

Energy Bars

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Not surprisingly, to think energy is always to address constitutive limits—the bars that ground and complicate any materialist understanding of the faintly oxymoronic term “Energy Humanities.” For efficiency—and after all, the exploitation of energy resources is about efficient resistance to anthropocentric atrophy—I will distill this response to four points about the local, the global, the institutional, and the theoretical. The idea is, on the one hand, to appreciate deeply the critical openings implicit in the notion of energy in a humanities frame; and, on the other, to register necessary incredulity that our efforts can resist the tendency to add just one more option to our endeavors rather than critique as criticality in the current conjuncture. In this way our understanding of energy bars might move beyond discourses of quotidian consumption. What does energy teach us about limits?

In Vancouver, the site of the 2015 MLA, the city is faced with a complex scene of contradiction. While its namesake in Washington state agonizes over whether to develop its harbor around upscale condos or Bakken shale oil, Vancouver already ships out 2.2 million metric tons of oil per year to enrich its local economy. The voluntary tanker exclusion zone that operates up and down British Columbia does not apply to oil ports like Vancouver, where most of the oil tankers and barges ply their trade. Whereas voluntary compliance around environmental protection is usually an oil business charade, the Canadian government has decided to spare the oil shippers from playing even this gesture in Vancouver. There are thousands of eco-activists in and out of academe in Vancouver who resist the inevitabilities of an oil economy, and the point is not to disparage their ongoing efforts (the Green Party is particularly strong in Vancouver and the NSV movement [Neighborhoods for a Sustainable Vancouver] has greatly enhanced environmental dialogues and practices in the city). But for all that, local power (in all of its senses) is distributed the old fashioned way and reminds us that the first law of energy business is inertia and necessitates a consonant force to oppose it that would break the cycle rather than settle for recycling.

There is a huge literature on price manipulation in the energy industries (it's worth noting such massaging of price also applies to renewables, particularly in solar panels). Oil, of course, has been geopolitically fixed for decades, especially since the crises of the early Seventies, and has often come to the rescue of America as a failing hegemon, where depressed oil prices dissipate the more than nagging suspicion of its

working classes that their wages have barely moved in forty years. The geopolitical bar on energy now finds pricing overdetermined on one level by the U.S. ramping up its pumping and fracking as an expert export play, and on another as a rather obvious punishment of Putin-inspired expansionism. Whereas the collapse of the Soviet Union was accelerated by a fake arms race, the reining in of Russia can now be achieved by an equally fraudulent desire to push the price of a barrel of oil well below the \$100 necessary to keep the oligarchic orgy humming and delusions of grandeur grand. Will this pricing reach those for whom it would represent a tangible material benefit (for heating, cooking etc. in the global South)? There are many reasons this cannot last long, but one payoff will come in the 2016 U.S. presidential election when those who have played the game will be offered their inertial treats (light hands on resource exploitation, pricing, environmental restrictions, taxes, etc.). Much more than the Energy Humanities, carbon democracy is a quintessential oxymoron that often means the pleasure of doing business, geopolitically. Perhaps the humanities should not let this limit demarcate the arenas of its concern.

The Energy Humanities is a *primum mobile* of the public/private split in institutions of higher learning. It is increasingly clear that the luxury of studying energy in the humanities pivots on a resource war. Simply put, in public institutions like mine that boast part time instructional rates approaching 70%, allocations to the humanities, and new initiatives like ecological critique, are in short supply. The environmentalism we deal with concerns matters like class size determined by the fire marshal (not by pedagogy), security for Saturday classes, and when to deactivate escalators and elevators to save on repair bills (not power, necessarily). With a university so starved of tax dollars, the humanities is merely a discretionary cost and is more in danger of extinction than the polar bear. The humanities in the United States was a public initiative coterminous with the formation of its state. If the humanities wants to talk energy it might also usefully discuss how it has been drained of its public mandate.

A fourth reference point suggests the Energy Humanities offers tremendous opportunities, and not just those of opportunity cost or crass opportunism. Theoretically, it enjoins all of those intellectual, cultural and political aspirations we associate with interdisciplinary commitment. Within materialist theory, it has long been a space where critical concepts can be rewritten or transformed by deeply ecological imperatives. In my work the micro and macro realities of energy are striated or complexly interanimated by ideological critique which occasionally weaves the aesthetic, the economic, and the political in surprising ways, including the methodological shock of thinking ideology today in the first place. But it also usefully challenges theoretical shibboleths and gestural intellectualism so that what Althusserians might call a problematic is further problematized and sometimes undone by placing the transnational division of energy, let us say, front and center in how we conceptualize the

world. If for me this is often a postcolonial question (for instance, LED for the west, incandescent for the rest) it is clear that its cultural suasion needs a new grammar, an ecological syntax. And the humanities help to foster this language of change.

Limits within the academy, of course, cannot simply be calibrated according to scarcities across energy markets, but the antinomies of both constitute a timely and critical juncture for the humanities. As the late and dearly missed Patricia Yaeger pointed out in her Editor's Column for the *PMLA* a few years back, energy has long been a creative source for artists and critics in understanding the ways we constitute "living" on this planet. The point in foregrounding such discussion within the humanities is not to forget about limits, but is rather to focus on the imaginative challenges they represent. This does not simplify the discourses of energy and their capacity to both improve and ravage the conditions of actual existence. Instead it takes such limits as also a problem of cognitive capacity, a place where culture and all the worlds we make may need refueling of a very different kind.