its great theme of transition reflects developments in energy and fuel provision. Consider, for example, the moment – recoverable in numerous novels – in

Giuseppe de Lampedusa's archetypally modern novel of tradition and revolution, *The Leopard* (1958) where the death of the aristocrat Don Fabrizio is framed by the phenomenal change Italy has experienced in his lifetime, a transition measured by the accelerated *story* shift from the age of horse-driven power to the jet engine. *The Leopard's* temporal narrative jolts characterise the co-existent elements of most energy transitions but critical readings of the novel's expressions of the intersections between historico-political progression, shifting political culture and transnational geography leave energy provision subsumed. In these and countless novels before and after the age of petroleum, energy makes history and it has form in so doing; but despite providing the engine-room of plot, story, and context, the aesthetics and opportunities created by fuel power are not sufficiently registered, surfacing only periodically, during times of high resource-anxiety. In an unprecedented time of permanent conflict over supply, availability and destructive toxicity this critical blindness is unsustainable. The corrective involves new angles of methodological perspective and conceptual debates that have begun in the petrocriticism noted above. It certainly means consistently unveiling the banalized acculturation to prodigious uses of "natural" non-renewable energy in growth-obsessed polities and economies. The task is truly formidable, given the intensifying spread of oil-based development across the globe.

The challenge is thus made to critics across the genres of fiction making, from literature to cinema: if *all* fiction is potentially energetic, valorizing energy use, then how do we kinetically assert our claims and configure our readings to make it more apparent? The bedrock of this question is not only formed by the simple fact that the formal conditions for all narrative – even the most minimalist or "slo-fiction" – require a degree of forward momentum for events, space, mobility and development: as a basic unit of charge, but also by recognizing that if literary form is always to some extent an abstraction of the social, then interpretive issues and critical formations of capacity, power and supply determine *all* worlds. This requires we stretch our definitions and reconsider historical sedimentations of genre and period. "Petrofiction" in this frame is certainly stories about platforms, drill-bits, combustible transport, deadly spills and exploration-rights. But it's also about the world a specific fuel creates and maintains; about the relation between the oblique and surface world of fuel; a world of electronic gadgets, imported goods and financial transactions reliant on oil consumption but abstracted from the backstage forms of its conversion, extraction, refining and delivery, from sequestered pipelines and petro-guerrillas to compromised forms of democracy.

How trite or redundant, then, in this view, is the claim that given the global cultural reach of an oil and gas dominated world energy system, *all* fiction is petro-fiction to various removes? That all fiction, pre and post-oil, can be measured by its relationship to the transformed aesthetic and material world that oil created and threatens

to revolutionize again, by either its absence or its carbonizing essence? Is fuel *that* fundamental to culture and cultural production? If a future of eventual diminishment or unworkable or unwanted energy types is certain, and we resort to a world of reduced force, even one of post-prime moving, then work published prior to oil (or outside the carbon-complex) becomes re-energised by the examples it offers of a world constituted via alternative energy sources.

LeMenager argues that

the petroleum infrastructure has become embodied memory and habitus for modern humans, insofar as everyday events such as driving or feeling the summer heat or asphalt on the soles of one's feet are incorporating practices...de-coupling human corporeal memory from the infrastructures that have sustained it may be the primary challenge for ecological narrative in the service of human species survival beyond the twenty-first century. (26)

What would a non-hydrocarbon imaginary resemble, after humanity's experience of oil? Reading fiction in this light offers eco-chronological backflips. A bounty of refuelled scenes from metropolitan core to oil-deprived periphery of literary history offer a means to "re-couple" our pre-oil energy memories to consider their usefulness for a post-oil world. Reading pre-oil texts from a post-oil perspective becomes particularly instructive. Did people really *walk* "sixty miles each way" on errands and business, as Mr Earnshaw does in matter-of-fact fashion, near the beginning of Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847)? Will literature after oil become more pedestrian? Certainly post-automobiliar narratives of on-foot struggle, such as *The Road* or Joshua Ferris's *The Unnamed* (2010) seem to suggest we re-attune ourselves to an embodied aesthetic with a rich literary history, from Rousseau to Baudelaire, Beckett and Sebald. Stendhal's famous aphorism from *Le Rouge et Le Noir* (1830), that "a novel is a mirror on a highway walked" – somewhat eclipsed by an age in which the mirror is more likely to reflect a highway burned up by an SUV – comes back into focus here. LeMenager speculates on what might be considered as a "post-petrol style", to challenge the autoerotic, affective concentrations of mass car culture, and asks if, in a world attracted to low growth and reduced output there might be an "erotics of post-sustainability" on a par close to the "affective intensity" oil living provides (61). An entire corpus of ambulatory fiction awaits this type of analysis, but it is wholly naïve to think of the end, however prolonged, of petroleum as automatically ushering in a new, "older" era of slower movement and localized distance. It might require, as Allan Stoekl has argued, a wholly refurbished theory of energy, involving a redefinition of its utility, necessity, and use-value, as well as its physical and philosophical "qualities", to challenge modernity's love of gasoline speed and combustion prowess; it's continual pursuit of maximum output and its captured definitions of energy efficiency and

economy. For Stoekl, “we have no choice but (miming Bataille) to elaborate a theory of excess in an era of radical shortage, a practice of human-powered velocity in an era of gas lines” (193). He insists this cannot involve a simple return to a romanticized past, as a “good duality” to carbon-made modernity, without recognising the importance of energy excess and burn as crucial – but non-polluting – features of human, bodily expenditure.

The extent to which such terms are placed within and against their understanding and operations in the closed global economy of petro-capitalist time and space, presently running out of gas, is crucial. For Stoekl, the solution is to fundamentally rethink animate power, joy and labor, within a radically re-localized spatiality:

The radical finitude of fossil fuel — the Nature that refuses to die, even when it gives itself up and runs out (and its running out is its reaffirmation of its singular autonomy) — is the opening of muscle expenditure, the squandering of excited organs. (202)

Such a view, in conjunction with the findings of modern bioenergetics, presents an interesting platform to reconsider the way we re-energize scenes from literary history. Think, for example, of Konstantin Levin’s appreciation of a “sea of cheerful common human labor” scything crops in part 3 of Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina* (1877). In a novel where the development of steam-driven motive power engages with massive transformations in agro-class development, this renowned scene reminds us of the most primal and fundamental energy form: organic muscular exertion. But it also underlines the long connection between energy “production”, resource ownership and labor exploitation. Similar attention to “alternative” energy sources in the anticipated future-without-oil present opportunities for historical re-reading. The giant log pile behind Mr Knightley as he converses with his eventual wife in Jane Austen’s *Emma* might have long appeared incidental. Now, in petroleum’s deferred wake, it denotes not only an age of wood but also the invested power and prestige in the ownership of stockpiles of energy throughout history.¹⁰ Consider the transformative hydro-active power of a water wheel that runs the nail factory at the commencement of Stendhal’s *Le Rouge et Le Noir*. These countless scenes become more than incidental or isolate scenes of the historical entanglement of fuel power, resource-based capitalism and the class control of extractive production: they become critical fuel for fiction’s effective recuperation and recycling of the energy forms made peripheral by the oil age and the cultural forms associated with it. Calvino’s narrator’s day wasn’t, after all, to be about fuel levels, but in the end, in order to move forward, it had to be. However we

¹⁰ Emma Woodhouse’s name takes on a different hue in a biomass attentive reading!

interpret it, this has to be construed as a problem. If anything, “The Petrol Pump” reminds us that the warning light set in 1973 continues to blink. To properly energize culture in petromodernity’s wake requires huge theoretical resolve to jumpstart the practical effort: nothing less than wholesale critical transformation and renewability.

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Everything New is New Again

MCMASTER CULTURAL STUDIES
READING GROUP

Paul Smith, ed. *The Renewal of Cultural Studies*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011. 266 pp.

It can be difficult to review an anthology. At the very least, the numbers are stacked against the lone reviewer, who must account for multiple arguments, interventions, and articulations all on her own. This is perhaps even truer of Paul Smith's recent anthology, *The Renewal of Cultural Studies*, which boasts twenty-seven contributions, held together by one of the thinnest of discursive threads - that thing we like to call cultural studies. And while twenty-seven may not constitute a multitude (this is not a large book and the individual contributions are brief), these diverse contributions no doubt reveal that many academics, spanning across multiple disciplines and continents, will certainly contradict one another in powerful, provocative, and perplexing ways. In order to even the odds, the Cultural Studies Reading Group from McMaster University sought to tackle *Renewal* en masse: the following review arises out of a semester-long series of discussions between the members of the CSRG as we sought to grapple with the plethora of ideas presented in *Renewal*.

1. A Long, (Long) Time Ago.

In the early days – whenever those early days may have been, and it all depends on who you ask and where they've been – cultural studies must have seemed a new world of unlimited potential, of political efficacy and interdisciplinary ferment. In those halcyon days, when the “mega-anthologies” roamed the earth, the definition of cultural studies was still up for grabs and produced what often appears in hindsight as an excess of naming, labelling and delineating, a process that still continues in dribs and drabs to this day. However, as Paul Smith suggests in his introduction to *Renewal*, the early days are long since gone: it's probably about time to stop asking what we are and instead ask what we—the collective noun of “cultural studies”—can do. The communal answer of Smith *et al*, though, is less a roadmap than a bar fight, and the transition would seem to be from a Terra Nullius of exploration and adventure to the wild west, where everyone now owns a stake, one which they seek to defend from interlopers. Before engaging with *Renewal*, we believed that the different branches of contemporary cultural studies held some conceptual ground in common: Marxism,

feminism, semiotics, postcolonialism and historical context. After finishing, we're no longer so sure.

2. What Goes Around Comes Around.

Let's not rely, again, on the *OED*, but why *renewal*? What does it mean to call for the renewal of anything, particularly something like cultural studies? It could imply that cultural studies is like a credit card—ubiquitous, over-extended and subject to a built-in obsolescence that requires reissue. It might mean that cultural studies has exhausted its reserves, demanding, if not defibrillation, then an energy gel pack to fortify it for the duration. It could mean we are dissatisfied with the look and feel of cultural studies and seek to overhaul it with a makeover. And if we renew, how do we proceed? Do we, advertently or not, steamroll the margins in a wave of zealous gentrification? What (or who) do we jettison? With whom do we forge connections? Who decides?

Not all renewals are created equal; not all renewals produce the intended results. And yet, sometimes renewal can clarify. Renewed, we can finally articulate some concept, feeling or frustration we've been struggling over for months, years or decades. In the case of *Renewal*, Paul Smith imagines renewal in this way: as the crystallization of the desire that Jameson named cultural studies into a clearly defined, if faceted, field of study, the sort of thing upon which robust university departments are built and maintained (1-3).

However, if this book lays the groundwork for cultural studies' vibrant future, we find ourselves respectfully questioning the foundation on which we are meant to build. Though a few pieces inspire and engage, many of these essays call for a renewal that assumes the irrelevance of the current iteration of cultural studies. The renewals proposed ask us to rehash old questions—*are we or are we not disciplinary?*, re-entrench old boundaries—*we are not feminists, film scholars, poststructuralists, etc.*, or adopt the aims of other fields—*we should be more like historians, Marxists or ethnographers*—as aspirational for cultural studies scholars. This is the risk of renewal: that it will mire us in a perpetual feedback loop.

If cultural studies requires renewal—and it may well—then we would humbly submit that renewal should come of the confidence to refuse the temptation of renewal. Renewal is alluring, but can be dangerous: it orients one towards overhauls, yard sales and new beginnings, but cultural studies has begun; it cannot begin again, no matter how many times we raise the question *what is cultural studies?* Renewal must instead address a field that we ourselves (in North America) persistently frame as precarious addendum. What if, in renewal, we gave up on this self-imposed and often institu-

tionally-reiterated precarity? What would happen if we, as cultural studies scholars, proceeded with the notion that our field—like so many others—is built out of the work itself? This does not mean we would eschew self-examination or disciplinary critique—these are essential—but that we move beyond imagining cultural studies as a pursuit requiring justification. Cultural studies may need precisely the kind of renewal Smith calls for, a renewal that engenders solidity, but what if we sought it by assuming our relevance and getting on with the work itself?

3. We Are All Marxists Now...

One of this collection's big claims is that Marxism must be acknowledged as cultural studies' basic frame of reference, its *sine qua non*, as Smith puts it in his introduction (6). Several essays follow suit, calling for a turn back to political economy and production as fields of analysis and intervention. We were encouraged by the robustness of this debate in contributors like Randy Martin, Eric Cazdyn, S. Charusheela, Max Gulias, and Marcus Breen, in whose hands terms like "economy" and "culture" bear no resemblance to the determinist categories that, they remind us, cultural studies was designed to avoid in the first place; instead both terms, and the relation between them, are "kept open as questions," to borrow Gary Hall and Clare Birchall's cautionary phrase (75).

There are risks to a recommitment to Marxism, however. Smith's introduction walks into one of them when it claims that cultural studies has to move beyond its mega-anthology moment, trading disciplinary cohesion and defined methodologies for that era's capaciousness, its "libertarian" spirit (1). But has cultural studies ever been so *ad hoc* and polymorphous as all that? We thought Jameson's interpretation—that those mega-anthologies' breadth was the translation of 1960s new social movements into academic discourse—was more compelling. Filtered through identity politics, grappling with hybridity and intersectionality, and working towards the "articulation" of differently-positioned, non-disciplinary "-studies" and their constituencies, the mega-anthologies¹ documented not a suppressed totalization, but an important attempt to renew the language of opposition and class consciousness for the decolonizing and liberatory politics of what Michael Denning's contribution here helpfully terms the "age of three worlds" (136). Smith's characterization of the interdisciplinary euphoria that followed the mega-anthologies as "libertarian" and "laissez faire" (2), and his insistence that we get beyond it, is at the very least contentious. We're all for putting politics and economy back in the centre of the agenda, but isn't there a way to do that without dismissing the interdisciplinary ferment that has given cultural

¹ Or at least the anthology Jameson reviews in detail: 1992's era-defining *Cultural Studies* (Grossberg, Nelson and Treichler).

studies its particular shape?

4. ...Except Stuart Hall?

One good indication of how this *Renewal* sells the mega-anthology moment short is in its treatment of Stuart Hall. Apparently there are a few of him. And each version of Hall stands in for the critical errors of an earlier phase: mistaking “interests” for politics (Smith); neglecting feminism (Carole Stabile); stating, but not overcoming, the gap between intellectual work and activism (Henry Krips); naïvely positing ethnography as one way to bridge that gap (Lisa Breglia); too caught up in sign consumption to notice changes in production (Max Gulias); and too enamoured of Gramscian hegemony to be useful in post-hegemonic times (Hall and Birchall, though S. Charusheela swims against the current on this topic).

Hall’s career has been long and varied, to be sure, but his own engagement with Marxism should be part of this conversation.² Meanwhile, if *our* frame of reference is Marxist, then we might also try to historicize Hall’s work. Hall’s own recent essay on the formation of clubs and editorial boards around the *New Left Review* raises a key point: the underlying project that emerges from the New Left milieu—the idea that postcolonials could affiliate themselves with an existing, if battered, organized left, all in the interest of “articulating” an alternative to national, imperial chauvinism and mid-century capitalist expansion—seems worth holding onto. Parts of *Renewal*, it should be said, draw from the very diasporic and transnational frameworks that Hall helped put on cultural studies’ agenda: essays by Cazdyn, Grant Farred, Sophia A. McClennen, and Mahmut Mutman all complicate the unreflexive critique of Hall we see elsewhere in the book.

Somehow, Hall has become a new litmus test: did he deviate from a more viable Marxism by miring left scholarship in identity politics and discourse analysis, mistaking representation and against-the-grain readings for more effective forms of counter-hegemonic practice? Or instead, was his itinerary through his period’s major theoretical concepts—deconstruction, representation, communication, postcolonialism, many others—a savvy and intellectually formidable “articulation” in its own right, inviting different branches of the postwar cultural turn to understand themselves as a potentially cohesive political formation? When he speaks of hegemony, Hall always understands it as a project—as something that intellectuals and others need to *do*. Should we be so eager to move beyond that?

² The Thatcher-era debate around Hall’s ‘Marxism without guarantees’ in journals like *Marxism Today* and *Race and Class* is particularly important in this context.

5. Renewal despite ourselves?

If an essential element of cultural studies as a collective project is its challenge to the disciplinary divides that help obscure the fundamental irrationality of capitalism as a social system (Edwards, Hayes and McCarthy 5), then Smith's collection perhaps unintentionally performs the renewal it calls for, even while the tendency of many of the collected essays is, rather, a "re-entrenchment" of various positions within the established divisions of academic labour. Given Smith's introductory premise that cultural studies is now largely established as a discipline unto itself, the danger of such enfranchisement is that what Jameson insists on calling the "postdisciplinary" challenge of cultural studies—its generation of a negative space allowing for disciplinary critique alongside productive inter-disciplinary convergences—will be lost (Jameson 18).

In the roughly fifty years of cultural studies' existence, neoliberal forms of governance have made steady gains, introducing market logics into the very heart of institutions that have historically harboured important sites for their critique. *Renewal* registers this shift in a sustained call for self-awareness that sounds through the diverse positions informing this collection.³ The thread of institutional analysis running through *Renewal* indicates that the critical space opened up by the field must now confront the conditions that make its own existence possible. Against the antidisciplinary stance and muddled self-reflexivity that often provide an all-too-ready caricature of cultural studies, we were heartened by *Renewal's* call for a responsible disciplinarity that engages with both critical tradition and the institutional structures of privilege and power that make such work possible.

But one should make a distinction between the danger of cultural studies becoming "a dumping site for academic miscellany" (Cohn et. al. 29) and the properly revolutionary trajectory inherent in Jameson's designation of "postdisciplinarity." In an institutional context that increasingly champions inter-disciplinarity, celebrating "innovation" and "creativity" as the banners under which knowledge production might maximize investor returns in a manner not necessarily to the benefit of the intellectual labourers involved, a recursive insistence on disciplinary boundaries becomes

³ See, for instance, Birchall and Hall's attention to the political economy of academic journal publishing (76-77), Nick Couldry's apocalyptic vision of the demise of the leftist democratic project (10), Julie Rak's exploration of modes of pedagogy that deputize students as co-producers of knowledge (49), and Carol A. Stabile's highlighting the need for collaborative models of scholarship and an awareness of the precarious position occupied by graduate students in a younger discipline like cultural studies (26).

a strategic necessity. This places cultural studies in the delicate position of needing to justify its place on the intellectual map without giving up the very questioning of that map that constituted an integral part of its founding imperative. Here we must emphasize postdisciplinarity as the future-oriented, utopian impulse that lead Jameson to characterize the whole project as a political “desire” rather than an accomplished fact. As such, cultural studies paradoxically reveals itself as the discipline whose trajectory is the ultimate dissolution of disciplinarity, a project whose outer horizon would be the hypothetical moment when, the divisions between intellectual and other kinds of labour having been overcome, *everyone* would be able to realize themselves as a philosopher in the Gramscian sense. Such an event being (perhaps forever) in the making, we are left with a discipline whose very existence within the academy is testimony to the inadequacy of bourgeois forms of knowledge production, a critique that the steady proletarianization of the academic labour force makes all the more pertinent.

If the responses gathered in *Renewal* sometime seem more telling of the increased pressures supplied by market forces than the shortcomings of the strategies cultural studies has adopted in its decades of struggle, then a note of hope is to be detected amidst the reservations many of these authors harbour. The defensive gestures that surface throughout the collection can be read as so many marks of vitality, signs that the desire for postdisciplinarity still troubles the waters of academia enough to evoke passionate discourse, thus enacting a “renewal” or reiteration of a central tenant of cultural studies through the very act of raising the issue of how such a renewal would proceed. This reading, however, refutes the other point Smith makes in his introduction, that cultural studies should accept its institutionalization and “carry on,” since the main success of the collection is the negative one of “flushing out” the inadequacy of already entrenched positions (those of cultural studies included!) to meet the challenges of a truly postdisciplinary, inclusive and open-ended project of inquiry.

7. Working Together, Working Apart.

We first learned of *Renewal* after a few of us heard Paul Smith introduce the volume as part of a roundtable plenary session at the 9th annual Cultural Studies Association conference held in Chicago in 2011. There Smith delivered an edited version of the collection’s introduction, lobbying for a new age of cultural studies—and more or less heralding its arrival with the forthcoming release of *Renewal*. Smith’s provocative call to action piqued our interest. “Renewal” emerged as a hopeful antidote to the often uneven content of a conference that had somewhat failed to live up to the promise of its CFP to “lay the groundwork of [cultural studies]’ future.”

The resulting volume, however, was not always indicative of the promised land of

Smith's proclamations; during our meetings we found ourselves remarking on the frequency with which "renewal" had been discarded in favour of rehashing and/or re-entrenchment. And yet, writing from arguably the most precarious and vulnerable position of the bunch, it was the graduate student contributors, broaching "renewal" with a mind to "humility" (29), "reality" and a keen sense of their own "privilege" (34-5), who seemed most up to the challenge set forth by Smith. Cohn, Mitcho and Woolsey, opposing "the fetishization of any object of study or formulaic method of analysis, especially those that champion supposedly resistant texts or subjects" (32), came closest to enacting the "statement" that was to be *Renewal*: a call for (not overly, but still) reflexive, repoliticized, pedagogically bound intellectual work. Perhaps it was easiest for these contributors to tackle the proposition of the renewal of cultural studies unselfishly and without the elsewhere noted knee-jerk defenses of personal academic territory—at the expense of the greater questions—because they (and, well, *we*) have none. Forgive us if we seem self-indulgent in high-fiving our fellow grad students, our *Renewal* counterparts. At the risk of sounding off like a presidential candidate, the cultural-studies-to-come is *our* cultural studies, and their contribution seemed the most concerned with making room for *us*. But what and where would cultural studies be without a little debate and disagreement? The CSA conference, *Renewal*, our reading group, the review we've collectively produced here, the whole discipline of cultural studies itself all hold one thing in common: the inherent and inevitable—and, we would argue, *productive*—tensions and messiness of collaboration. We may not have always been pleased or appeased by the attempts at renewal offered by Smith and his contributors, but the process of *Renewal*, both in its inscription and its analysis, recalls the foundational and insistent impetus of cultural studies toward radical, and not always simple or easy, collaborative work.

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The McMaster Cultural Studies Reading Group meets bimonthly to discuss contemporary and classic works in cultural studies. It is largely composed of current and recently graduated students of the MA and PhD programs in the Department of English and Cultural Studies at McMaster University, but also welcomes members from other departments, local universities and the wider community. More information can be found at <http://readingculturalstudies.blogspot.ca/>. The members of the Reading Group contributing to this review include Carolyn Veldstra, Simon Orpana, Evan Mauro, Pamela Ingleton and Nicholas Holm.

Enlightenment Interrupted

ALISON SHONKWILER

Marie-Hélène Huet, *The Culture of Disaster*. University of Chicago Press, 2012. 256 pp.

“Our culture thinks *through* disasters” (2), writes Marie-Helene Huet in *The Culture of Disaster*. Building an argument that catastrophes have shaped the imagination of modernity, Huet’s book examines new modes of conceptualizing disaster and human power in the late 18th century and 19th centuries. In a further step, the book also argues for a direct link between post-Enlightenment discourses of disaster and present-day “states of emergency,” a move I will discuss below for its relevance to thinking about contemporary politics.

Huet’s account is not about a shift from Providential to scientific and natural explanations of disaster. Instead, it is a post-Enlightenment account of changing conceptions of human responsibility and management. Although the book tracks the tendencies toward secularization that accompanied the rationalization of thought in the period, it is most usefully an account of how disaster came to be understood as political. From this perspective, disaster comes to imply the human error and misjudgment that is increasingly seen to cause it, contribute to it, or exacerbate its effects. Correspondingly, to read history of the period through the lens of disaster dramatically underscores the ordinary experience of political violence in the Revolutionary and post-Revolutionary eras in Europe and in the Americas. The “Age of Reason” was also an age of fear and unrest, and it is only logical that the discourses of catastrophe and political disorder in this period would inform each other.

The first section of the book reads three key events in a new politics of “extreme disorder.” The plague outbreak in 1720 in Marseilles—the event that Foucault would use as a basis for his analysis of discipline and surveillance—was a particularly traumatic episode of the disease-to-end-all-diseases, ultimately claiming fifty thousand lives. The spread of rumors plunged the city into as much chaos as the disease itself, resulting in breakdowns in communication that threatened to destroy not only cities and families but, in the words of the writers Huet cites, all social bonds. The second example, the earthquake of 1755 that devastated the city of Lisbon, is positioned as the “first disaster of a post-theological age” (37). Although historical commentary about the earthquake demonstrates the new power of natural explanations of disaster, it also offers evidence of a new *social* scientific analysis—such as the idea that the

number of survivors could have been greater if buildings had not been so tall and densely concentrated. (In one estimate 17 thousand out of 20 thousand houses in the city were destroyed.) Huet's third example, the 1831-32 cholera epidemic in Europe and America, is the event most explicitly cast in political terms. Writers at the time described the disease as a "prolongation of terror" and a "state of siege" and drew explicitly on imagery of the guillotine. Moreover, in its guise as another "masked executioner," cholera represented to some monarchical supporters the final, morbid turn of the "great equalizing" potential of the revolutionary violence of the 1790s. Chateaubriand, for instance, would describe the epidemic as having "finished what the French Revolution had begun" (75).

Huet argues that commentators of the time saw both the disease outbreaks and the earthquake as humanly unknowable events that "def[ied] enlightenment" [22] yet demanded administrative intervention and management in precisely the ways that would later be analyzed by Foucault. What is most striking are the ways in which, before the Revolution, disaster could be seen as an excess or outbreak of the natural, whereas after the revolution disasters of all kinds, natural or political, could and would be described in mutually constitutive terms. Huet even points out how official response patterns to disease (fear of contagion—militarization—isolation) operated in parallel to responses to revolutionary sentiment. As rumor and anxiety about disease echoed the atmospheric "fever" of the mob, the effect of the cholera epidemic was to isolate France from its fearful neighbors just as political emergency had earlier done.

It is tempting to treat the Lisbon quake as the most "natural" disaster of the three; yet Huet emphasizes instead the ways it challenged the limits of the natural as explanatory. She notes Deleuze's claim that the Lisbon quake played a role for this moment in European philosophy not unlike that of the Nazi concentration camps two centuries later. The question that resounded in the wake of it—"how is it possible to maintain the least faith in a rationalism originating in God?" (Deleuze qtd in Huet 49)—was as powerful in its time as the question of how to maintain optimism in reason after Auschwitz. What made the quake a truly *modern* disaster in Huet's argument is that its "natural" devastation was compounded by a new awareness of the management of risk. To replace the idea of an "act of God" with the notion of calculated "risk-taking" is of course to bring the discourse fully into the realm of social and political management. Americanist readers may draw a connection here to the discussion of seafaring and insurance in the same period in Ian Baucom's *Specters of the Atlantic*, which addresses the transatlantic slave trade in terms of financial risk.

The book's second section argues that the French Revolution and the Terror contributed to a "growing sense of responsibility" in managing disasters and to the view that

no catastrophe could be seen entirely apart from problems of political administration. Rousseau and Chateaubriand, writers at very different points on the political spectrum, both show how anxieties of history, freedom, and progress are shaped by political emergency. For Rousseau the nature of the compromises demanded for political freedom lead, as Huet discusses, to a combined fantasy/anxiety of the threat of individual annihilation. In contrast, the *Mémoires* of Chateaubriand, a monarchist supporter who lost members of his family to the guillotine reveal a different kind of “interiorization” of disaster in his accounts of visits to ancient Roman ruins; indeed the *Mémoires*, which describe the spectacle of antiquity through the themes of illegitimacy, usurpation, and mourning, are said to “read as the longest obituary ever written for the French monarchy” (144). For both writers the “fragmented past” of the fall of Rome hovers symbolically over eighteenth-century discourses of power and freedom.

The book’s third and most compelling section focuses on catastrophes at sea. The wreck of the French ship *Medusa* in 1816 and the famous “lost expedition” of explorer Sir John Franklin, who set out in 1845 to discover the Northwest Passage, were two events that captured the nineteenth-century public imagination and inspired a number of contemporary artists and authors. The former served as the subject of Géricault’s famous painting *The Raft of the Medusa*; the latter figured in the adventure fictions of Jules Verne, whose novels of polar exploration both drew upon and sustained the Sir John Franklin legend.

These chapters, which feel like the heart of the book, trace the connections between these events and the imaginative power of the mythical past: the association of Medusa with chaos and despair, and the wreck as produced by a negative cosmology of dis-astering (literally coming unfixed from navigational guidance of stars). Even the names of Franklin’s ships—*Terror* and *Erebus* (son of Chaos)—become part of an extraordinary nineteenth-century narrative overdetermination of meaning. The ultimate disaster here is associated with fragmentation of the body through cannibalism, evidence of which emerged from both events. In some of the most intricate weaving of analyses in the book, Huet connects the themes of myth, monstrosity, and dis-incorporation to the violence of the Revolution. In preparatory sketches for *The Raft of the Medusa*, for instance, Géricault used severed heads and limbs from the guillotine to practice depicting the cannibalized bodies of the wreck victims. His famous painting thus dramatically unites the themes of the decapitation of a mythical monster, the bodily fragmentation of cannibalism, and the legacy of political disembodiment.

Huet here also develops a formal, narratological claim that disaster is that which contradicts “ordinary” narrative. Disaster is the “negation of sense and expectation” and offers fragments in place of causality, signification, and closure. But even as it

thwarts and disrupts the desire to assign responsibility, disaster also provides interpretative resources. Interpretation becomes “a form of exorcism” that “also draws from the disaster its resources and its paradoxical methodology” (178). The reconstructed histories of the Franklin expedition, Huet argues, inform questions about narrative interpretation in Jules Verne’s *Adventures of Captain Hatteras* (1866) and *Sphinx of the Ice Fields* (1897). Edgar Allan Poe’s only novel, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (1838), is similarly organized around the problem of the nature of exploration and the reconstruction of narrative traces that have been fragmented in a way that is destructive yet also, for the literary imagination, ultimately productive.

Can we extend this line of argument about disaster’s fragmentative and interpretive power to New Orleans, Haiti, and Fukushima? The answer for Huet is affirmative, although this is not the line the book takes. Instead it shifts to a set of twentieth-century films that, although they do not in and of themselves represent catastrophic events, are seen to incorporate a logic of disaster. Francis Ford Coppola’s *The Conversation*, Michael Antonini’s *Blow-Up*, and Ridley Scott’s *Blade Runner* all feature a central enigma that represents an endlessly deferred moment of full explanation or knowledge. Here Huet might be understood as reading postmodern narrative fragmentation itself as informed by the conceptual structure of disaster. In this ambitious expansion of the concept, disaster becomes a metaphor for the limits of representation in general.

There seem to me two potential objections to this expansion. One is that the concept risks losing the specificity that informed the chapters dealing with disaster as an event. The second, and I think potentially more consequential one, is the risk of depoliticizing what Huet elsewhere convincingly argues must be seen in political terms. Beyond offering a figure for narrative disruption, disaster also extends postmodern antifoundationalist logic in complex and politically contradictory ways. It highlights the persistence and recurrence of “un-Enlightened” forms of thought: postsecular modes of belief, conspiracy thinking, and widespread skepticism and rejection of the authority of evidence. If the Enlightenment sought to illuminate and “disenchant” the world, its persistent dialectical counterpart is a *refusal* of the rationalized ordering of knowledge. Such is precisely the problem that Bruno Latour articulates in his influential essay “Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?” pointing to the right-wing embrace of scientific uncertainty about global warming. Journalist Naomi Klein has similarly argued that the desire to preserve a particular way of life (American, consumerist, and planet-warming) logically *requires* the refusal of belief in scientific evidence. In this context, cultural narratives of disaster, survivalism, and planetary apocalypse can be seen as a kind of paradoxical displacement of the “anxiety of the unknown” (to borrow Huet’s term) to a more politically strategic calculation of unknowability that paralyzes human reaction. The “disorder” of catastrophe is not merely fragmentation

but the impossibility of any consensus upon which to assess evidence, assign human responsibility, or manage the politics of a disaster that may be unfolding in slow time rather than as a singular, sensational event.

Even where shared reason is not impossible, however, our collective anxieties about what might remain unexplainable, and how the unexplainable should shape human behavior, are certainly as political as ever. Here is where the expansion of disaster—as an “increasing sense of emergency that structures relations of power” (112)—seems most promising in explaining crises as normal states of affairs. One thinks of Klein’s “shock doctrine” thesis and the multiple contemporary forces of terrorism, neoliberal capitalism, and political instability. Huet draws a brief but suggestive parallel between the states of emergency associated with disaster and the “state of exception” theorized by Agamben. Like the suspension of juridical order that is an unexceptional exception, the logic of “emergency” is increasingly available as standard operating procedure. There is certainly more theoretical work to be done here that is beyond the purview of Huet’s book. Nonetheless *The Culture of Disaster* offers a compelling model of the kind of literary, cultural, and historical material that could constitute the archive for a “thick” history of disaster.

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Under the Hood of Wolfgang Ernst's Media Archaeology

LIAM YOUNG

Wolfgang Ernst. *Digital Memory and the Archive*. Jussi Parikka, ed. University of Minnesota Press, 2013. 265 pp.

The allure of the archive as a concept, space, form, and metaphor has proven irresistible for continentally inflected media and cultural studies over the last two decades. The “archive fever” diagnosed by Derrida in 1995 has only become more acute as the ever-accelerating digitization of culture, memory, and history has fundamentally reconfigured archives, both real and imaginary. *Digital Memory and the Archive* intervenes in this ‘archival’ moment by offering the first major collection of essays in English by one of the central figures in contemporary ‘German’ media theory and a thinker for whom archive has been an animating concern, Wolfgang Ernst. The book offers a much anticipated entry point into Ernst’s influential work, which has hitherto been largely absent from contemporary debates in North American media and communication studies around new materialism and the nonhuman turn. Ernst’s provocative propositions about doing media theory, writing media history, and the state of media studies as a discipline make the book of interest to readers not just in those fields, but also in communication and information studies, computer science, history, and the (digital) humanities more broadly.

Digital Memory and the Archive is edited and introduced by Jussi Parikka, who in recent years—along with Geoffrey Winthrop-Young, John Durham Peters and others—has been doing a great service to English readers in relaying texts and thinkers from the German tradition of media analysis. Parikka’s introduction offers a series of biographical notes about Ernst that provide useful context both for the essays that follow, and the latter’s intellectual formation more generally. It productively situates Ernst’s break with conventional History and Classics, as well as his relation to what Winthrop-Young (2011) calls the “[Friedrich] Kittler effect,” while also offering some suggestive planes on which Ernst might be connected to recent developments in North American media studies. Parikka organizes a number of diverse essays around three conceptual hubs: “The Media-Archaeological Method,” “Temporality and the Multimedial Archive,” and “Microtemporal Media.” These help to map not only the trajectory of Ernst’s thought (helping contextualize, for instance, his continuing move toward computation and mathematics), but also to streamline his most

influential contributions to media analysis. The latter are primarily centred on methodology, “time-criticality,” and the development of non-narrative modes of doing media history and theory. This review will touch briefly on each of these interrelated planes as I sketch out in a very preliminary way Ernst's unique approach.

Media Archaeology

Ernst has pursued a dynamic and at times controversial intellectual project that has taken shape in recent years under the rubric of “media archaeology.” Though trained in History and Classics, Ernst turned toward media after he became convinced that the existing theoretical and methodological frameworks of these disciplines (and the traditional humanities generally) were not capable of offering a comprehensive picture of historical change and dynamism. To address such limitations, Ernst has been heavily influenced by media philosopher Friedrich Kittler in developing a radically materialist approach to studying history, memory, and culture through a series of books, a prolific lecture circuit, and initiatives such as the Berlin Media Archaeological Fundus (a laboratory at Humboldt University devoted to the study and operationalization of “dead” media). *Digital Memory and the Archive* collects essays from the last ten years of this project, and positions the brand of media archaeology it contains as a “transatlantic bridge” between certain developments in continental and German media analysis, and those in North America such as software and platform studies (see Manovich 2001; Chun 2011) or media forensics (see Kirschenbaum 2008).

Following Foucault's emphasis on historical and epistemological rupture and McLuhan's non-content based understanding of media, Ernst's media archaeology (or “archivology”) is an “epistemological reverse-engineering” (55) that “makes us aware of discontinuities in media cultures as opposed to the reconciling narratives of cultural history” (25). Media archaeology de-emphasizes the human subject as central figure of historical and technical change, seeking instead to unearth the “nondiscursive infrastructure and (hidden) programs of media” (59) that structure what it is possible for humans to think and do. According to Ernst (and here he follows Kittler closely) the contours of these infrastructures are always already shaped by the media-technical conditions of possibility that obtain in any given historical moment; these are, namely, the means by which data is processed, stored, and transmitted. While thinkers such as McLuhan and Virilio have convincingly demonstrated the extent to which such medial conditions structure perception, Ernst goes a step further in arguing that they also delineate *cultural* data such as history, memory, and so on—because media measure, process, and so structure *time*, they are the true archivists of pasts both human and non. As such, for Ernst the archive itself becomes a historical subject. Parikka summarizes this point nicely:

even before a historian or a media archaeologist steps in to tell stories about history, past media cultures, and lost ideas, there is a prior level on which the past has been recorded. The documents of the past are such concrete instances of pasts present but even more so of the way in which technical media records time and acts as a time machine between current times and the past (9).

Connections between Ernst and other thinkers in the German media studies *milieu* are obvious—beyond Kittler, there are clear resonances with Cornelia Vismann, Sybille Krämer, Bernhard Siegert and others—but the essays of *Digital Memory and the Archive* notably foreground just how formative an influence American historian Hayden White has been on Ernst. The integration of White into contemporary debates is noteworthy given that he is not a figure that has had much currency in media studies traditionally, and also because it offers an opportunity to reclaim White's work from its unfair relegation to the scrapheap of extreme 1970s and 80s postmodern relativism. Ernst picks up the thread developed in White's *Metahistory* (1973), arguing that the monopoly of narrative that structures the historical imaginary of the 19th century has continued to enjoy preeminence in media and cultural historiography right up to the 21st century, in spite of the epistemological ruptures inaugurated by first technical, and later digital, media. Which is to say, the narrative form—a relic from the epoch of the written word—is the secret that continues to haunt the stories we tell about media history. In order to more properly account for the world after digital computation, Ernst updates and extends White's analysis beyond the confines of the Gutenberg galaxy. He writes, "I have always felt uneasy with the predominance of narrative as the unimedium of processing our knowledge of the past. It takes a new infrastructure of communicating realities—the impact of digital media itself—to put this critique of historical discourse into media-archaeological terms and practice" (196). The challenge, according to Ernst, is to develop new tools of writing and thinking about the past and memory in terms more accurate to the contemporary epoch's media-technical conditions of possibility.

Time-Critical

To develop such an approach Ernst emphasizes the relation between media and time. Specifically, he is interested in the way categories and practices of memory and history emerge as a corollary of the ways that media-technics process and store time. Foregrounding this relation allows him to argue persuasively that the imperative for media studies must be "time-critical" (18-19). This argument updates not only White but also Foucault, following Kittler in pushing Foucauldian discourse analysis beyond its space bias—not just taking "Foucault the last historian or first archaeologist" (Kittler 4-5) out of the library and into the realm of technical media, but also taking the concept of archive much further. Ernst writes, "[i]t is worth remembering

that the archive as the condition for our knowledge of history becomes dependent on the media of its transmission... The mechanisms that regulate entry into the discourse of history or exclusion from cultural memory are therefore part of the media archaeological investigation" (42). Foucault grasped this to a certain degree, but Ernst shows that his medial blind spot regarding how the archive is transmitted prevented Foucault's archaeologies of knowledge from moving beyond the *spaces* of the written word (whether formal state archives and libraries, the paper surfaces of documents, observation charts and tables, concepts, etc.), and therefore his analyses cannot offer a comprehensive picture of history, memory, or knowledge outside the world of writing. Ernst argues that when we look beyond alphabetic writing to technical media such as the phonograph and cinematograph we see that "signs of or in time themselves can be registered. Not only do they maintain a symbolical relationship to macro and micro time (such as historiography), but they inscribe and reproduce functions of time themselves" (30). After technical media the mechanisms that transmit, store, and process—that is, mediate—archival information are not reducible to their spatial functions (as with writing and its documentary apparatus) but instead inaugurate whole new regimes of time. They do so precisely because they are themselves entirely new modalities of measuring and recording time.

Digitization offers a similar rupture: "[i]t is only with the digital computer that the symbolic regime *dialectically* returns, this time in a genuinely dynamic mode (which differentiates implementation of software from the traditional Gutenberg galaxy): algorithmic time and operative diagrams" (30). So while technical media inaugurate time-critical media studies by foregrounding the extent to which media record the 'flow' of human and machine time, it is not until digital media that we come to see that this flow is comprised of discrete, operative units and processes that escape human perception. Digital times are processual and discrete, rather than static and continuous; they are operational rather than narrative, re-inscribing the symbolic as binary 1s and 0s in place of alphanumeric letters. As a result, the digital archive itself has become an entity always already in flux, continuously in-formation, and its analysis requires new conceptual tools such as Ernst develops.

Time-critical analysis extends and complicates many of the inherited conceptual categories of media studies. For instance, Harold Innis' (2008) formative insights regarding 'time-biased' media and the societies they structure are complicated by Ernst's distinction, absent in the Innisian concept of time, between operative time (such as we find in the algorithms and code of the digital archive) and the static time of the 'classical' archives of the written word.⁴ The latter primarily transmits via storage,

⁴ Interestingly, while readers of Innis will recognize his influence throughout this book, the Canadian medium theorist is only mentioned a single time in passing

while the former performs all three data operations—processing, storage, transmission—at and in the same time. The distinction Ernst introduces offers a productive vein through which to address a common critique of Innis’ concepts of time- and space-bias (that they are too totalizing) by allowing us to account for many often competing times present in any given media device, network, or environment. “The moment a singer of epics sings into a current recording device, two different regimes clash as human performativity is confronted with technological algorithmical operations” (59). Ernst is particularly insistent that these times be understood according to their own operative dimensions—by going ‘under the hood’ of media—rather than in relation to inherited, abstract notions of human time that often go unquestioned.

Non-Narrative

Ernst therefore pushes (media) historiography from mythology and semiotics to mathematics and computation—from telling stories to counting units. Indeed, he reminds us that for centuries telling actually *was* counting, and that the tendency toward narrative is only a relatively recent development in human memory systems. Other historical modes of transmitting cultural information (such as the epic and the chronicle) functioned for thousands of years as non-narrative forms of *telling as counting*. These would enumerate, accumulate, and describe events, offering a “glimpse of a way of processing cultural experience that does not need stories” (149). The point, Ernst continuously shows, is not that narrative modes of telling have no value, but that they have become obsolete. The operational infrastructures of computing which now process, store, and transmit data about the past lay bare the limitations of narrative and thus inaugurate its crisis:

Media archaeology deals with this crisis in the narrative memory of culture. Digital narrative, on a media-archaeological (not interface) level, is linked to discrete mathematics...A computing culture, from a media-archaeological view, deals not with narrative memory but with calculating memory—counting rather than recounting, the archaeological versus the historical mode (71).

Such insights are only available to us, Ernst argues, by opening up the black boxes of media devices so that we might observe and tinker with their hardware. Doing so allows for empirical understanding of the ways in which media objects and systems function. Since “[m]edia theories work only when being tested against hard(ware)

(100). While Ernst is much better at citing his influences than for instance Kittler, his Innisian blind spot is an example of the extent to which media archaeology is at times ignorant of its *own* archive. Certainly, Canadian readers will view it as yet another unacknowledged debt in contemporary media studies to the foundational work of Innis and the Canadian school of communication.

evidence" (60), the importance of his Media Archaeological Fundus (mentioned above) to Ernst's project cannot be overstated, and this methodological commitment to actually *doing* media archaeology is another aspect that further sets his work apart from much media theory.

Since time-critical media studies require a break with narrative historiography, Ernst seeks to mirror form with content by avoiding narrative as a rhetorical strategy throughout the book. The result is an unconventional text that unfolds more via affirmation and aphorism than analytic argumentation—by counting rather than recounting—a style that is at times exhilarating, at others frustrating. The ambition is admirable, but in certain chapters (particularly experimental chapters 9 and 10) the sacrifice of clarity in the name of formal rigour weakens the force with which the argument is delivered. But the point should not be lost that Ernst's foregrounding of historians' reliance on the formal structures of narrative to tell their stories offers important insights into the way a narrative unconscious is always already delimiting not only what stories we can tell, but the very fact that we are telling 'stories' in the first place. Ernst pushes this point even further than White, elaborating a compelling argument that not only is there a crucial relation between the medial infrastructures that obtain in any given historical moment and its modes of thinking and doing history, but that these infrastructures are at core about time.

Some of these discussions do stall at a level of abstraction that contradicts the materialist program with which he is so preoccupied. In particular there is a disappointing lack of specificity with regard to certain concepts integral to his theoretical apparatus. The term "Archive" wanders at times opaquely through the text—a precise definition is never offered, and the term functions in a wide variety of ways (as a collective memory form, data processor, historical subject, storage space, etc.). We can probably forgive him this, given that a major aim of the work is to clear the concept of its cultural studies baggage in order to see what it might do when re-imagined in terms of hardware and operative time. More problematic is the extent to which terms like "format" and "protocol" seem often to be free-floating catchall terms that conflate many important distinctions, operational and otherwise. For instance, Ernst only rarely discusses specific software formats, and even less often gestures toward the fact that these entities do not drop from the sky, but are developed in very specific institutional, political, industrial, socio-economic, cultural, and technical constellations, as for instance Sterne (2012) shows. Ernst's emphasis on unit operations conflates such layers of analysis under an abstract category of 'format.' A discussion of pixel-based imaging in chapter six (130-137), for example, does not take into account that various computing hardware and software operate according to different protocols, resulting in a diverse array of competing imaging formats (JPEG, PDF, TIFF, etc.). While Ernst's point about the new temporal horizon of digital imaging (always in-

formation rather than static) is well taken, the reader is left to ponder questions such as: do all imaging formats operate according to the same time? If not, how are their times different and what implications follow? And if so, does this imply a new temporal ontology of digital computation? Doesn't the latter contradict remarks elsewhere about competing digital times?

Too often with Ernst—to invoke a familiar critique of the German *milieu*—media apparatuses seem simply to appear. As Parikka notes, they “might be important to give us history (as conditions of knowledge) [but] seem themselves surprisingly without history and outside time” (11). These limitations would be easier to excuse in a work as ambitious as Ernst's were it not for his repeatedly stated commitment to object-oriented empirical specificity and rigour. Unfortunately, he at times falls victim to what Gitelman describes regarding the tendency in media studies to sacrifice empirical and historical specificity in the name of grand theories of everything (Gitelman 3-5), and her advice about resisting the urge to frame media objects or systems in such general terms—to speak not simply of “the telephone” or “the computer” but *specifically* about e.g. telephones in the 1890 rural United States, or tablet computers in 2012 (Gitelman 8)—would have been well-heeded here.

Much time and energy has been devoted recently toward urging more traditional disciplinary orientations in the humanities to take approaches such as media archaeology more seriously. Indeed, *so much* energy has been devoted to integrating figures like Ernst into English-speaking debates that the arguments themselves (and their limitations) may have been too quickly glossed over. Now that that battle has been won for attention, thanks in large part to books like *Digital Memory and the Archive*, it is incumbent upon those that have championed such work to take critical stock of what is on offer, and how it might be problematized, extended, and elaborated. It is in such a spirit that I have offered the above remarks.

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Intersectionality Matters

MELISSA HAYNES

Mel Y. Chen. *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect*. Duke University Press, 2012. 312 pp.

The title of Mel Y. Chen's *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* immediately announces to readers that this is not a book that can be easily disciplined. "Animacies," for readers who are unfamiliar with the term, might sound like a portmanteau of "animal" and "intimacies." The rest of the title evokes a compendium of areas of inquiry, namely biopolitics, critical race theory, new materialism, queer studies, and affect theory. And though this list may seem, already, to include more fields than one book can satisfactorily address, it is in fact only a subset of this book's concerns (it fails to indicate, for example, disability theory or environmentalism). Perhaps ironically, *Animacies'* transgression of modern disciplinary categories makes it a perfect fit for inclusion in Duke University Press's radically interdisciplinary *Perverse Modernities* series. *Animacies* traverses a range of theoretical discourses to identify an element common to the maintenance of all kinds of privilege: the sustenance of a *hierarchy of animacy*.

Chen draws the term animacy from linguistics, where it refers to an entity's degree of agency, awareness, sentience, liveliness, or mobility. Across languages, grammatical structures indicate speakers' views about the animate and the inanimate. A simple example in English is the distinction between "he" or "she" and "it." The latter is reserved for inanimate objects, so that calling a person "it" conspicuously performs his or her demotion on the animacy hierarchy. Likewise, whether one refers to a pet as "she" or "it" expresses a view about that pet's place in the world. Animacy is also communicated by expressions of possession; thus, we prefer "the eye of the needle" to "the needle's eye," but we say "my eye" rather than "the eye of me."

What makes animacy particularly interesting for political analysis is that it is not a fixed attribute, but a relative one. Generally, speakers treat humans as having the highest degree of animacy, followed by nonhuman animals, then inanimate objects, followed by concepts. Within these categories are further divisions: adults are higher than children, large animals are higher than insects, etc. An entity cannot behave, syntactically, as if it were more animate than an entity above it, without violating the hierarchy. For example, the phrase "the child that toys hide" is confusing. It violates English speakers' expectations that the animate child should act as the agent of the

verb *hide*, and the inanimate rock should be the passive object of the phrase (as in “the toys that the child hides”). Animacy expresses beliefs about who (and what) has the power to affect others, and who (and what) do not: through it, speakers make claims about which lives matter.

Animacies works deconstructively. Chen traces the dominant animacy hierarchy negatively, through moments of slippage and failure, to show “how animacy is defined, tested, and configured via its ostensible opposite: the inanimate, deadness, lowness, nonhuman animals (rendered as insensate), the abject, the object” (30). The book develops this argument with reference to an eclectic “shifting archive” of examples drawn from twentieth- and twenty-first century American cultural production, frequently those that articulate transnational encounters between the United States and Asia (18). Such examples range from avant-garde performance art to the sexual subculture of “furies,” and from linguistic philosophy lectures to knock-off Thomas the Tank Engine toys. In three sections, “Words,” “Animals,” and “Metals,” Chen explores the difference that subtends and enlivens normative Western cultural life.

Language is one of those surprisingly lively entities that bears affect, and effects change. The first section of *Animacies* focuses on the linguistic insult and the history of the word *queer* to demonstrate the animacy and materiality of words. Chen’s discussion of the word *queer* draws on her background in cognitive linguistics, showing how the word has been refigured along two trajectories. As a noun, she argues, *queer* has been de-animated. She associates its nominalization with essentializing identity politics that elide radical, trans and intersex queers, and queers of colour; its reclamation, she argues, has led to its “deflated neutrality, essentially a loss of the word’s affective valences” (65). Chen suggests that this neutral, “neutered” form limits the political potential of *queer*. In its verb form, *queer* is re-animated, taking on life in its ability to set other objects in motion. Queering and animating are closely related for Chen, who argues that “animacy can *itself* be queer, for animacy can work to blur the tenuous hierarchy of human-animal-vegetable-mineral with which it is associated” (98, emphasis in the original). Chen’s discussion of *queer*—as a word and as a concept—is clearly based in rigorous scholarship and, in her commendable desire to foreground a non-essentialist, interstitial conception of the term, she is supported by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and David M. Halperin, amongst others. Still, her own analysis raises the question of what happens to the animacy of *queering* when it becomes a “veering-away from dominant ontologies and the normativities they promulgate” (11): when *queer* broadly stands for difference, does the term itself continue to be queer?

Nonhuman animals have been the ground against and out of which human identity has been defined—an operation that Giorgio Agamben refers to as the working of the “anthropological machine.” The second section of *Animacies* considers how this

machine overdetermines animality, particularly in relation to anxieties about race and nation. The argument that humans alone possess language has been, from Aristotle to Heidegger, a major basis for claims to the singularity of human sentience—Akira Mizuta Lippit goes so far as to describe the ontology of animals as the very “antithesis” of language (163). Chen historicizes and calls into question the validity and usefulness of this distinction. She shows how it has historically been used to render sexual, racial, and national others less animate, via comparison to animals. Such comparisons are not only verbal but also visual and, accordingly, Chen models “animacy theory” as an optic, analyzing (in the third chapter of the book) turn-of-the-century political images and depictions of the fictional character Fu Manchu for interplay amongst their constellated signifiers of race, gender, sexuality, and geopolitics.

This intersectional mode of reading is sustained in a chapter that draws on trans and animacy theory to discuss neutering, reproductivity, and the visual culture of animal genitalia. Physical or figural interventions into an animal’s sexual and reproductive capacity here are made to resonate with China’s one-child policy, heteronormative, racist, classist and ableist sterilizations within the United States, and the homonormative suppression of queerness in the fight against California’s Proposition 8. Chen defends against possible charges that analyzing the genitalia of animal costumes is an “indulgence” or “nonserious joke,” arguing that “any decision about including or excluding genitals on a figured nonhuman animal cannot help but be loaded [since] species difference itself is fraught with anxieties about race and reproduction” (148). The thrust of this section is to suggest that *shifts* (voluntary or otherwise) in the matter and affects of bodies can be a fulcrum for collaboration, as they evince the regulatory regimes in which all bodies are caught. That Chen identifies all such shifts as forms of *trans-* recalls her basis in linguistics; like her use of *queer*, readers may take this breadth as generative or appropriative.

Lead is a synonym for inert, spiritless, and lifeless, and yet in the third section of *Animacies* Chen shows us how lead, from the bottom of the animacy hierarchy, came to circulate as a lively figure in the imagination of the American public. In 2007, the United States was gripped by panic that the paint on Chinese-manufactured toys posed a threat of lead poisoning to (mostly white) American children. Chen argues that in this scare, “a new material-semiotic form of lead emerged” (166) that was racialized as Chinese, and animated by anxieties about the porosity of bodily *and* national borders. This new lead threatened to contaminate the upper echelons of the animacy hierarchy via its associations with ideas about black violence, queer orality, and cognitive disability; Chen contends that lead provoked such intense anxiety because it destabilized race, class, sexuality and ability, performing the vulnerability of these categories of privilege. Lead, having become animate itself, threatened to drag other bodies down on the animacy hierarchy.

Like *animatedness*, which Sianne Ngai describes as an excessive, overemotional capacity to be moved or manipulated, *mercurial*—to be changeable, volatile, or fickle—seems to bespeak an excessive animacy, albeit without the associations with Asianness and blackness that Ngai locates in animatedness. Chen’s discussion of mercury and the mercurial considers “mobile, molecular” animacy (16) to discuss how we are changed by our ostensibly inanimate environments, from the smoke we inhale to the affection we may feel for a favourite couch. Pushing on the notion of intersubjectivity, this chapter calls on readers to recognize also the intercorporeal assemblages by which we are constituted—though surprisingly (given her own sense of the interplay between materiality and figuration), Chen distances herself from Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of the assemblage, for its insufficient discrimination “between ‘actual’ and ‘abstract’” (206). Mercury animates Chen’s investigation of toxicity, as a metaphor and as embodied experience. After considering how toxicity operates in the construction of threatened immunitary bodies, she proceeds to an autobiographical narration of how mercury “intoxication” has shaped her own sociality, cognition, and embodiment. This unique section of the book explores the manifold intimacies between the author’s own body and the environments around her. These intimacies are illuminated by her extreme chemical sensitivity, which, though disabling in many ways, opens channels for unexpected affects. This leads Chen to consider toxicity as akin to queerness, as a means by which nonhuman matter can trouble normative intimacies.

Animacies concludes with the hope that animacy theory can queer the reified—yet contingent and mobile—animacy hierarchies that support the privilege of only a few. We might mitigate our “vexed and often painful complicity” with such hierarchies by becoming vulnerable and receptive to affiliations across the animacy hierarchy (233). *Animacies* calls for “an ethic of care and sensitivity, queerings of objects and affects accompanied by political revision, reworldings that challenge the order of things” (237).

This is an admirable aim, and in animacy theory, Chen has offered a canny theoretical lens for thinking through the consequences of human exceptionalism—that is, if readers are able and willing to meet the demands *Animacies* places upon them. The self-conscious prose style of the book may frustrate some readers, with its heavy signposting and rationalization of its aims and rhetorical moves. The book’s phrasings (and, occasionally, diagrams) deliberately leave room for interpretive play, but this indeterminacy does at times risk vagueness. This tension also applies to the ambiguity (or animacy) of the central concepts *animacy*, *queer*, and *toxic*, but, if drawing conclusions is not this book’s strength, neither is that its aim.

Chen’s fluency in the many theoretical fields she addresses is apparent, and her eclec-

tic choice of objects is entertaining. The dispersion of her critical attention, however, at times leaves some areas under-elaborated. For instance, the connection between animals and trans and disability theory in the “Animals” section is tantalizing but somewhat latent, and the notion of “mercurial” largely drops away after the introduction of its eponymous chapter. Most conspicuous is the lack of substantive, explicit discussion of biopolitics. Chen refers on the first page to the importance of deconstructing the *life* implicit in Achille Mbembe’s necropolitics and Agamben’s figure of “bare life,” and in the sixth chapter briefly glosses Roberto Esposito’s paradigm of immunity, but for the most part the biopolitical enters the text as an unremarked-upon adjective. Readers fluent in biopolitical theory may appreciate being spared the lengthy excursus that precedes many works drawing on that field; however, the extent to which *Animacies* leaves biopolitics’ insights and debates unspoken is perplexing in an otherwise theoretically rigorous, ambitious, and intellectually inventive book. *Animacies* is positively queer, as described by Chen: it “animates too much, exacerbates rather than contains frisson, [and] soars beyond its bounds” (67).

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“A Second Innocence”: Deactivating the Debt Machine

BRUNO GULLÌ

Maurizio Lazzarato. *The Making of the Indebted Man*. Trans. Joshua David Jordan. Semiotext(e), 2012. 199 pp.

At the outset of *The Making of the Indebted Man*, in its foreword, Maurizio Lazzarato points out the necessity to “construct the theoretical weapons for the struggles to come” (2012: 11). This is perhaps the most important aspect of Lazzarato’s incisive “venture into enemy territory” (*ibid.*) – the territory, not simply of finance, but of the debt, or extortion, economy. Indeed, as Lazzarato explains, what is usually called finance economy is really a debt economy: interest for the capitalists and bankers, debt for the rest of us. It is a venture into the territory, not simply of crisis, but of catastrophe; the territory of “infinite debt” (77), of the logic of security, the politics of subjection, and the quicksand of guilt. He builds these much-needed “theoretical weapons” by using important elements from the philosophies of Marx and Nietzsche, from Deleuze and Guattari’s *Anti-Oedipus*, and their notions of the univocity of production and antiproduction, from Foucault’s thinking on biopolitics, and from other (perhaps unexpected) motifs of reflection, such as the “short philosophical digression” on William James (65-71), which, Lazzarato says, “the reader may possibly wish to skip” (66), but which this reader highly recommends.

The book begins with a qualified notion of the class struggle. It is the class struggle itself which is “today unfolding and intensifying ... around the issue of debt” (7). Both in the foreword and toward the end of the book, Lazzarato makes very clear what this essentially and concretely means: “Debt surpasses the division between employment and unemployment, working and non-working, productive and assisted, precarious and non-precarious...” (162; cf. 7). Capital, the Universal Creditor, is everywhere. Indeed, “debt cuts across every domain” (161). Today, we hear that in Europe alone twenty million people are unemployed. It makes sense to think of the necessity, as Lazzarato says, “to shift our perspective from labor and employment” (162). The coming struggles, entailing a *reinvention of ‘democracy’* (Lazzarato’s scare quotes), go well beyond that. They reach into the substance of all existence, as debt –the ugly face of contemporary Capital—becomes *existential debt*, that is to say, a real existential

threat and a path to death, as we know all too concretely from the many tragic cases of people taking their lives due to debt.

What must be examined, Lazzarato says, is the so-called ‘new economy,’ which deprives people of political power and, of course, of wealth: it deprives them of “the future, that is, of time, time as decision-making, choice and possibility” (8). It is the issue of possibility (and thus, time) that comes back in the section on James. The result of this is the *subjective figure* of the *indebted man*, of which Lazzarato offers a genealogy. This requires that one go beyond the idea of the economy narrowly construed and look at debt as a power relation, a “universal power relation, since everyone is included in it” (32). It is in this sense that the concept of finance economy does not work and that a “non-economistic reading of the economy” (72) becomes necessary. Indeed, debt becomes something like original sin in that it is acquired through inheritance. One is born in debt, and through the process of constant evaluation (see 137-145), the subjectivity of the indebted man (*homo debitor*) is constructed and projected to infinity. But what is the figure of the indebted man in relation to labor – and this, regardless of whether one works or not? What is the labor that the indebted man or woman must constantly undertake so that the ‘morality’ of debt may work and the spurious infinity of guilt bear its sad fruit? We know that for Lazzarato, who goes back to Nietzsche here, the morality of debt entails the construction of memory, guilt, fear and bad conscience in the economic subject, the entrepreneur of the self. (130). So, precisely, the answers to the above questions will be found in one of the most interesting notions Lazzarato discusses: the notion of the entrepreneur of the self.

The examination of the figure of the entrepreneur (and, in particular, the entrepreneur of the self) allows Lazzarato to engage in a poignant critique of neoliberalism and, to an extent, Foucault’s understanding of it. Far from embracing the notion that everyone has to become an entrepreneur – as if this could be a path to liberation – Lazzarato shows that indeed this is what the neoliberal economy (in this sense, a *subjective* economy, for it produces subjectivity) demands from all of us. The figure of the entrepreneur (of the self) is the figure of the indebted man, and thus the opposite of the subject of liberation. What characterizes that figure is infinite debt: infinite work, infinite effort and striving for the mere aim of escaping bare life, whose only horizon is death – a life of debt that ends only in and with death. The politics of subjection, typical of the neoliberal economy, has a biopolitical and thanatopolitical meaning, namely, the right of life and death that power (of the sovereign, disciplinary, or pastoral kind) has over everybody. The moral and legal injunction to *labor* is also an injunction to *work on the self* (42). Lazzarato says: “Economic production and the production of subjectivity, labor and ethics, are indissociable” (49). He points out that this is precisely what Nietzsche calls the ‘labor of man on himself’ and a

‘self-torture’ (42). He goes into a reading of Nietzsche’s sections on the construction of memory in *Genealogy of Morals*. The aim of this construction is the control of the future (45).

The question of the future, in particular of the control of the future and the annihilation of the possible – a question which comes back in the section on James – is very important here. It is also linked to the question of security: the logic of security, which is today’s main ideological justification for the system’s use and abuse of power against everybody. I say today, but I should perhaps say ever since Hobbes. I will go back to this when I address Lazzarato’s reading of Foucault’s modes of power. What is important for now is the idea that debt also functions as a “security-state technique of government” (46), and that it is not simply an economic mechanism.

Lazzarato continues with a very interesting reading of Marx’s essay on James Mill and then of his theory of credit in the third volume of *Capital*. It is here that the logic of security, based on universal distrust (57), gives rise to the most thorough and powerful application of the mode of debt: existential debt. What is evaluated now is not only “the skills and know how of the worker,” but also “the poor man’s actions in society . . . , that is, his lifestyle, his social behavior, his values, his very *existence*” (59). What we— especially in American cities—experience as racial profiling (the odious ‘stop and frisk’ law in New York City for instance), is the direct result of the logic of security and debt, of the constant evaluation of vast sections of the population and the curtailment of time (and space) – the curtailment of the healthy indeterminacy of the possible. Lazzarato first speaks of a “very Nietzschean Marx,” and later, when he goes into the theory of credit, of Marx and “objective” debt. For lack of space, I will not go into that, except to say that we find here the important assertion that “there is only one capital and one valorization process.” There is, Lazzarato notes, no distinction between a “real economy” and a “financial economy,” and this is already true in Marx: “The formula for financial capital, that is, self-valorizing money (M-M’), fully captures the logic of capital” (62).

With the debt economy, the objective and subjective moments, sovereign and existential debt, *labor* and *action*, work and life, are all determined and *commanded* (Marx’s word, quoted by Lazzarato) by the formula M-M’, by its mad spiraling motion, which “preempts the future” (74) and posits the conditions for *infinite debt*. Perhaps one of my favorite passages in the book is the following, which I want to quote in its entirety; it is from the philosophical digression on William James:

The world must contain indetermination, an open temporality in the process of realizing itself, that is, a ‘present’ which encompasses possible alternatives and, thus, possibilities of choice and existential risks. It is these possibilities

and the unpredictable alternatives that debt seeks to neutralize (70).

This means that the “logic of debt is stifling our possibilities for action” (71). Money as capital destroys time, and it destroys life. Everyday life, for each person, for each singularity and subject, is reduced to constant work on the self, which distorts and destroys the self’s genuine possibilities as well as its alternatives by reducing everything to the formula of a flat uniformity, to docility, and the univocity of production. Precarity is the existence and essence of the entrepreneur of the self, who no longer possesses rights, but is rather compelled to constantly act and work in accordance with the ideology of risk and the notion that the self itself *is* his/her capital (‘human capital’). The conclusion is contained in the premise: a self that cannot be but enslaved to debt. This is indeed both the conclusion and premise of the murderous logic of debt. What becomes a commodity, invested by the power relations of money as debt, is no longer simply a person’s labor-power, the time of labor, but all power and all time. It is life itself, which is now indistinguishable from death. Indeed, I believe that this is one of the most important arguments made by Lazzarato’s book: the life of the indebted person is the same as death. This becomes particularly evident when debt becomes *social*, a category Lazzarato takes from Foucault. Social debt happens when the prison extends to society as a whole, when the chains of slavery are everywhere, and society no longer has any autonomy vis-à-vis the State, but it is the product of governmental techniques (125), as well as the field of action of the police. This is when debt, the prison of debt, is extended to the social as a whole. The injunction to constantly work and to work on the self, to “become one’s own boss,” shifts to society the costs and risks of business and the State (93). It is in this context that Lazzarato deals with Foucault’s three modes of power: sovereign, disciplinary, and biopolitical power. With biopolitical power, and in particular, pastoral power (see 128), the neoliberal shift to the subjective economy of risk and debt is fully accomplished. However, the question remains as to whether all these forms of power are not instances and mutations of the same original sovereign power. This is a question that probably must be posed more in relation to Foucault’s texts, especially *The Birth of Biopolitics*, than Lazzarato’s book. Indeed, it seems to me that Lazzarato retains the centrality of sovereign power by precisely showing the limits of Foucault’s exceedingly positive view of the passage from one mode of power to the other and of his ambivalent/ambiguous reading of liberalism. In this context, Lazzarato speaks of Foucault’s “political naiveté” (108).

To conclude my brief remarks on this important book, I want to note that Lazzarato does not only give us a genealogy of the indebted man and the theoretical weapons for the struggles to come – something which is in itself of exceptional value, but he also concretely outlines what must be done as well as the aims of these struggles. It is the cancellation of all debt which can bring about the conditions for a better

world. For Lazzarato, the cancellation of debt and the deactivation of its genocidal machine means the abolition of the system of Capital. The aim is a *second innocence*: the possibilities to start afresh, the possibility of moving within the indeterminacy of ever-new possibilities..

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Race and Citizenship in Postwar America

MICHAEL MAYNE

Joseph Keith, *Unbecoming Americans: Writing Race and Nation from the Shadows of Citizenship, 1945-1960*. Rutgers University Press, 2013. 239pp.

On June 25, 2013, the Supreme Court ruled in *Shelby v. Holder* that the most important Section (Section 4b) of the 1965 Voting Rights Act (VRA) was unconstitutional. The majority decision, written by John Roberts, was filled with references to progress: “50 years later, things have changed dramatically”; “history did not end in 1965”; “history since 1965 cannot be ignored”; “our Nation has made great strides” (17, 24, 4, 20). Roberts pointed out that blacks vote now more than they did in 1965 and some minorities even hold political office. “Today,” Roberts opined, “the Nation is no longer divided along those lines” (4). The court was ruling on legislation that been modified and reauthorized in 2006. Congress compiled more than 15,000 pages of evidence, held over twenty hearings, and noted that there were more filed instances of discriminatory voting practices between 1982 and 2006 than there were between 1965 and 1982, when the VRA was last reauthorized. The VRA reauthorization passed the House 390-33, the Senate 98-0, and was signed by President Bush.

Robert’s sentiment echoes convenient conclusions from the 2008 presidential election. Jim Hoagland’s comments on election day in *The Washington Post* typify this rhetoric about a new America: “Even before the votes have been cast, [Obama] has written a glorious coda for the civil rights struggle” (qtd. in Proyect). Of course, these sentiments do not reflect reality. In her Dissent, Ruth Ginsberg details the variety of contemporary “second-generation barriers” designed to maintain white supremacy, argues that equal opportunity to vote is “the most fundamental right in our democratic system,” and asserts that the VRA “became one of the most consequential, efficacious, and amply justified exercises of federal legislative power in our Nation’s history” (39, 34). The “grand aim” of the VRA, according to Ginsberg, “is to secure to all in our polity equal citizenship stature, a voice in our democracy undiluted by race” (66). The court returned federal oversight of state laws to pre-VRA levels, and, Ginsberg observes, “history repeats itself” (67).

Race and citizenship are also the subjects of Joseph Keith’s *Unbecoming Americans: Writing Race and Nation from the Shadows of Citizenship, 1945-1960*. Keith uses work

produced between 1945 and 1960 by four nonwhite authors to reveal fallacies in early Cold War narratives about race in America and American citizenship. Keith argues that “the universalism of American citizenship,” an important tenet of American Cold War rhetoric, was a notion “constitutively linked to the production of subjects excluded from national membership” (3). While the Civil Rights movement was organizing a struggle for full citizenship of nonwhite Americans, the logic of Cold War discourse was producing a condition of estrangement that Keith calls “alienage.” “Located at citizenship’s threshold,” alienage “marks the boundaries against which conceptual and political terms of national belonging are...defined and secured”; it “defines the status of individuals and social groups excluded from membership in the social polity”; and it “animates the incoherencies between the nation’s self-imaginings and its economic and political global ambitions” (5, 165, 201). Alienage ultimately provides “an analytic opportunity,” an opportunity and function that becomes the focal point of *Unbecoming Americans* (136).

Unbecoming Americans looks at “minor” works by Carlos Bulosan (*America Is in the Heart* [1946]), Richard Wright (*The Outsider* [1952] and his 1950s travel narratives), C. L. R. James (*Mariners, Renegades, and Castaways* [1952]), and Claudia Jones (her 1953 court testimony, eight-page autobiography, and Notting Hill Caribbean Carnival venture). This study continues the tendency in literary scholarship of arguing for the rehabilitation of neglected texts because of their transgressive qualities. Like Keith’s, which is an insightful and successful example of this tendency, these arguments are usually right. Texts that challenge orthodoxy are often considered failures, and Keith suggests “the ‘failure’ of these works might be reread instead as indicative of subjects and ways of knowing rendered aberrant or illegible by the existing political and literary form in which the state is organized” (17). The authors discussed here “transformed their enforced exclusion from national membership into a prescriptive site” and performed alienage by articulating “a historical and cultural counternarrative of America during the period” that challenged liberal pluralism, the teleological propaganda of racial progress America branded itself with (13, 5). Keith argues that these works were neglected in part because they revealed the lie behind this strain of American exceptionalism.

Liberal pluralism was essential to Cold War rhetoric, according to Keith, “not only for framing the terms of domestic national unity but also for underwriting and legitimating U.S. *global power*” (9-10). All of these writers tied their discussions of race and citizenship to an international context, and these discussions collectively created a “counter-cosmopolitan” perspective. Counter-cosmopolitanism here means an “alternative global consciousness” that can inspire “a radical counterinternationalism...to U.S. state and global power” (158, 77). This perspective could challenge “the nation-state and the entrenched binary logic of the early Cold War” and draft

“a model for imagining and articulating an alternative nonnational form of political subjectivity and community (157, 172). By rejecting the rote platitudes of American equality in an international context, these writers provided a counterpoint to liberal pluralism and the rhetorical universalism of American citizenship.

Keith finds the key to counter-cosmopolitanism in Satya Mohanty’s theory of the “epistemic privilege of the oppressed.” According to Keith’s appropriation, “some identities...have greater analytic power or epistemic value than others,” and “people who have been oppressed have experiences mediated by these identities...which can provide information and more objective knowledge” about power dynamics in their communities (80). Keith transvalues Mohanty’s theory for his purposes as an “epistemology of unbelonging.” In Wright’s *The Outsider*, for example, Cross Damon turns his alienage “into an analytic opportunity, an unassimilated and unco-opted angle of vision that could come to serve as an ‘emergent’ model of critical consciousness” (108). *The Outsider* along with Wright’s travel narratives “can be read as a sustained effort to theorize a model of the black and anticolonial intellectual as the political and epistemological vanguard” because of Wright and his subjects’ outsider perspective (111). James, in his *Mariners, Renegades, and Castaways*, finds in Ahab’s motley crew “aberrant ways of knowing... that might serve as an articulate and emergent form of resistance to the dominant narratives of the state from which they have been excluded” (157). These alternative perspectives articulate a counter-cosmopolitanism that critically revises hegemonic narratives about race and citizenship.

Keith is correct; minority subjects have unique ways of understanding the world, and these alternative perspectives contest discursive orthodoxy and, therefore, state hegemony. But are these counter perspectives otherwise consequential? As Keith points out, “an underlying racist exceptionalism...is not anomalous to but in fact constitutive of the universalist principles of American citizenship” (203). Orthodoxy seeks hegemony in its quest to constitute epistemological certainty, and it metastasizes, spreading out from social discourse into social practice, stabilizing and maintaining state hegemony. Heterodoxy counters with dissent, sustaining the field of opinion by preventing the field of doxa and orthodox narratives from being synonymous, but heterodoxy also simultaneously defines orthodoxy. They are constitutive of each other. The state’s consistent violence against the citizenship of minorities proves the potential efficacy of minorities, but what is the efficacy of their alternative epistemologies to counter state violence? Alienage certainly “represents a disruptive subject position,” but are the consequences of this position more than analytic?

The concept of utopia provides a heuristic mode for more explicitly situating Keith’s cultural artifacts in the sphere of consequential political struggle by suggesting that these texts do more than fulfill the discursive requirement of heterodox critique. Re-

cently, for example, Kevin Floyd, Kathi Weeks, and Phillip Wegner have employed the concept of utopia to locate the political promise of narratives in queer subjectivity, feminism, and literature (respectively). And plenty of Keith's own discussion points to the potential of a utopian emphasis: Bolosan "can be read as striving to fashion an alternative tradition of universalism... against the existing racial limitations of modern imperialism, nationalism, and humanisms" (52); Wright's *The Outsider* "is haunted by this communitarian strain – this unfulfilled possibility of some social community" (88); James's "mariners, renegades, and castaways" of his prison on Ellis Island "in fact form a heterogeneous community more in keeping with a radicalized but genuine cosmopolitan Americanism than that of the American nation-state from which they have been discarded and displaced" (172); and Jones's 1959 Caribbean Carnival created (in Bakhtin's words) "'a utopian realm of community, freedom, equality, and abundance' that unmoors, albeit temporarily, fixed social roles and facilitates a free and familiar dialogue between people" (194). Keith concludes that "these figures left behind a rich legacy of universalist visions of social justice and aesthetic practice that can help remind us of more radical thresholds of democracy," which signals the potential for a productive extension of his ideas. *Unbecoming Americans* provides a sophisticated synthesis of disparate texts, highlights the significance of discursive critique during the early years of the Cold War, and encourages scholars to investigate other neglected works in search of both alternative perspectives of social discourse and alternative conceptions of the social itself.

American society between World War II and the Voting Rights Act was a particularly explicit battleground for the civil rights of American citizens. Today, massive resistance to civil rights continues with new strategies, ironically confirming Clarence Thomas's statement in his concurring opinion, which he intended to prove the absence of ballot barriers: "circumstances in the covered jurisdictions can no longer be characterized as 'exceptional' or 'unique'" (30). Indeed, eighteen states have passed voter suppression bills since 2011, including all of the states covered under Section 4 of the VRA (ACLU). Two years before the VRA was passed and fifty years before *Shelby v. Holder*, Martin Luther King, Jr., articulated a utopian vision in a speech at the end of the March on Washington that inspired millions of white Americans to reevaluate the logic of white supremacy. While Roberts and Thomas are rightly chastised for straining constitutional law and precedent to disenfranchise minorities, critiques of their maintenance of orthodoxy pale in comparison to the potential of utopian visions that inspire more than rhetorical struggles.

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Glorious and Brave: An American's Take on Canadian Art

MARY ELIZABETH LUKA

Denise Markonish, Ed. *Oh Canada: Contemporary Art from North North America*. The MIT Press, 2012. 400 pp.

From the first images and words of the *Oh, Canada* catalogue, it is evident that Denise Markonish is a curator in love with the thousands of artistic works, the 800 artists, and the dozens of critics, commentators and curators she has discovered, considered, and pulled together in a relatively idiosyncratic manner from a country abutting her own. Following a herculean research process (visiting 400 artist studios in a three-year period over many thousands of miles), Markonish has organized a compelling depiction of contemporary Canadian art around a range of histories, themes and formal, creative considerations. The effort to offer a comprehensive account necessarily introduces limits and blindspots. Markonish herself acknowledges the confines that her approach inevitably generates:

[C]learly a lot gets left out. Canada is a huge country... *Oh, Canada* attempts to...mount an exhibition hailing the creative output of Canada. But be warned, this is just a snapshot, one curator's view, ... a snapshot that will spark a dialogue continuing well after the exhibition is packed in boxes. (52)

The product of an equally ambitious exhibition at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (MASS MoCA) curated by Markonish, this edited volume follows the original curatorial aim to aggregate a comprehensive accounting of artistic works and interventions from Canada in order to make an exponentially larger intervention in the vast public space of the MASS MoCA structure, calling attention to the multi-faceted nature of Canadian artistic work, dialogues and histories within an international context. This was meant to be a grand public intervention into a substantive "terrain vague" (Sassen). Even with the gaps and omissions in the exhibition that the catalogue exemplifies, *Oh, Canada* is an intriguing stroll through the state of art in Canada and its relationship to what Canadian art critic Sarah Milroy has provocatively called a "counter-narrative to the Canadian art A-list" in her article about the exhibition in *Canadian Art* (Milroy).

This catalogue is a visually rich, if somewhat cacophonous contribution to the discus

sion of Canadian art in the 21st century. Using mostly accessible language, the book is organized geographically from west to east, including a few highlights from northern Canada. At 400 pages, it boasts 300 images reflecting high production values, and 62 short interviews of (and by) the artists involved, providing a recognizable rhythm to the catalogue (pp. 68-87 for British Columbia; 90-101 for Yukon-based artists; 108-139 for Alberta; etc.). Additionally, there are six literary contributions (one per *region*, spanning an immense time period and types of writing, obviously a personal selection by Markonish), and 14 commentaries (one per province and territory – almost) from individual contemporary art curators. The catalogue offers evidence of the vibrant and highly fluid network of artists and curators across the country. It suggests several points of entrée into the state of the visual arts discourse, as well as providing a richly provocative set of images, artist statements and glimpses of the present-day Canadian social imaginary concerning the visual arts. It explicitly does not set out to be a compendium of Canadian art, but to illuminate the fruits of a fascinated outsider's snowballing journey through the field.

In contrast to Markonish's express desire to spark dialogue rather than claim exhaustiveness, the blurb on The MIT Press website for the book makes a somewhat more sweeping claim: "*Oh, Canada* is an unprecedented, near-encyclopedic guide to Canadian contemporary art, and to Canada itself." Recalling tourism-generated provincial or regional studio maps, the blurb on the back of the book states this catalogue "... offer[s] a new kind of travel guide with art as the main attraction." Never mind that Windsor (Ontario) didn't make it to the frontispiece map because it was too far south to comfortably fit the illustration, that Newfoundland is spelled New Foundland, that few towns are marked, or that several of the islands north of Inuvik and Pangnirtung seem to be simply too far north to warrant inclusion. There are several other successful ways to probe the state of art in Canada today suggested in the catalogue. Like the representation of Canada on the frontispiece, some could have been much more deeply pursued, if only space had allowed.

An editorial tension between the temptation to make grand claims, and a more pragmatic awareness of the limits of the *Oh, Canada* survey is present throughout the volume. Structurally, Markonish's major curatorial essay (18-53) leads the catalogue, buttressed by an introduction and a foreword, and book-ended by two seemingly random lists of Canadian artists and/or celebrities (364-367), and two maps (one representing key cities attached to the inside front and back bindings, and another, "born in/norw reside in" trajectory map of all the artists, 368-69). Though Markonish depended on the conceit of tackling an overwhelmingly large land as her starting point, based on the final entries, she seems to have aimed for a more substantive engagement with themes other than the land. Once she lets the artists' works and words speak, the catalogue's slightly awkward reliance on geographic framing simply

falls away, and the work establishes its own rhythm, so that stronger themes and patterns can emerge.

Markonish outlines several organizing themes in her lengthy curator essay. It's evident from the over-representation within some geographic regions that Markonish's determination to include primarily mid-career artists, particularly several not already well-known in the United States, was more of an organizing principle than geography. In the essay, she starts off with geographically-based themes, then quickly moves on to non-geographic ones. First comes Canada's square miles and prairie sky (seven artists plus one Newfoundlander), then Aboriginal artists (six artists named) and one Acadian artist (20-26). This is followed by a brief consideration of a few important tropes: "the idea of North;" "the hyphenated Canadian" exemplified through the inclusion of two artists; and the stereotype of the apologizing Canadian somehow embodied by Canadians who became famous in the United States through their work on Saturday Night Live, as well as Rick Mercer's 2001 "Talking to Americans" mockumentary program (26-30). Markonish (like Simpson above) spends quite a bit of time on the primarily Ontario-centric art history usually referenced as the foundation of Canadian art, including the Group of Seven, and then moves on to the role of funding and policy in Canada. This is a richer vein for her to mine. For example, she discusses the Canada Council for the Arts as core funders of a strong studio system, "artist-run centres and collective practices" (36), gender and sexuality as sites of engagement (though not race or identity more generally) and the emergence of fine craft and artisanal work as a strength in Canadian art (though she doesn't explicitly include fine craft artists in her survey). Performance work in and outside the museum setting is highlighted as are "provincial schools" (41) (meaning the university-level art colleges) as sites of influence. More idiosyncratically, she lays out a short description of one aspect of painting-based work as a precursor to Canadian artists' evident engagement with international practices and dialogues and uses Quebec's specific mid-20th century history as the lead-in to discuss the lack of national survey shows or of Canadian artists in the American art market. Using each of these diverging lenses in turn, Markonish identifies specific *Oh, Canada* artists who fit with each theme. However, she does not provide the page numbers, provinces, territories or chapters where the work and interviews of each of the artists' mentioned can be found. Instead, the table of contents at the front must be consulted, by province or territory. More importantly, the rich themes introduced in the opening essay haven't been carried through the rest of the catalogue effectively, which was designed to reflect primarily geographic framing. Despite the commitment to less-well-known artists spread out over a vast geography, the curatorial thrust actually relies on work found in three art centres: Toronto, Montreal, and Calgary, with nods in the direction of Vancouver and Halifax.

The curatorial essays following Markonish's start with a chronology of "Canadian Art: 1847-1985" by Robin Simpson (54-61) focusing primarily on central Canada's (mostly Ontario's) canonical position in Canadian art history, and on the 1960s. This chronology ends inexplicably just before the powerful engagement with identity politics in the Canadian art world that gained prominence in the 1990s (Gagnon), and which significantly influences some of the newer work generated by the artists included in the exhibition and the catalogue. The rest of the curatorial statements seem to bear mostly incidental relationships to the artists selected by Markonish, charged as these were with expressing the implications of the geographical peculiarities of provincial or territorial "place or space" (Lemos), in response to the question asked by Markonish about "what distinguishes the art made in that place" (qtd in Markonish 236). Some curators take this opportunity to layer in additional counter-narratives while others focus on the social characteristics of people in each area. Still, they seem disconnected from the main narrative developed by Markonish, and could perhaps have benefited from a more dialogical approach similar to that employed in the artists' interviews of one another.

Finally, pointing to the paramouncy of mobility, there are three key ways in which Markonish carefully locates each artist geographically. First, artists' are presented alphabetically within province and territory chapters in the table of contents (10-11). Second, this is replicated and fleshed out with four pages dedicated to each artist in the main section of the catalogue (62-361), by province/territory, and adding details such as where the artists worked at the time of the exhibition's opening plus their birth-town. Usually, one image from each artist takes up their own introductory page, followed by a split of imagery and interview for the other three pages. Each image is carefully labeled. Each artist is interviewed by another artist (whose own page reference is included), often incorporating humour. Thirdly, in a graphic illustration near the back of the catalogue (368-69) and patently reminiscent of an airline route map, each artist is represented by a "named" arrow linking city of birth to current city of work, but not including page references or the spaces lived or worked in between. These visual and organizational cues helpfully point to the relatively mobile nature of artist work and artist gigs in Canada more readily visible in music, dance and theatre communities. It becomes evident that the modestly-sized visual arts community is stretched out over many minor centres located at extremely distant sites, one from another, and that these individuals relocate frequently, often temporarily. Regrettably, this is not fully explored or clearly elucidated in the catalogue, even though themes of geography, landscape and narrative storytelling clearly support it.

At the end of the day, there are more questions than answers: a good sign for a text that aims to generate discussion. Is there a place where this content can be linked to deeper considerations of the larger themes? Is the list of the other 340 artists con-

sidered presented elsewhere? Why so few writers (one from each region), and why these writers? How were the artists paired up to conduct the interviews of each other? Could some of the emergent or specific themes identified in the introductory essay been explored more thoroughly in the body of the catalogue, for example, by the other curators?

I clearly remember artists' and art supporters' excitement in Halifax and Montreal about the opportunities represented through participation in this exhibition, and reading similarly hopeful statements and commentaries in Canadian newspapers and art magazines at the time of installation (e.g. Adams; Helterman; Milroy). Mere inclusion held out the promise of an explicitly Canadian creative synergy in North Adams, Massachusetts in 2012. As ironic as a national Canadian meeting would have been in the U.S.A., it was a welcome opportunity to illustrate the existing modes, dialogues, and networks in which artists are engaged in both national and international environments. At a time when artists' remuneration remains woefully inadequate and arts funding has become marked by loss—including the loss of export assistance and transportation costs as well as hosting or profiling at cultural embassies—it has yet to be seen whether *Oh, Canada* will remain “only” a snapshot or celebratory event or whether (for example) the continued dissemination of the catalogue and the discussions begun there may propel the exhibition into the role of catalyst.

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Orgasm Without Bodies

ELA PRZYBYŁO

Annamarie Jagose. *Orgasmology*. Duke University Press, 2013. 251 pp.

Annamarie Jagose's *Orgasmology* is a glistening tome of a book. Speaking to the critical figure of the orgasm, *Orgasmology* – wittily masquerading as an encyclopedic-type entity – has something to offer to every sexuality and queer studies scholar, student, and practitioner. Jagose dedicates her monograph to a capillary stalking of the manifestations, representations, and discourses of the orgasm in the twentieth century. She chases orgasm through 1920s and 30s marriage manuals that called for the hetero-romantic magic of the “simultaneous orgasm,” 50s and 60s behaviour-modification practices that utilized the orgasm to straighten “deviant” male gay desires, cinematic and sexological representations of the orgasm, and contemporary enactments of the “fake orgasm” among heterosexual women. The orgasm – multitudinous, contradictory, and unruly – becomes Jagose's ground and model for rethinking all the big coordinates of sexuality, including practices, identities, ethics, pleasures, and politics.

Reading *Orgasmology*, what then is the orgasm? Where does orgasm's pleasure lay, if anywhere? How is it fixed today as a cultural site of pleasure-making and self-realization? Where has the orgasm been and what has it seen and made possible in its representative career as “the Big O, a story in four episodes” (Heath 1983, 68)?

Jagose's text serves as a rich compendium of queer theory, cultural studies, and critical theory. Like her previous significant texts, *Queer Theory: An Introduction* (1996) and *Inconsequence: Lesbian Representation and the Logic of Sexual Sequence* (2002), *Orgasmology* does not lack in depth or innovation. Populated by rich phraseology, with adroit navigation of queer theory and accompanying fields, *Orgasmology* is not a linear hobby-horse creation. At the same time, modeling her book on the “complex constellation of ideas” (18) that is the orgasm of the twentieth century, Jagose takes readers in so many directions, that we are left feasting without a common table.

Yet her contributions to the orgasm are several-fold, and not to be underestimated. Speaking to a queer and critical “theoretical aversion for orgasm” (9), she centers orgasm as a historical site of analysis in an unprecedented way. For instance, as Jagose argues, neither Foucault nor Deleuze nor Baudrillard cared much for the orgasm, delimiting it as a moment of capitulation to normalizing structures. The orgasm

has also been cast aside by queer theory as a moment not queer enough, occluded by other bodily practices such as anal sex and fist-fucking. Jagose thus looks to the orgasm as a cultural repository that, while ignored or disliked by critical and queer theorists, has nonetheless been a privileged figure of twentieth century modern sexuality, linked as it is to pleasure, the body, and sexual self-realization. “[A]s a complexly contradictory formation,” the orgasm, Jagose argues, may be “potentially disruptive of many of the sedimenting critical frameworks by which we have grown accustomed to apprehending sexuality” (xiii).

Second, Jagose locates the orgasm, and especially the feminine “fake orgasm,” as a site of creativity and political import on par with other privileged queer practices like fist-fucking. In her most innovative chapter, “Counterfeit Pleasures: Fake Orgasm and Queer Agency,” which was published also in the journal *Textual Practice* (2010), Jagose dislodges accusations of the fake orgasm as inherently unqueer and unfeminist in that it embodies an acquiescence to normative frameworks and a disloyalty to projects of sexual pleasure. Instead, she takes the fake orgasm as “one of the twentieth century’s few sexual inventions” (xv), which “makes available a mode of feminine self-production in a constrained field of possibility” (196) and should thus be understood as “less an imitation of orgasm than a critique of its disciplinary imperatives” (197). Effectively, then, Jagose recodes the social meanings and theoretical capaciousness of the Fake-O, demonstrating that it opens up feminist and queer possibilities for rethinking the postures of sex.

Third, yet more ambivalently, Jagose historicizes orgasm, reading the biological and cultural in tandem, denaturalizing the knee-jerk allotment of the orgasm to the natural, singular, and transparent. She talks back to pervasive contemporary discourses, which situate the orgasm as a bodily event, a reflex brought on by certain frictions. In this sense Jagose plots the orgasm as a site that is not self-evident or unified, but as a space in which contemporary hopes, anxieties, and futures are mapped.

In the first chapter, Jagose examines the simultaneous orgasm as a key site for the imposition of normative heterosexuality. She demonstrates that the simultaneous orgasm appears as an ideal in marital and sex advice literature of the twentieth century (and especially of the 20s and 30s), to preserve the institution of marriage – “to revitalize marriage at a time when the self-evident validity of the institution was being questioned” due to urbanization and increased women’s rights (57). With a white, middle-class audience in mind, the marital and sex advice genre hagiographed the “simultaneous orgasm” as the pivotal event of a loving marriage, an experience uniting the souls and bodies of two oppositely-sexed partners. Imbued with a new emphasis on equality in marriage, as on unity and companionship, the simultaneous orgasm straddles temporal zones, reaching backwards to an idyllic past when mar-

riage was unquestioned, and to an imagined future predicated on the preservation of the white nation.

Next, Jagose explores “the double bind of modern sex” (83), that is both its personalizing and impersonalizing motility, through Anthony Giddens’ figure of the heterosexual woman and Henning Bech’s figure of the cruising homosexual man. While not turning to the orgasm until the final section of the chapter, where she looks at its representations in John Cameron Mitchell’s film *Shortbus*, Jagose nonetheless provides a valuable discussion of the modernization of sex, a modernization that has linked sexuality to sociality, providing new opportunities for both intimacy and alienation.

In the third chapter, Jagose reads erotic aversion therapy of the 50s to mid-70s not for the cruelties it afflicted on gay men (when attempting to revise their deviant desires into heterosexual codes), but for the potentially queer reverberations of this applied behaviorism. Lacking perhaps in argumentative force, Jagose speaks of behavior-therapy as queer in that it reflects a “sexuality without a subject” (134), since it is less interested in orientation or identity than in the behavioral manifestations of sex. The orgasm is central to this discussion because it is around orgasmic reconditioning that these straightening projects are based, and orgasm becomes the measurable event or “somatic evidence” (113) of straightened desires.

Later, in “Face-Off,” Jagose’s fourth chapter, we are provided with an examination of the co-production of the orgasm, through “facialization” in cinema and effacement by medico-sexology. Films, starting already with Gustav Machatý’s 1933 *Ekstase*, wrestle with bringing the female orgasm into a visible register through the “well-established, even [...] hackneyed, representational protocol” (142) of the face shot – the “facialization of orgasm” (142). Sexology on the other hand, (and here Jagose is reading William Masters and Virginia Johnson, in particular), visualizes orgasm through the “carnal disinterest” (172) of universalizing graphs. Yet both cinema and medico-sexology share an investment, for Jagose, in beckoning the orgasm into the visual field, making it an object of vision.

Jagose’s final chapter brings us to a heady discussion of feminine “fake orgasm.” Revisiting Foucault’s call to “bodies and pleasures” from *The History of Sexuality Vol. I*, Jagose proceeds to deploy the fake orgasm to pry open sedimented relations between canonized queer sexual practices such as fist-fucking and barebacking and social change. The fake orgasm, as an unlikely and unlikeable figure made possible by “asymmetrically gendered access to sexual pleasure” (195), provides an “improbable opportunity for rethinking the relation between sex and politics” (177). Following Jagose’s argument, we learn to appreciate the fake orgasm not merely as indexical of sexu-social inequality but as an inventive erotic technique and counter-disciplinary practice. The Fake-O can thus help us rethink which acts count as political enough,

queer enough, and feminist enough, as well as the relationship between sex and politics itself.

So, the orgasm, where does this leave us in terms of the orgasm? We learn from Jagose that the orgasm is a historical entity, overrepresented and undertheorized, mystifying and quotidian. Yet we are never taken back to the body, to the feel and texture of the orgasm on the skin or to the ways in which the orgasm is lodged in the body's crevices, biological and cultural alike. Is the orgasm real? In the twentieth century and after, how is the orgasm *made* real to sexually differentiated bodies as a cluster of bio-culturally induced sensations and perceptions? We never find out from Jagose. Even while seeing orgasm's "facialization" in cinema, its avid effacement in sexological texts, its harnessing for behaviour-modification, its potent "faking," we lose track of how it is that the orgasm comes to inhabit the body, and what this means. For instance, while the fake orgasm might constitute "a mode of feminine self-production in a constrained field of possibility" (196), what might a routine invocation of the fake orgasm feel like for its practitioners? Jagose surrounds us with a compelling decentralized rendering of the orgasm but does not quite give us a fleshy body-at-orgasm, if there is – or ever was – such a thing.

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Trauma and the Limits of Counter-Memory

KELLI MOORE

Dora Apel. *War Culture and the Contest of Images*. Rutgers University Press, 2012. 273 pp.

War Culture and the Contest of Images comes in the wake of the Bush administration's corporatized media production, chiefly represented by Colin Powell's testimony before the U.N. Security Council on the presence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, and the current extension of policies and practices of the Obama administration that continue to drive underground public knowledge and debate about secret detention camps. The book advances Apel's previous scholarship on the visual culture of two thanatocratic regimes that subtend modern subjectivity: the plantation society and National Socialist state. Apel's previous work in *Memory Effects: The Holocaust and the Art of Secondary Witnessing* (2002); *Imagery of Lynching: Black Men, White Women and the Mob* (2004) and, *Lynching Photographs* (co-authored with Shawn Michelle Smith) (2007) paid particular attention to the aftermath of the plantation and National Socialist regimes as they played out through the camera lens. At the center of her analysis in these initial studies was the question of trauma and secondary witnessing. The same is true of Apel's latest endeavor.

In *War Culture and the Contest of Images* Apel explores how our experience of the Iraq war is conditioned on the one hand by frenzied production of documentary images and the rational, administrative government suppression of images on the other. The circuit of production, circulation and suppression of war imagery produces the frame that structures the very experience of reality—a reality critical theorists and activists have worked hard to frame as “perpetual war.” Perpetual war calls into being a culture of trauma that organizes the experience of modern subjectivity. In a culture of perpetual war, witnessing becomes an occasion in which the citizen demonstrates complicity or dissent with the machinations of oppressive sovereign power. Apel examines how documentary art forms have become sites for the production of secondary witnessing, and by extension, recognition of the experience trauma. Apel's archive is culled from art installation, reenactment, photography, video games, and performance art and investigates these aesthetic practices as counter-hegemonic examples of seeing war that challenge dominant state corporate narratives.

Apel's examination of the visualization of war carefully avoids attributing too much power to the state. The germinal work of Martha Rosler, Alan Sekula, and John Tagg on the history of photography contextualizes the book's introductory argument that documentary images need not always be theorized as hegemonic state practices. Apel argues that this previous scholarship, while a crucial advancement of the work of Michel Foucault on the representational mechanisms of state power and Western association between knowledge and vision, nevertheless offered a hegemonic view of documentary where documentary practice was intimately tied to shoring up the recurrent failures of capitalism. Instead, Apel asks that we consider the critical and combative potential of documentary as an aesthetic form used by citizens to enunciate the subject of human rights. Charting the ways citizens are "claiming the frame for the rightless" (5), Apel shows how documentary practices have evolved into counter-narratives that actively contest the machinations of perpetual war.

A major strength of the text is its organization. The tri-parted arrangement of the book suggests that war's traumatic aftermath is negotiated across three domains: the technological, the human, and the geographical. These bodies delimit the political economy in which images of war are produced and contested. The technological domain is elaborated first and exemplifies Apel's attunement to mediation, to the *processes* through which knowledge of war is achieved and archived. As Apel writes, "The effects of contemporary war culture and the incursion of the heightened power of the state into every kind of domestic or homeland space, creat[es] a perpetual state of hypervigilance in which 'homeland' is always mobilized for war. If military technology can be domesticated the domestic becomes militarized" (21). Called forth by the "war on terror," copious military advances in surveillance technology and behavioral modification techniques have been systematically domesticated into everyday American life. The art installation work of Krzysztof Wodiczko illustrates how military spy technologies permeate our everyday encounters, structuring critical discourse and conduct between citizens many miles from Iraq's combat zones. Apel shows how artists appropriate feelings and affects cultivated by the military such as the mood of suspicion and "code of silence" into installation work, introducing an experimental art context where the trauma of war may be publicly discharged.

The phenomenon of war re-enactment groups is another keen example of the militarization of domestic life; the entry of military strategy into the life-world. Unlike the multi-media artists profiled, those who participate in war re-enactments are less likely to spark a counter-narrative of war. Instead, Apel suggests their activities reify dominant state narratives of war that are uncritical. Apel's reading of the aesthetic practices of war re-enactors is all the more convincing in its unsettling account of the militarization of leisure as we continue to learn of the macabre intimacies of torture and other military techniques of motivation through the exposure of off-shore

military torture sites and clandestine tribunals. The annual re-enactment of the quadruple lynching of four black sharecroppers in Moore's Ford, Georgia is discussed as an example of the power of re-enactment to render a counter-narrative to sovereign patriarchal, racist, power. This is unsurprising given Apel's previous arguments that figured lynching photography as the key ephemera framing white hetero-patriarchal capitalist American culture. In terms of the domestication of military technique and technology, the multi-media artist appears to be a more reliable witness and translator of the atrocities of war and violent conflict than the pretend soldier who clings to the fetish of authentic war memorabilia purchased at a tradeshow.

Combat training tactics are by now familiar inside and outside of the academy. Military technologies mediate the process by which the soldier enters into a state contract that promises masculinity that is attached to heroism, and honor in and after battle. Apel reminds us that this contract is secured by state intervention into the bare life of the military subjects it disciplines. Yet, *War Culture* makes an important pivot away from surveillance technologies and behavioral techniques that produce the soldier's body to instead suggest that documentary images produce a more general "body of war." The condition of the human body photographed during war time has formed a political corpus: a photographic archive of war's trauma. This will not strike readers as a new argument. However, the book observes how sexual violence remains largely unphotographed and unpublished in the mainstream press; images of sexual violence occupy little to no place in the public archive of images that frame war. Apel's discussion of the Abu Ghraib photographs, released in 2004, offers a particularly cogent analysis of how pictures of the tortured body provide the alibi for an absent trove of images of rape and other documentation of sexual violence. Overwhelmingly, these images are images of Iraqi and Afghani people. Apel draws on Judith Butler to note how the absence of their suffering from public view renders these bodies ungrievable. If the most iconic image of the Iraq war remains the Hooded Man, Apel shows how the iconicity of this image, taken by an American soldier of the enemy combatant, depends upon the systematic U.S. government suppression of images of rape. To the extent they exist, images of rape are aggressively suppressed by state corporate interests framed in the interest of "good taste" (104). In this way, the book gestures at the idea of an absent icon, an image whose iconicity we may derive from its absence from the world.

Apel subtly draws out the relationship between photography and performance. Pictures of the tortured body are representations of military choreography that inform contemporary artistic performance repertoires. The notorious vernacular photography of former soldiers Lynndie England and Sabrina Harman appearing with tortured enemy combatants are read against the work of a number of performance artists, including Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gómez-Peña. The confluence of gen-

der, race and sexuality vary the capacity of the performance artist who rehearses the embodied rhetoric of torture to enact a counter-narrative of just heroic war. Female performers offer particularly complex reflections on the liberal feminist politics that enfranchised women in terms of participation in the military and the arbitrary power it wields. While it may appear that it is again the reflexive performance artist who is most capable of contesting corporate government framing of the Iraq war, Apel pays equal attention to several portraits of wounded soldiers, demonstrating how they too enter a counter-hegemonic framing of war into the public domain. Images of military amputees document the aftermath of war largely unarticulated by the U.S. military. At home, out of uniform, the amputee soldier establishes the political corpus of war for what it is: broken bodies and their nations who struggle to recover and redress vicious psychic and physical deformations of the human category.

War Culture hones in on an economy of images that experiment with landscape aesthetics offering a geographical testimony of war. The landscape of war is framed according to corporate government models as well as models emerging from the art world. Apel examines a government model of war communication that tempers the chaotic and arbitrary nature of its power by managing the press, specifically the photographers who cover war zones. Apel offers a very astute reading of the “embedded” photographer, a program she demonstrates is entirely administered by the U.S. military (151). Public perception of the embedded war photographer is clouded by mystique. The very attunement to their visceral witnessing practices has made the public overconfident that war atrocities are impeded by this sort of ethical monitoring. This is hegemonic perception that leads our attention away from thinking critically about the *process* of embedding photographers in conflict zones. The book disarticulates the embedded war photographer from a hero or celebrity ethos by presenting critical reflections of photographers whose work was compromised by the legal demands and restrictions of the embedding program. The critical documentarian of war must not be satisfied with their images, however hard won. Instead, they ought to continue to produce their photography as counter-hegemonic narrative by disclosing the ways their whereabouts, “free” access and movement to combat planning and events is controlled by U.S. policy and the discourse of national security. For Apel, the task of the embedded war photographer is complete when he or she supplements the documentation of war by *speaking* publicly about the realpolitik conditioning the capture of their images.

Digital technologies negotiate the landscape of war with ever increasing sophistication. First person shooter video games are another visual technology the military uses to mediate the soldier’s experience of ground war. Apel is interested in the mimicry performed between leaked video footage of U.S. military kill missions and first person shooter games such as “Modern Warfare’s” *Call of Duty Series*. The work of Rich-

ard Grusin helps Apel focus on the role of the gaming console on the immersion of the soldier's body into the experience of battle. In the military-sponsored first person shooter game the military recruit and video-gamer are collapsed into an individual who believes they are prepared for war. The frequencies of friendly fire, mistaken and flat out arbitrary kill decisions are removed from the military-sponsored first person shooter game narrative. In this way, the highly edited experiences of the "embedded" documentary war photographer are brought into conceptual alignment with the video gamer's leisurely immersive play. Both are forms of spectatorship, simulations of war experience that are driven by military public relations. This is a provocative suggestion that emerges across Apel's analysis. The embedded photographer's spoken words, recorded as interview texts rather than pictures, offer the most ethical and critical articulations of witnessing.

While the management of embedded documentary photographers is another extension of military power, other communication models exist that offer critical approaches to documenting the geography of war. Art works exploring the Israel-Palestine conflict are critical approaches to documenting the landscape of war. Part III investigates critical shifts in Israeli art which subtend the book's final point that the crux of modern subjectivity is the ability to witness. Political and psychoanalytic trends haunt art work produced within the Occupied Territories, revealing how "Israeli identity is built upon overcoming victimization and the cult of the fallen even as it instrumentalizes that identity in order to perpetrate its own atrocities on a victimized people" (216). These expressive models reflect critical shifts in civil discourse in which citizens of photography increasingly counter powerful Zionist narratives of security and Arab terror.

War Culture and the Contest of Images is a significant contribution to cultural studies of photography and the afterlife of trauma. The book's conclusion reiterates a complaint made by Slavoj Žižek that academics have largely abandoned a commitment to issue radical anti-capitalist critique. This point, though well taken, feels sudden and somewhat perfunctory because Apel leaves undeveloped her perspective on the precise role of the image to speak an anti-capitalist vision. Apel concludes, "[I]n a global culture in which everyone can produce as well as consume public imagery in a contest of images, the mastery of images and their polemical power is crucial to any emancipatory and transformative program of social and political struggle" (236). In addition to assuming equal access to the Internet, technologies of seeing and a lack of retribution against those from non-liberal states who capture political atrocities, Apel's final position seems to read images of political violence as fetishes; this despite our susceptibility to misrecognize the production of human culture as a series of economic exchanges of commodities rather than social relationships. One is left wondering about the status of traditional forms of social justice organizing

where anti-capitalist political programs developed through collective struggles that were characterized by the spoken word and slow, gradual ideological positioning.

These are minor criticisms as Apel's well researched and thought provoking descriptions of the counter-hegemonic uses of war imagery does an innovative job of showing how the social contract gains expression through the exchange of photograph files. *War Culture and the Contest of Images* finds perfect company with other recent work on ethics and visual culture, most notably Lisa Cartwright's *Moral Spectatorship: Technologies of Voice and Affect in Post-War Representations of the Child* (Duke UP, 2008). Tina Camp's *Image Matters: Archive, Photography and the African Diaspora in Europe* (Duke UP, 2012) and Nicole R. Fleetwood's *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness* (Chicago UP, 2011) both offer similar illustrations of modern subjects using photography to mediate social bonds across time and historical circumstances. Finally *War Culture* extends the arguments about state "containment and fragmentation of competing digital communities" (11) made in Elizabeth Losh's *Virtualpolitik: An Electronic History of Government Media-Making in a Time of War, Miscommunication and Mistakes* (MIT, 2009) to include art genres where subjects may rehearse hegemonic narratives of war or engage a counter-memory.

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A Logical Revolt

TULLY RECTOR

Alain Badiou, *Philosophy for Militants*. Trans. Bruno Bosteels. Verso, 2012. 98pp.

Philosophy for Militants comprises three essays on the interanimation of politics and philosophy, plus a brief interview with Badiou, tacked on as an appendix, about the student protests in Québec in 2012. It originally appeared in French as *La relation énigmatique entre philosophie et politique*, a title retained here only for the first, longest, and most foundational piece, in which Badiou defends both the autonomy of politics, conceived principally as a domain of truth, and philosophy's role in its creative innovations. This is followed by "The Figure of the Soldier", a meditation on valor and self-overcoming. "Politics as Nonexpressive Dialectics" extends the track of the first essay and links it with related paths in Badiou's work, including his use of certain results in set theory to model and clarify the conditions of political invention.

In the liberal tradition, political philosophy is a pragmatic or applied branch of moral theory. It is treated as primordial to discussions of institutional design, social action, the distribution of power and resources, how authority is to be constituted and legitimated, and so on, discussions that compose the essence of politics. The resulting decisions are political judgments, and philosophy's role is to define, formulate, and justify them. That this conception relies on a disastrously naïve and unrealistic model of politics is well-established.¹ That it also deforms and betrays the nature of philosophy is what Badiou sets out to show. In his vision, what is truly primordial is the event, that unpredictable rupture in the order of a situation that must be nominated as something radically new, proclaimed as unrepresentable from within the situation's current coordinates of meaning, and therefore made capable, if the subjects issuing such a proclamation faithfully construct its consequences, of changing existence. An event is political if its truth pertains to all and is available to all; if its type of equality exhibits, even in necessarily limited situations, the infinite multiplicity of human arrangements; if it exposes the repressive power of the State by interrupting that power, revealing and measuring its excessive, supererogatory dimension. Canonical events would include the Haitian Revolution of 1791, the Paris Commune of 1871, and the Chinese Cultural Revolution of the 1960s.

¹ For a precisely argued treatment of this problem, especially as it concerns the legacies of Kant and Rawls, see Raymond Geuss's *Philosophy and Real Politics*.

What binds philosophy to this process? Here we find the “enigma” of Badiou’s original title. For Badiou, what politics is and means will be both autonomous with respect to philosophy and yet dependent on the work of thought, the conceptual production of truths. While philosophers cannot establish in advance the legitimate goals of political action—these are donated, as it were, by the event—they can, as subjects to the event, propose “a great new normative division, which inverts an established intellectual order and promotes new values beyond the commonly accepted ones” (13), thereby dividing, in the classical idiom that marks Badiou as a Platonist, *doxa* from *aletheia*. Events make truths, philosophy makes them speak. It breaks with the old regime of understanding by formalizing those newly veridical norms that we cannot reduce, repress, or ignore. To bear witness to eventual truth is to resist the “dissolution of philosophy into cultural relativism” (30) and to uphold the universality of philosophy, its democratic indifference to the position or identity of its speakers. The formal equality of minds is, for Badiou, internally connected to both the universal validity of logical rules and the exigencies of radical action: “if justice is the philosophical name of politics as truth of the collective, then justice is more important than freedom” (30). Any situation in which the equality of intelligences is not materially realized is unjust, and any society that elevates the interests of particular individuals over universal political truths is to be overthrown. This is where democracy comes in. Badiou identifies it with philosophy’s indifference to identitarian particulars, but it is also, in another sense, the name we give to both popular political mobilization and one configuration of the State’s structure. It can be a powerful instrument for reaching political truth, but is not the truth of politics as such. Badiou has his own name for a hypothetical space in which the formal indifference of truth is unified with the reality of mass political action, in which the philosophical equality of argument and discourse derives from and reinforces a just, virtuous politics: communism. “In this sense, all emancipatory politics contains for philosophy...the watchword that brings about the actuality of universality—namely: if all are together, then all are communists! And if all are communists, then all are philosophers!” (38)

Much of the preceding will be more intelligible to readers familiar with the radical ontology developed Badiou’s major theoretical works, in which being is modeled mathematically, in set-theoretic terms, yet in such a way that its truths emerge through aleatory, decisionist, near-existential processes of subjective commitment. Fidelity is basic to these processes. One function of *Philosophy for Militants* is to expand on the meaning of fidelity in the political domain. What does it look like? In “The Figure of the Soldier”, Badiou calls it a form of heroism, the struggle to win local battles against inhuman regressions. It is self-transcendent loyalty, “the luminous appearance, in a concrete situation, of something that assumes its humanity beyond the natural limits of the human animal” (42). The essay explores the parlous state of political heroism today, when we appear trapped between the dead ends of religious

sacrifice and nihilistic exhaustion, or the evasion of heroism as such. In order to see whether there remains any creative potential for new forms of heroism we must first examine the heroic figures of our older political imaginary. As is clear from Badiou's list of canonical political events, the period from 1789 to 1976 should be regarded as an era of revolutions, in which the archaic image of the warrior was replaced by that of the soldier, a hero whose fidelity to the secular political body was measured by his (and in Badiou's retrospective accounting, the soldier is always male) brave and nameless death. His monuments enshrined a figure with no given identity, since he was both every citizen and the collective citizenry's guarantor of an eternal future: the flame at his grave was meant to burn forever. Badiou analyzes the lyrical resonance of this image in poems by GM Hopkins and Wallace Stevens. These readings conclude with the idea that the soldier was paradigmatic on account of his having fused two principles into a single image of human possibility: that truths can be forged on behalf of everyone, indifferently, in the here and now, and that they thereby belong to history and not to some sacred eternal order. But the living world of this figure is past; the revolutionary sequence has ended. War is now a repulsive scandal, a vast and meaningless homicide. Badiou therefore insists that "we must create new symbolic forms for our collective actions" (58), proper to whatever truths will come to have shaped, through those actions, our historical moment.

What does it mean to say that the era of revolutions is over? Collective emancipation no longer assumes its real form under some proper name—that of Lenin or Mao, for example. In the past, mass rebellion expressed objective class antagonisms, classes expressed their quiddity through parties led by individuals, and the name of the leader expressed therefore "the totality of the political process in its becoming" (62). It is this expressive dimension that has been consumed or emptied, historically speaking. The political dialectic in which a particular, exceptional event can embody a truth that is universal in its prescription, and in the address and legibility of its postulate, must now refuse its coverage by a proper name. Badiou argues for this refusal in "Politics as Nonexpressive Dialectics". Revolutionary action is no longer defined by its disclosure of objective contradictions—of some already existing reality—but by its disjunction or severance from reality in pursuit of the radically new, the currently nameless. Only such creative natality can restructure the political domain. Badiou diagnoses our current conjuncture as built—at least ideologically—around the opposition between liberalism's law and radicalism's desire, a relation that must itself be superseded by any properly generic political truth. Such a truth would, in its evasion of existing descriptions, in its separation from both law's dominion and "the dictatorship of normal desires" (74), rest on some magnificent, inspiring fiction. About this fiction Badiou can, of course, say very little. What he can do is model the process of natality in the language of set theory. The essay contains an intricately convoluted little riff on constructible and non-constructible sets. More precisely, Badiou is interested

here in the passage from a universe governed by the axiom of constructibility—a figure, here, for a meta-law, under which every situation can always already be named—to one where an unclassifiable set can be brought into being through an operation that is internal to set theory’s logic of consistency and yet, at the same time, the result of a pure or non-derived decision. The whole thing is pretty complicated, and what Badiou presents is more of a sketch of how some radical new situation can be ontologically grounded than a patient demonstration or formalized argument. For that one needs to consult Badiou’s major theoretical works.²

Such is *Philosophy for Militants*. Its usefulness will largely depend on the reader’s familiarity with and sympathy for Badiou’s project as a whole, although his caustic and haunting insights into the present order carry their own independent value. While any serious criticism of the main positions laid out in these essays should really be targeted at *Being and Event* and *Logics of Worlds*, where the author’s theoretical armamentarium is displayed in full, I can review some possible lines of direction. To start with the most general point, we may want to resist the whole idea of subsuming truth under the category of the event, at least according to the way Badiou describes the decisionist enigma of evental rupture. Which repeatable cognitive procedures can one use in order to declare that something is an event? And if there are no such procedures, and one’s declaration is basically a leap in the Kierkegaardian dark, why should truth—the product of a declared event—be held hostage to what is outside communicable reason? Preserving the term “truth” for cognitive procedures of multiple kinds might be a better way of securing what Badiou thinks, correctly in my view, any radical politics cannot do without: a means for separating mere opinion from actionable accuracy. It is also dubious, as the history of post-revolutionary situations suggests, that we should think of fidelity to an event as beyond criterial judgment because it is productive of those very criteria the event’s truth brings about. That would make decisions about who is allegiant and who is a betrayer a matter of opinion, or, more realistically, a matter of brute power. There is perhaps a further problem, independent of the internal consistency of Badiou’s approach to truth. It concerns the role of philosophy. Surely the case can be made that the historical analysis of political concepts—tracing the consistency and coherence in their patterns of use—is both a valid philosophical enterprise and a politically useful one, in a way that does not depend in any significant sense on radical evental commitment. All of these remarks circle around the sense that Badiou’s ingenious and powerful argumentative machine, and the vision of the political field it generates, may have left little room for movements that could connect ordinary thought and practice with the realization of justice. The

² See Badiou’s *Being and Event*. The second part of his ontological development, in which the intra-worldly realization of truth events is explored in greater detail, is found in *Logics of Worlds*.

ordinary may be as degraded as Badiou contends—it certainly doesn't look great—but its wholesale disavowal and repudiation may also embody pathologies of thought, flights from the actual that serve, or can be made to serve, the interests of the status quo in hidden and dangerous ways.

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