Infrastructure Again, and Always

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This essay grows out of a roundtable meant to assist the development of the so-called Energy Humanities. Each participant was asked to contribute a generative question. Mine was the question that now begins every conversation in the Humanities, that of scale. I asked it because it is unavoidable. The scale problem seeds and feeds the Environmental Humanities, which is an aspirational, activist, interdisciplinary field that grew from rising awareness of global climate change, from a need driven both organically and institutionally to declare the Humanities as transformational cultural practice, and from an informed disgust about the ecological and social costs of economic globalization. Tian Song wryly reminds us that greenhouse gases are global "garbage," (Song 2012) and analogously the Environmental Humanities assume a global waste-archive through which to sift, assembling cultural knowledges, from the traditional to the digital, in response to the injuries of neoliberalism. Generative works such as Allan Sekula's *Fish Story* (1995), Gay Hawkins' *Culture and Waste* (2002), Anna Tsing's *Friction* (2005), and Rob Nixon's *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011) explore the dizzying swings between micro- and macro-scale crises enabled by neoliberalism as it has been exported worldwide and as it manifests itself in a North American landscape for forty years marked by labor's devaluation, manufacture's outsourcing, resource wars, and new forms of fossil fuel extraction with massive external costs.

Living oil in the U.S.A. of the twenty-first century is living subprime. It's living bankrupt in suburbia on fire, as are so many southern Californians that a Los Angeles-based Zombie radio podcast titled (hopefully) "We're Alive!" has been adopted as an interactive collective resiliency plan through fan fiction. Living oil is living out of a truck and conceiving oneself as "living the dream" because you can turn your key and get "heat" and "music," as does a Bakken oil worker in Isaac Gale and Alec Soth's haunting documentary about transient labor in Williston, North Dakota, "Sweet Crude Man Camp" (2013). Living oil is the subprime dream of the new American ~~middle class~~, as we are reminded by the recent rapid expansion of subprime auto loans in the U.S.A., which indicate not only a continuing financial landscape of Wild West deregulation but also the real need of U.S. workers—without good credit, striving—to travel to their jobs by car where there is no public transport. Living oil—the title of my most recent book—is living within the infrastructure that fossil fuels made, since roughly 1930. It's living in the old century, the twentieth, but without many of the safeguards (a genuinely progressive tax structure, labor rights, civil rights) hard won in that century that made it boom. And today living oil is living without oil, in that the relatively cheap, more easily extracted energy of the twentieth century is gone, as is our ignorance of the connection between fossil fuels and climate change. "There is a good taking for granted and a bad taking for granted, and at least theirs was good then," writes Rick Bass about "people of the thirties, forties, fifties, sixties, and seventies who used Too Much Gasoline, Too Much Energy" (171). His own generation, he laments, has "a little more awareness," so the party's over (171). Bass published the book these quotes come from, *Oil Notes*, in the same year that Bill McKibben published *The End of Nature* (1989), the first popular treatment of global climate change. Both books are anxious as hell about what comes after the frontierist phase of U.S. cultural and economic imperialism that brought us, it now seems, the end of the inhabitable world.

Living oil is persisting, holding on—all etymological implications of living—in the infrastructure that oil made. As Adam Dickinson writes in the brilliant *The Polymers* (2013), a collection of poetry and provocation about the complex molecular chains we associate with petrochemical plastics, "We have nothing to read but our chains. Our chains reread us precipitously" (3). Today our trains re-read us precipitously. I mean the long, heavy trains that an anarchist photographer in my hometown of Eugene, Oregon, has identified as carriers of Bakken crude. Since Lac-Mégantic, such trains, running through the Canadian and U.S. West, toward the Pacific, and otherwise toward the Gulf and the Atlantic coasts, are conceived as "oil bombs" rather than the sentries of North American wealth and promise that trains were for small towns of the 1920s, 40s, 60s, or the 1880s, for that matter, with their happy resonance memorialized in the work of Sherwood Anderson, Willa Cather, and Wallace Stegner. Oil train traffic has increased some 4000% since 2008, small towns in the Pacific Northwest suffer traffic jams as cars await the passage of oil trains at local street crossings, oil trains coming through in the tens and soon hundreds per week, oil trains easily derailed because they are longer and heavier than they should be, exceeding the 30-car limit of the "no problem" train as declared by the American Association of Railroads, oil trains newly regulated for travel at speeds (40-50mph) deemed unsafe to prevent puncture in the case of derailment and still, in some cases, using old DOT-III railcars designed for less flammable, lighter crudes than those of the Bakken shale or the Athabaskan oil sands.[1] Trains designed to carry oil that no longer exists, carrying oil that does. They reread us, as we read them, our precipitous supply lines. The "living" in living oil has connotations of belief, with which it shares an Indo-European base, but also of leaving, which shares that same base. Those indigenous, farming, and environmentalist coalitions who Naomi Klein represents as an international geopolitical movement, "Blockadia," suggest that a politics of refusal—eg. *leaving* oil—starts with disrupting the infrastructure.

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[1] Oil train facts and figures from Jared Margolis's *Runaway Risks* and Matt Krogh's report *Off the Rails*, a report prepared by Matt Krogh, Campaign Director at ForestEthics with contributions of research and analysis by Eric de Place, Policy

Marshall McLuhan described infrastructure as media. Along similar lines, one could say that infrastructure is embodied memory. As I describe in a gloss on my concept "petromelancholia," by which I mean an endless grieving and thus re-membering of oil suffered by the oil industry, by well-oiled lobbyists and politicians, by (some) everyday North Americans: "The petroleum infrastructure has become embodied memory and habitus for modern humans, insofar as everyday events such as driving or feeling the summer heat of asphalt on the soles of one's feet are incorporating practices, in Paul Connerton's term for the repeated performances that become encoded in the body. Decoupling 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" (LeMenager 2014, 104). An ironic new ad campaign by Volkswagen named "Mémoire de Pétrole" celebrates the electric-model V.W. *Golf* by offering the scent of gasoline—"Mémoire de Pétrole" is a cologne—to speak sensually about a fossil fuel age gone by. Enter the e-Golf, goodbye petroleum aesthetics—sights, sounds, smells. "Presented alongside work by Berlin-based photographer Attila Hartwig [psychedelically colored photographs of oil spills], Mémoire de Pétrole was passed through the crowd, spritzed onto thin blue ribbons…"[2] While Germany's famed *Energiewende* or energy transition comes under fire because of its balancing investments in coal, this promotional stunt feels idiotic in the tautological sense, an "idiocy" of mirroring *as* meaning that Jennifer Wenzel implies when she speaks of "petro-porn,"[3] the mere display of our diverse affective investments in petroleum and petrochemicals *as* critique.

Yet one cannot dismiss Mémoire de Pétrole as such idiocy without considering the dramatic irony that shadows it: today fossil fuels are bigger than Jesus Christ, to paraphrase John Lennon's blasphemy, and the U.S.A. stands to outpace Saudi Arabia as their number one producer in merely five years. Mémoire de Pétrole *IS* the scent of the twenty-first century, in that always-already way that makes pointing it out seem naïve. Yet by lifting it from of the realm of the subliminal, swanking it up on thin blue ribbons in a gallery or putting it on the Web as a faux-glossy advertise-

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[2] Many thanks to Nicole Seymour for this reference.

[3] See Wenzel "Taking Stock of Energy Humanities" in this issue.

ment for scent, Volkswagen advertises the way that infrastructure works, again, as memory, and how alternate infrastructures—for instance a road system that sustains the electric car—might create new memories, neuronal pathways, politics, desires. The "alternative hedonism" Kate Soper has called for. Infrastructure, like memory, is determinative *and* design-able.

When we talk about deliberate memory, memorization or memory making, we often talk of maps—cognitive maps, mnemonics, even mapped paces around a room, meant to spur recall. Mapping can be tactical, in a way that memory isn't supposed to be—and yet can be, too. When she was an undergraduate college student, Emily Ferguson, the Ontario-based bloggist of "Line 9 Communities," stayed up night after night assembling satellite images, publicly available information and integrity data, creating a map of an Enbridge pipeline whose route had been withheld at a public meeting. The map got tens of thousands of hits in a few weeks, and it made Ferguson a figure of national importance in Canada, a representative to Canada's National Energy Board.[4] Ferguson and Jeffrey Insko, a professor-activist in Michigan whose property has been earmarked for an Enbridge pipeline, identify the formation of "citizens along the line" as an innovative rethinking of bioregionalism, the summoning of political community along pipelines, oil-track, stressed grids.[5] The "region along the line" is infrastructure critically remapped and remembered, under the pressure of violated property rights or tribal sovereignty. As DIY speculum culture was to the feminist revolution, DIY mapping might be to North America's grassroots *Energiewende*. Map it. Know thyself. Walk the line.

This essay began with the question of scale and has performed an answer to that question without directly addressing it, until now. Has it become apparent that I see infrastructure as the interface of multiple scales, as a means of finding, within overlapping and at times unthinkable systems, point of view? Reframing the everyday so that its obscured workings become visible has been called defamiliarization in literary criticism and an geographic aesthetic orientation or "poetics of infrastructure" by the Center for Land Use Interpretation's Matt Coolidge.[6] It's been called radicalism by the sociologist Harvey Molotch, who described "radicals" in the wake of the Santa Barbara oil spill of 1969 as "persons who live in conditions where injustice is apparent, and who have access to more complete information about their plight than the average man, giving them a perspective that allows them to become angry in a socially meaningful way" (44). Living oil is people becoming angry in a socially meaningful way, at the interface of overlapping scales, of global markets and polymers. Map your supply lines, your pleasures. Re-read them. Not precipitously.

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[4] See Ferguson *Line 9 Communities*.

[5] See Insko "Line 6B Citizens Blog."

[6] See my interview with Matt Coolidge in *Resilience, A Journal of the Environmental Humanities* 1.1.

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