Stephanie LeMenager, *Living Oil: Petroleum Culture in the American Century* (Oxford University Press, 2014), 288 pp.

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More than just a social and cultural history of energy use in the US, Stephanie LeMenager's *Living Oil: Petroleum Culture in the American Century* explores twentieth- and twenty-first-century structures of feeling generated by oil's centrality to and permeation of American life. Demonstrating exhaustive archival research, *Living Oil* tracks this feeling and embodiment as it is culturally expressed across a wide range of media, from architectural, town and highway planning to museums, memorials, and heritage sites, graphic novels, novels, and poetry, as well as feature, documentary, and corporate propaganda films, photography (artistic, personal, and public), newspapers, and journals, and new digital and Net-based media.

What LeMenager predominantly finds is the expression of "petromelancholia" (15-16): an aesthetics that fails to imagine an alternative to a fossil-fuelled capitalist modernity and, following Imre Szeman, the dismantling of "'our self-subjection to oil capital'" (qtd. in LeMenager 11); an aesthetics not geared to mourning but the disavowal of a dependency on cheap, easily accessible oil in the face of less easily extractable if not precarious future reserves; and an aesthetics that screens past, present, and future environmental consequences of extraction and consumption. What emerges from LeMenager's book is a concern that the realities of oil will be forgotten, that ecological histories of inextricable natural, social, and cultural environments are subsumed by US petromelancholias, and that the quotidian, affective, and embodied routines of living oil are amnesiac. *Living Oil* reads for the unconscious of melancholic texts but also reconstructs and animates an archive of counter-hegemonic cultural memory, the textual artifacts of which are otherwise scattered across public and private places without sufficient critical mass or attention in those disparate places (59).

While the globalization of oil is in LeMenager's purview—for example, her comparison of the petro-fiction of Attica Locke and Helon Habila establishes a transatlantic oil imaginary, relating the effects of the oil industry in Houston and the Niger Delta, respectively (133)—the focus of her book is unashamedly American, or more specifically regionalist. Although fuelled and lubricated by the global network of oil's extraction, refinement, distribution, and consumption, and the concomitant geopolitics, the transnational nature of economic globalization is "most visible in regional sites of capital production and transhipment" (12). Moving beyond the homogenizing potential of a national narrative, *Living Oil*'s regionalism "activates" historical, global, and ecological frames of understanding as to how oil is lived, felt, embodied, thought or unthought at the local and quotidian level (12-13). With that in mind, *Living Oil* turns to California, particularly the Gulf Coast, in its recollection of

oil. Although *Living Oil*'s repertoire of case studies, media and textual examples is expansive, there is only space in this review to focus on several of them–namely, representations of oil spills. Oil spills make particularly interesting examples because of their potential to exceed spectacularly reifying narratives of fossil fuels and make visible the ecology of oil.

The Santa Barbara oil spill began on 28, January 1969, causing extensive damage to coastal environments and their ecosystems and a huge number of fatalities across marine animal populations "comparable to human death tolls in wars" (22). In tracing the "transience" (22) of oil across US public culture, LeMenager assesses its valence in the cultural formations that seek to emplot it, and whether that emplotment is sufficiently ecological in scale (interrelating the global and local, and human and inhuman and animate and inanimate matter, systems, and processes) (23). LeMenager finds in those narratives that the spill catalyzed a middle-class, mainstream environmental movement and simultaneously the painful self-consciousness of that class's indebtedness to oil for its social mobility and ascendancy (24-25, 33).

More significantly, *Living Oil*–in its assemblage of a transmedial collection of representations of the spill–contributes to and reactivates cultural memories beyond the usual humanist concerns of collective remembrance. In doing so, LeMenager, reconceives the very study of cultural memory and moves toward a sense of "ecological trauma" (35). Drawing on the photographic theories of Alan Trachtenberg, John Berger, and Roland Barthes, amongst others, LeMenager traces and conceptualizes a trajectory of photography and photo-texts (for example, by Dick Smith, John Keebles, Harry Benson, David Snell, and Natalie Forbes), focusing on animal death, which harnesses traumatic affect to break the normative frames of reference and cognition by which environmental disaster is traditionally understood and indeed assimilated. *Living Oil* finds that these photographs resonate with the historical uses of the medium in collective remembrance–for example, in the nineteenth century, the collective mourning of the Civil War dead, and Victorian, familial rituals of mourning—and more recent traditions in which photography is part of witnessing atrocity (for example, the Vietnam War). Like images of human atrocity, ecological images of atrocity share their counterpart's potential of aestheticizing horror and anaestheticizing their viewers' critical faculties. Aestheticization and anaestheticization can subsume political responses to atrocity. Nonetheless, and acutely aware of the ideals of photography theory, and how trauma can be culturally assimilated, LeMenager invests in the potential of this eco-aesthetic to widen the definition of trauma, to move beyond humanist enclosures of empathy for the injured. This is an eco-aesthetic that provokes remembrance across the divide between species and human and nonhuman realms and systems, and, thereby, the remembrance of a traumatized ecology.

In the digital age, and in comparison with its print medium of the '60s, *Life*'s coverage of the BP oil blowout and spill of 2010 feeds more readily into regimes of digital consumption in which the voluntary act of looking can inform voyeurism and become a form of "ecopornography", as LeMenager puts it, or fail to differentiate itself from consumer-orientated browsing (44). Whereas, in its predigital coverage of the Santa Barbara spill, *Life*'s interrelation of verbal and pictorial content had the capacity to arrest the reader, so LeMenager argues. That capacity was of course inflected by the magazine's commercial content and nationalist, liberal editorial bent; for example, in 1969 coverage of the oil spill was bookended by the magazine's expression of cultural anxiety over humanity's technological advances, not only in terms of industrial accidents but also space exploration and reproductive sciences, and the way those advances might have consequences for normative modes of masculinity and femininity.

Here LeMenager displays a critical nostalgia for print media, the visibility and tangibility of this form of public culture rather than virtual archives of the present—the potential of the digital archive in amassing and distributing evidence of atrocity, as in Human Rights movements, notwithstanding. Still, it is the potential invisibility of the digital archive, a form of unseen public culture, that could lead to a diminished ecological consciousness of environmental disaster, impeding cognition of social, political, and economic infrastructures and processes that interrelate oil spills and idealized ways of American life (43-44). Although not subscribing to a technological determinism, and certainly not idealizing *Life* magazine in print form, LeMenager finds in digital culture the structural grounds for the atomization of public culture and the incoherence of cultural memory, despite the promises of the Internet (45).

What of the BP Oil blow out and consequent spill? How has its mediation in the digital age affected cultural memory? The disaster failed to work as spectacle but rather as a form of "dereification, a failure of the commodity form's abstraction." The Deepwater Horizon rig "localized a plethora of visible data," compared to other forms of environmental catastrophe, such as anthropogenic climate change, which resist narrative representation given "their global scale and . . . as-yet limited visibility" (104). Where that data took its most visual and tangible form was in the live feed from the spill-cam, which captured the "humiliation of modernity" understood in terms of the "human capacity to harness cheap energy." Despite this dereification, the disposition towards petro-modernity and its promise of cheap, clean, plentiful fuel remains melancholic. Just as Hurricane Katrina did "not result in a changed national affect toward black, urban poverty, the BP explosion has not, it seems, spurred Americans to reconsider loving oil" (105). The forgetful attachment to oil (and the disavowal of its precarious and catastrophic supply) is still lived, embodied, practiced in the routines of daily consumption.

This embodiment of oil—a corporeal memory of consumptive practices—forgets other bodies. Petroleum consumption carried on, of course, against the background of post-spill media and political rhetoric in which a "way of life" singled out as human was found endangered no matter the ecosystems and primarily "nonhuman" "community" in which it was immersed. That a lost "way of life" was invoked suggested a Southern, premodern attachment to place (now ruined). That rhetoric suggests, then, the intrusion of petro-modernity on the Gulf, as if it was not fully immersed in petro-modernity to begin with (106-07). The BP blowout and spill and has made visible other Southern bodies. The petrochemical economic development of the Gulf coast has disproportionately affected the racialized poor, contaminated by its proximity to industrial sites and disasters. Here modernity's narrative of energized progress is belied by what Rob Nixon calls the "slow violence" and the racial embodiment of environmental injury. The fueling of American modernity suggests not so much an escape from the past—how fossil fuel-based energy has replaced the energy of enslaved, objectified laboring bodies of the nineteenth century—but its uncanny return (107-08, 125). As LeMenager puts it, energy becomes a "metaphor that obscures our laboring bodies, offloading work as a grounding concept of our species onto other entities, such as water, wood, coal, and oil" (191).

Oil is everywhere in American life and seemingly always reified when represented; oil's ecological context is always "disappearing into the charismatic term 'energy'" (185); the slow violence of oil-based catastrophes is not confined to an initial event but unfolds in space and time in often imperceptible ways; and critical writing about oil is conveyed in a medium dependent on oil for is manufacture, distribution, and consumption (71). It is no wonder that oil induces a crisis of representation, given this "multiform liquidity and imbrication in networks of power" (185). While few of the texts that LeMenager examines deliver a truly ecological narrative that remembers the imbrication of human and nonhuman life, matter, systems, worlds—perhaps photography and phototextuality come closest—*Living Oil* has nonetheless emplotted oil, in a manner that claims neither the coherence and redemption of a "complicit cultural memory or national imaginary saturated with oil" (64-65). LeMenager's work is an original and fundamental contribution to the archive of counter-memory in the face of petro-melanchola, even as it offers a remembrance of that which the corporeal, consumptive routines of living oil forget.