Way Beyond Petroleum

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Stephanie LeMenager, *Living Oil: Petroleum Culture in the American Century*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2014. xi + 263 pp. $53.00.

One way to begin this review: Name Stephanie LeMenager as one of our most incisive and inventive critics on the intersections between oil and culture. Laud her book, *Living Oil: Petroleum Culture in the American Century*, for its indispensable account of oil in the making and unmaking of modernity in the United States and beyond. Urge it upon readers interested in the burgeoning interdisciplinary subfields of environmental and energy humanities—or in the small matters of the future of democracy and the planet itself. . . .

All of the above are apt, but inadequate. I want to begin by saying that the significance of this extraordinary work ranges far beyond oil. I'm not speaking in the maximalist mode of the petrocritic—that is, insisting that oil is everywhere and therefore everything, equivalent to life itself. Rather, my claim is at once more modest (in civic terms) and more forceful (in disciplinary terms): LeMenager is one of our most incisive and inventive critics, *period*, and *Living Oil* is the cutting edge of what literary and cultural criticism is and might be. It's the kind of book to recommend to graduate students, regardless of field, as a model of what's possible in the discipline, or to keep close at hand for inspiration. My opening gambit in this review, for example, is inspired by LeMenager's epilogue, which begins by listing ways one might end the task of writing about oil:

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"One way to end this book: Note viable alternatives to Tough Oil World and diverse efforts toward energy sustainability" (183).

LeMenager's central concern is with "how the story of petroleum has come to play a foundational role in the American imagination and therefore in the future of life on earth" (4). Drawing on energy expert Michael T. Klare's account of the present as the era of "Tough Oil"—in which the oil deposits that remain are increasingly expensive and/or environmentally risky to extract—LeMenager turns the technological phenomenon of "ultradeep" drilling (that is, more than five thousand feet below the ocean floor) into an affective metaphor for Americans' "ultradeep" attachments to oil and the forms of life and culture it makes possible (3–6). Her task in *Living Oil* is to subject those largely unexamined attachments to deep reading and reimagining. She activates the ambiguity of her title, so that "living" attaches syntactically both to us and to oil: "We experience ourselves . . . every day in oil, living within oil, breathing it and registering it with our senses"; and oil, fossilized matter once alive, "acts with a force suggestive of a form of life" (6).

In its concern with the quotidian American experience of living oil, LeMenager's book is a wonderful complement to geographer Matthew T. Huber's *Lifeblood: Oil, Freedom, and the Forces of Capital*. It has become *de rigueur* to cite Timothy Mitchell's landmark study *Carbon Democracy* on the ways that coal and oil shaped labor organization, political economy, and geopolitics; LeMenager's work should occupy a similar status with regard to affect and cultural imaginaries in North America. Although the study of petrocultures by literary and cultural critics—including Imre Szeman, Frederick Buell, Peter Hitchcock, and myself—has boomed in the past decade, *Living Oil* is the first monograph in the field, and it sets a high bar indeed.[1]

In 1992, in the wake of the first Bush Gulf war, the Indian writer Amitav Ghosh made a now-famous observation about the remark-

1. See Matthew T. Huber, *Lifeblood: Oil, Freedom, and the Forces of Capital* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2013); and Timothy Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil* (London: Verso, 2013). For a sense of the range of work in this emergent field, see *Oil Culture*, ed. Ross Barrett and Daniel Worden (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2014); and *Fueling Culture: Energy, History, Politics*, ed. Imre Szeman, Patricia Yaeger, and Jennifer Wenzel, forthcoming from Fordham University Press in 2016.

able lack of novels about the oil industry, given the centrality of oil to twentieth-century geopolitics and daily life. LeMenager shares with Ghosh an interest in the difficulty of representing and narrating oil, but she finds twentieth-century U.S. culture saturated in "oil media," a term that she reads expansively to denote "the objects derived from petroleum that mediate our relationship, as humans, to other humans, to other life, and to things" (6). Hence "Films, books, cars, foods, museums, even towns are oil media. The world itself writes oil, you and I write it. Petrofiction provides one route to understanding our entanglement. So does everything else" (11).

LeMenager sets herself a seemingly impossible task, then—to make sense of petrofiction and this "everything else." Given the vastness of an archive construed in this way, her attunement to questions of form, genre, and medium is salutary in distinguishing the range of ways that oil is narrated and imagined, and what differences those differences make, how they *matter* (about which more below). She describes her method as having produced "a spilled book, flowing from literary criticism and cultural history into travel narrative and fragments of memoir" (18). *Flow* is the most apt of those terms, which captures better than *spill* or *fragment* the shapeliness of the arguments and the deftness with which LeMenager shifts from exquisite close reading, to historical contextualization, to conceptual framing, to sociological analysis, to oral history. The writing feels organic and looks easy—a testament to skill and craft. And the variety of texts assembled for interpretation is simply dazzling, with considerable attention paid to the conventional literary genres of prose fiction, poetry, and memoir, yet ranging far beyond them to documentary and feature film, comic books and graphic novels, photography, urban-planning and design documents, government reports, and magazines spanning the ideological gamut from *Life* to *The New Yorker* to *Ramparts*. LeMenager's training in nineteenth-century American literature yields striking insights and analogies in every chapter, yet her investment in the literary also makes her an uncommonly sympathetic and astute reader of forms of imagining, expression, and mediation particular to the twenty-first century, such as blogs, YouTube videos, and smartphone apps.

Two of the book's four chapters are focused on particular oil disasters. Chapter 1, "Origins, Spills," examines a massive blowout

at an offshore platform near Santa Barbara, California, in January 1969. Although not the first oil spill in U.S. history, this event was seminal, LeMenager argues, in establishing both the conventions for understanding and representing oil spills (for example, photos of oil-soaked birds), and American environmentalism as we know it today. Chapter 3, "Petromelancholia," considers Hurricane Katrina and the BP Deepwater Horizon blowout as signal events in what Mike Davis would call the long-standing "ordinary disaster" that is the petrochemical industry in the U.S. Gulf Coast (qtd. in LeMenager 103).[2]

The other chapters cohere around particular cultural forms. The second chapter, "The Aesthetics of Petroleum," takes Los Angeles as the *locus classicus* of American car culture and reads novels including Upton Sinclair's *Oil!* (1927), Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955), and Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957) in terms of two key moments: the urban planning of Los Angeles in the 1930s (by the Olmsteds, among others) and the spatial and social transformations set into motion by the 1956 Interstate Highway Act. A coda to this chapter uses *There Will Be Blood*, the 2007 film adaptation of Sinclair's novel, to consider the diegetic, ideological, and material role of oil in the history of film—as spectacle, as mode of sociality, and as key ingredient in film stock and other aspects of production. "The Petroleum Archive," chapter 4, recounts LeMenager's visits to oil museums in three of the industry's most iconic North American sites: Los Angeles, Fort McMurray (the site of Canada's notorious oil sands), and coastal East Texas. LeMenager takes the museum seriously as a cultural form and practice; she draws on museum-studies scholarship on the histories and debates surrounding the different categories of museums she visits (natural history, heritage, science and industry), in order to measure how the versions of history and futurity in "Big Oil's American Story compared with life on the ground" (169).

Let me enumerate some of the substantive contributions at work throughout these chapters.

2. An earlier version of parts of this chapter appeared in *Qui Parle*; readers familiar with that article, which established LeMenager's prominence as a critic of petroculture, should resist any temptation to skip the even better and much-expanded book chapter.

First, LeMenager helps us to think nimbly about oil in terms of geographic scale. She complicates the increasingly familiar notion of a U.S. "national imaginary saturated in oil" (65) by insisting on the critical importance of regions (and also cities, and even neighborhoods) shaped by the oil industry. As an "oil colony," the Gulf Coast is both quintessentially and not-quite American, the harbinger of a Tough Oil future that, in presenting the impossible predicament of choosing between health and jobs, invites transnational comparison with sites in the global South like the Niger Delta (although there both choice and oil-industry jobs are in short supply). She helpfully situates the Northern Alberta oil sands boom in terms of the longer history of Canada-U.S. economic relations (that is, Canada's long history as an extractive economy, "serving 'the empire'" [158]); her account of the Alberta oil sands is necessary reading for anyone seeking to understand the Keystone XL pipeline. One virtuoso sequence in the museums chapter allows readers to share in the satisfying sensations of physical labor on offer at the Oil Sands Discovery Centre in the ostensibly "Union Town" of Fort McMurray—"what labor is supposed to feel like"—which LeMenager reveals to be a "mirage" in a boomtown dependent on nonunion, temporary, and "foreign" workers without adequate housing or labor protections (165). This shift from museum fiction to lived reality sets up LeMenager's devastating big reveal: the "hocus-pocus put on for energy tourists at Alberta's oil patch," she notes, "is just a fragment of the unreal world that thrives in the United States. . . . The corporate fictions of the oil industry have become deeply lived cultures in North America" (166–67).

Second, LeMenager insists on the multiple, inextricable connections between oil and water, whether the threat to oceans and coastal habitats posed by offshore drilling (including the problem of subsidence, or land gradually sinking below sea level) or the massive quantities of fresh water used (without hope of remediation) and/or put at risk of contamination by the Tough Oil technologies of hydraulic fracturing (fracking) and oil sands mining, which involves either the surface removal of muskeg (boreal wetlands) or putatively less disruptive steam injection. Although the current California megadrought isn't discussed in this 2014 book, LeMenager's analysis helps to account for the fact that national

media coverage focuses on the profligacy of agricultural irrigation (for example, demonizing almonds) and landscaping in affluent neighborhoods while barely mentioning the seeming insanity of fracking in the nation's most notorious fault zone.

Third, LeMenager attends to contradictions at work in American environmentalism, with the 1969 Santa Barbara spill a seminal moment that spurred the first Earth Day and the early-seventies federal legislative framework for environmental protection in the U.S. LeMenager helpfully excavates more radical roads not taken at this time, which might have obviated the divide between "mainstream," largely white and middle-class U.S. environmentalism and environmental justice activism against toxic burdens disproportionately borne by racialized and underprivileged communities. She alerts us to what now feel like unlikely moments when oil and the automobile were viewed not as environmental villains but *as* nature or a vehicle to it—getting in the car as a way of getting back to nature; driving in the countryside, along the California coast, or through road-oriented national parks as a way of "feeling ecological." Space-age futurism in the mid-twentieth century, LeMenager shows, inspired both environmental utopianism and deep-sea oil drilling.

A keen appreciation of such contradictions is at the very heart of *Living Oil*, which might just as easily have been titled *Loving Oil*, given LeMenager's sustained and deeply sympathetic analysis of those ultradeep attachments—"why the world that oil makes remains so beloved" (69). It's difficult to overstate the importance of her acknowledgment of the pleasures, hopes, and promises associated with oil, and the sense of loss—particularly of lost futures—that she first theorized as "petromelancholia" in the wake of Katrina and the BP blowout. LeMenager is just as convinced as are climate change activists Bill McKibben and Naomi Klein that we urgently need a tomorrow radically different from today, but her book evinces a quiet yet powerful recognition that our imbrication in oil is so far beyond being a mere matter of individual choice that faux asceticism and energy-use–shaming don't get at the stubborn fact that there is "something terribly compelling about modern life as usual" (66). A powerful politics is at work here, but it begins by recognizing the many embodied pleasures of living oil.

This recognition is powerful in part because LeMenager addresses such pleasures and the deep ambivalence they evoke by locating them as her own experience, most disarmingly in her account of "[t]he pure physical satisfaction of feeling the heavy gear shaft in one's hand" at an Oil Sands Discovery Centre exhibit (164); this simulation of driving and physical labor "feels simply fabulous," she confesses (165). *Living Oil* is a deeply honest and personal book, yet also remarkably humble and fundamentally civic-minded in a way that suggests how the humanities can truly *matter*. Indeed, LeMenager's interventions cohere around a new kind of new materialism, deeply interested in old-materialist questions of labor, capital, and class, but also encompassing and articulating the links among ourselves as matter (embodied humans); our imbrication with nonhuman beings, substances, and forces; and an unrelenting reflexivity about the material (and particularly petroleum) substrate of cultural production, consumption, and criticism. There is no external, disembodied, carbon-neutral vantage point from which to read petrofiction or write petrocriticism; such practices have environmental implications, quite significant ones given that book publishing (as LeMenager tells us) is the fourth largest industrial source of greenhouse gas emissions. To drive the point home, a nine-page appendix to *Living Oil* offers a "life cycle assessment" by environmental engineer Sougandhica Hoysal, which calculates the energy inputs involved in producing the book. The shift to digital is hardly an escape from this material substrate (that is, *virtual* is not reality but metaphor), and another of LeMenager's canny, ambivalent confessions measures the embodied satisfactions and ethical/cognitive work of slow, silent reading of physical books (whose white spaces serve as a kind of utopian imaginative space) against the environmental costs of print.

Matter thus becomes method, in several ways. LeMenager uses the verb *to materialize* to describe her fundamental task, teasing out its various connotations of making material, representing, narrating, making visible, and (drawing on late-nineteenth-century Spiritualism) making "something (seem to) appear" (185)—an apt term for the contradictory elusiveness, invisibility, spectrality, and spectacle associated with oil and its relation to human bodies, work, and labor. Another key term is *intelligence*—variously described as nar-

rative, poetic, and collective—which stakes a claim for the civic-ecological importance of a sensibility that readers of *Contemporary Literature* would describe as literary, but which need not attach to literature in the conventional sense. (That said, LeMenager's attention to the workings of metaphor, narrative form and genre, and visual conventions like the lenticular image is consistently revelatory). LeMenager expresses a salutary skepticism about assuming that meaningful action necessarily results from empathy generated by media or cultural representation (17), but she also argues compellingly that "narrative arts will be key actors in establishing the ecological resilience of the human species" (67). In her account, narrative "plotting" becomes "a subsistence practice, a means of making *some* meaning, of getting by" (127); plotting combines with pedestrianism to become "a means of moving (literally, physically) against the melancholy of oil dependence" (141). Having analyzed and tabulated the ways in which literature is, so to speak, part of the problem, LeMenager also insists on the importance of narrative and humanistic inquiry for forging forms of life beyond petroleum. She makes a powerful case for the humanities, but in a radically accessible, democratic mode that acknowledges, defers to, and learns from the interpretive desires and vernacular theoretical intelligence of nonacademics; the epilogue reveals her to be writing quite literally for her neighbors in Ventura who, like her, live among ghosts of oil past-present-future, near an EPA Superfund site and an active frack zone.

Living Oil epitomizes an accessible, engaged mode of humanities scholarship that works nimbly to address multiple audiences—its vast and varied bibliography an indispensable resource, its argumentation nuanced with deft touches of theory (Derrida, Jameson, Latour, Sekula, Alaimo) and rigorously situated in terms of relevant scholarly conversations, but any tendency toward jargon defused effectively with "by which I mean" clauses. LeMenager means it when she writes:

> The global movements of these fossil fuels and their imbrication in all aspects of social and economic endeavor, let alone the personal nature of their effects in our bodies, demand the collaborative efforts of academics, artists, scientists, industry, and everyone—which means *everyone*—living in Tough Oil World. Without such collaboration, there can be no narrative

> intelligence capacious enough to approach oil's cultural and ecological legacies.
>
> (18)

At work here is both a new kind of literary criticism and a new kind of politics—forceful yet humble, the opposite of strident. A statement about architecture by Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown that LeMenager quotes seems apposite: "Withholding judgment may be used as a tool to make later judgment more sensitive. This is a way of learning from everything" (138). The judgments, sensitivity, and learning on offer in *Living Oil* suggest a crucial role for literature and literary studies in finding a way beyond petroleum and "reclaiming . . . the idea of the public, meaning people and our common resources, our civic ground" (182).

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