Taking Stock of Energy Humanities

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Soon after I arrived at Columbia University last fall, I was asked whether I would like to be nominated for a sustainability award sponsored by the Resnick Institute at CalTech. In 250 words or less, I had to describe my invention, including the potential market for it and whether it could be scaled up. For a humanist, these are strange questions to contemplate. Indeed, how can our work in the nascent field of Energy Humanities be described as an invention, or as a contribution to sustainability, however we define that tricky term? Even if we tend to think more in terms of *interventions* than *inventions*, what claims can we make about the work that, say, poetry, metaphor, narrative, point of view, imagination, close reading, or the humanities more broadly can do in the world?

Much of my intellectual energy in the past few years has been devoted to capacity-building work in the environmental and Energy Humanities. I've written spiel after spiel—for audiences including an environmental studies class at Austin College (my undergraduate alma mater in Texas), the folks at CalTech, and the president of Columbia University—to explain how the humanities' signature questions, modes of inquiry, and habits of mind can help us grapple with some of the most urgent challenges of our time: environmental crises, dependence on finite resources, and the economic inequalities and power imbalances that both create and result from these problems. In the classroom, too, my students are most consistently moved and politicized by questions of environmental and energy justice. (One particularly earnest student reported spending the weekend learning to ride a bike after reading Michael Watts' and Ed Kashi's photo-essay book *Curse of the Black Gold: 50 Years of Oil in the Niger Delta,* "so I never have to drive a car again.") The world is hungry for the kinds of knowledge and critique we have to offer.

Yet the work of building an academic field brings challenges of its own. One is the contradictions among the various imperatives that shape scholarly production. My aforementioned spiels on the Energy Humanities enumerate the ratios and equivalences at work in fossil fuels, which quantify energy in term of vast scales of space and time, or calculate the muscular equivalents – whether human or animal – of machines that run on mineral energy. How can we understand the discrepancy between

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the everyday tedium of filling the gas tank and the sublimely discrepant timescales at work in fossil fuels, the ways in which geologic past, technological present, and environmental future overlap and collide? How many oceans full of tiny creatures had to die and fossilize over how many millions of years in order to produce the 10 or 20 gallons of gas that you put in your tank? How many "energy slaves" would you require to perform the work that coal, oil, and natural gas do in your everyday life? "At some point," as I write in the introduction to "Fueling Culture: Energy, History, Politics," "this arithmetic gives way to an alchemy that turns dirty energy to gleaming gold.... It enable[s] an economy and infrastructure of the as-if, where one reaps the benefits of resources that one does not actually have." These ratios and conversions will blow your mind if you let them, but we mostly don't let them: that's the secret of petro-magic's conjuring trick.

At some point in tabulating this fuzzy math, however, I start to feel like the man behind the curtain. It's as if I'm the magician, pulling the rabbit out of the hat, night after night: *voila!* petro-complacency, *take that!* I begin to perceive the conventionality and inadequacy of the shtick. My concern has to do both with the deep intellectual pleasure that I derive from the frisson of oil's quotidian/sublime, and with the repetition of the gesture in my own work and elsewhere in this emergent field. When more and more of us in the Energy Humanities are making these moves, they can start to feel like a kind of petro-porn. *Ok, there you go again with the temporal and material mindfuck of oil. What else you got?* In other words, our goal is not the endless (and endlessly pleasurable) proliferation of neologisms that begin with *petro-,* but instead a future under the sign of some other prefix.

I would offer two and half ways of thinking about this concern.

First, acknowledging the pleasures of—and even love for—oil is a necessary aspect of understanding our relationship to it. Given its ubiquity in our daily lives (at least in energy-rich societies), nearly everyone derives some kind of pleasure from the world that oil has built. Disavowal of such pleasures or, even worse, abstemious shaming of other people's "addictions" does not offer a promising path toward critical understanding and transformation.[1]

Second, the repetition of conceptual moves might be described rather differently, as the work of forging a methodology and consolidating a field. The imperative of *originality* in scholarly production—which repetition seems to contravene—could be understood in terms of Foucault's distinction between authors and "founders of discursivity": figures like Marx and Freud who are "authors of a theory, tradition, or

1 See LeMenager, *Living Oil.*

discipline in which other books and authors will in their turn find a place" (153-54). Adapting and democratizing this distinction, we might say that, taken together, the individual work of pioneering scholars in emergent fields like Energy Humanities can also have a collective function of founding a discourse and creating the matrix within which conversation becomes possible. (See, for example, Brent Bellamy's above enumeration of possible methodologies for studying literature and energy).[2]

Alternatively, and more tentatively, it's worth thinking about scholarly production *as* production, and the demand for originality (and scholarly "productivity" itself) in terms of hyperconsumption, planned obsolescence, and the eternal lure of the "new and improved" as strategies for managing capitalism's own imperative–grow or die—which has for more than a century been premised on cheap energy. Because oil is, in a manner of speaking, *everything,* Alan Stoekl insists that "we need to do *more*" than to understand it in chemical or capitalist terms (xiv); Ross Barrett and Daniel Worden argue that it "requires *more* than just a commitment to alternative energy, *more* than just individual consumer choices" (xix); and I seek a methodology that offers something *more* than a list of texts about oil to show how wrong Amitav Ghosh was about the paucity of petrofictions. By "more… more… more," all of us mean a qualitative difference, new thinking adequate to the seemingly infinite power of this finite power source. Yet our critical desire (for another kind of originality) veers uncomfortably close to oil's love affair with quantity, its mantra of *more*.

A second challenge in this emerging field involves the kinds of knowledge we ask students to produce. In my course on "Literature and Oil," students write an "Oil Inventory," an assignment inspired by a line from Antonio Gramsci that Edward W. Said cites in the introduction to *Orientalism:* "'The starting point of critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is, and is 'knowing thyself' as a product of the historical process to date, which has deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory'" (25). In their Oil Inventories, students trace the presence (or absence) of oil and its history in their own lives. I encourage students to take risks with the form of the inventory; the results are fun to read and get the students to think about themselves analytically, structurally, and imaginatively.[3] This exercise offers a kind of inoculation against that too-easy depoliticizing gesture of pointing out energy hypocrisy (whether one's own or others'), as if anyone who drives or flies or eats Kellogg's cornflakes forfeits the right to wonder and worry about fossil fuels. We are oil subjects who inhabit a society predicated on fossil fuels: that's the big picture the Oil Inventory invites students to glimpse.

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[2] See Bellamy "Energy and Literary Studies" in this collection.

[3] For a discussion of this assignment and the course, see Wenzel, "How to Read for Oil."

And yet. The "Oil Inventory" is an effective assignment that transforms students' thinking individually and in our collective discussion. The problem is that I haven't figured out a follow-up assignment that would ask students to *do something* with the self-knowledge they've produced in an inventory that Said and Gramsci understood as preliminary, preparatory for something else. At least for the purposes of this roundtable, I'm going to say that this failure is not because of my own lack of creativity, but instead because of the topic itself: *because oil.* It feels like a pedagogical version of what Imre Szeman calls "impasse," the predicament of "know[ing] where we stand with respect to energy," yet not being able to act in a way adequate to that knowledge (324). I've figured out how to get students to begin to know themselves in relation to oil, but not how to ask them to write 5-7 pages that will use that knowledge to cut into the world. And to scale up my own little failure to the emerging field at large: now that we have an energy humanities, what exactly do we think it can do?

One of the less encouraging lessons that I take from the historical work of scholars like Matthew Huber is that the Oil Inventory was actually invented by the oil industry. In "Refined Politics," Huber analyzes advertising campaigns dating back to the 1940s that ask consumers to consider the ubiquity and indispensability of petroleum products in their lives. ExxonMobil has actually such been running such a campaign this year: "Energy Lives Here™" features a TV commercial called "Enabling Everyday Life," which traces the global energy and transport infrastructure necessary to boil an egg.[4] This ad offers a perfect example of Huber's somewhat paradoxical but no less powerful argument that the energy industry creates knowledge and awareness of our dependence on oil precisely in order to ensure passivity. In the ExxonMobil commercial, the voiceover implicitly asks viewers to *forget* the ad's own revelatory visual mapping of all that is involved in boiling an egg: "you don't need to think about the energy that makes our lives possible….because we do." Our task in the energy humanities is to reclaim that thinking from the industry, a task made harder because capitalism understands the workings of the imagination and desire better than we would like. In other words, we are at an impasse not merely *despite* our knowledge about energy, but also, at least in part, *because* of our knowledge about energy.[5]

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[4] See "Energy Lives Here™."

[5] See Wenzel, "Consumption for the Common Good?" for a broader discussion of the paradoxical relationship between knowledge and action in commodity capitalism.

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