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How to Read for Oil

JENNIFER WENZEL

I love to fly.

It's not the indignities of post-9/11 commercial air travel that I love, but rather the thrill of acceleration when the pilot hits the gas and my body is jolted back into the seat. I love the technological sublime of an active airfield, the many kinds of labor that bring a plane from the sky to the gate, and the sea of twinkling blue lights at Detroit's Metro airport by night.

I've recently been teaching a course titled Literature and Oil at the University of Michigan; cross listed between English and environmental studies, the course draws students from a wide range of majors and disciplines, including, in its second iteration, a group of eager first-year engineering students. Throughout the semester, I often talk about my love of flying in order to encourage students to think honestly and capaciously about oil, not only as an unfortunate necessity for so many aspects of everyday life, but also as a source of pleasure, even desire. "Loving oil" is Stephanie LeMenager's term for this dynamic: a deep attachment not to the substance itself but rather to all of the things that oil makes possible.¹ In these days of high gas prices and climate change anxiety, it's all too easy to "hate" oil or, more precisely, the oil companies who feed our societal addiction; to that end, I often speak about my love of flying—and the guilt that feels like oil dripping from my hands every time I get off a plane—to keep the class from disavowing too easily our own small part in modernity's troubled love affair with oil.²

Several paradoxes provide conceptual touchstones for the course. *Oil is everywhere and nowhere*, I tell the students on the first day, as

I invite them to imagine all the ways that oil is flowing through our classroom—including the manufacture of the objects in the room (and of the room itself), the various modes of transport that bring us and those objects together, and the economic activity that generates the revenue that makes the university run. Oil is everywhere, ubiquitous in our daily life, and yet we so rarely *see* oil, either literally or metaphorically.³ Given this simultaneous ubiquity and invisibility, our central questions are, *how do we read for oil?* and *how do different kinds of texts—novels, short stories, poems, manifestos, essays, cartoons, photographs, and documentary films—either work against or contribute to oil’s invisibility?* Such questions of representation and interpretation are fundamental to literary study, but we also ask rather different questions about the material aspects of literary production and consumption, about how oil not only fuels the imagination in a metaphorical sense but is also necessary for making and distributing books and films, Kindles and iPads. Our consideration of the relationships between literature and oil, in other words, ranges far beyond a thematic study of literature that is “about” oil. We ponder what to make of the fact that the English language occupies a privileged position in world literary space similar to that of the US dollar in the global oil market—these “universal” currencies each have profoundly uneven effects.

We also consider a second paradox: *there is too little oil in the world, and too much*. Oil is a finite, nonrenewable resource; the hydrocarbon-fueled modernity of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was enabled by what Imre Szeman observes was an *unrepeatable* surplus of cheap energy that is now becoming ever-less cheap, more scarce, and more difficult to extract.⁴ The oil era isn’t over, but the era of easy oil is likely gone forever. Too little oil—but also far too much, when we consider either the additional carbon yet to be emitted into the atmosphere by the oil still left to burn or how much human suffering and environmental harm have *already* occurred at sites of extraction like Azerbaijan, the Oklahoma territory, and Saudi Arabia in the early twentieth century; the Niger Delta and Ecuador in the midtwentieth century; and North Dakota and the Alberta tar sands today. (Alberta’s tar sands are the epitome of the too-muchness of oil: were Canada’s vast reserve of inefficient, highly polluting fuel to be fully developed, it would be “game over” for the climate, scientist James Hansen has warned.)⁵ In vastly different texts from several geographic contexts—including Helon Habila’s *Oil on Water*, Ogaga Ifowodo’s *The*

Oil Lamp, Warren Cariou's *Land of Oil and Water*, Linda Hogan's *Mean Spirit*, Abdelrahman Munif's *Cities of Salt*, and Paolo Bacigalupi's *Ship Breaker*—we found a strikingly similar scenario of marginalized communities longing for the infrastructural development they had been promised in exchange for oil being drilled beneath their homes. Such promises of development—like the more fantastic petro-magical promise of instant wealth without work—all too often turn out to be little more than fairy tales.⁶ Moreover, they tend to bring with them myriad forms of harm so common as to constitute a kind of syndrome, the problematic notion of a “resource curse”; this deterministic diagnosis sees affliction as inherent to the resource itself, so that the abundance of particular minerals or plants, rather than the ways in which states and economies are imbricated within global capitalism, is understood to be a threat to democratic rule and social welfare.

Throughout the semester, I ask students to focus simultaneously on the intensely personal and the geopolitical, by using the literary and filmic texts on our syllabus to think between these scales. Early on, each student writes an “oil inventory,” an assignment inspired by Edward Said's quotation of Antonio Gramsci 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.”⁷ This open-ended assignment asks students to trace the presence (and absence) of oil in their lives and to consider what it would mean to “know themselves” in relation to oil. Although the essays took many forms, many of them articulated a predicament that one student described as “the inner conflict I feel between my emotional self caring so much for the environment and the resources it provides, and my dependence on oil in my everyday life.” This student, Kerrie Gillespie, has kindly allowed me to include here an excerpt from her oil inventory:

My life has always depended on oil, even before I was born. In 1971 Grandpa Jewell Gillespie bought the *American Girl* and *Oil Queen* from Cecil Anderson. He used the boats for fuel oil and gas transport between the mainland and Beaver Island, the largest island of an archipelago in the northwest of the Michigan mitten. The ferry service on Lake Michigan for the 32-mile trip from Charlevoix to Beaver Island takes two hours; an airplane ride, 20 minutes. (My

dad piloted the Cessna that flew my mom to the mainland hospital where I was born.) Operating Gillespie Oil & Transit for more than a decade before that day, Grandpa sold fuel right down the hill from where I lived. People drove up to the pumps and filled up, but nobody was really thinking about oil then, not like we are now. “Filling up” on Beaver Island has a different meaning than it would on the mainland, though. Dimensions vary, but at its longest and widest edges the island extends 13 by 6 miles. Most places you need to go are within 15 minutes or less! Close proximity to destinations, very low traffic, and lots of appealing natural beauty all contribute to the community moving around the island mostly by using our own capable bodies: we do a lot of biking, walking, and rollerblading. But oil is involved in these activities too, from the frame of the bicycle to the mold of the rollerblades, and the food (energy) that must be flown or ferried over from the mainland before it can enter our mouths. This is the paradox of Beaver Island, my homeland, that I’ve come to recognize as I consider how oil flows through my life, encircled not only by Lake Michigan, but also by what Nigerian poet Ogaga Ifowodo has called “a chain of ease”⁸: Beaver Island is a uniquely beautiful, “natural” place of beaches, inland lakes, nature trails, and forest. It is also accessible only by boat or airplane—with a tank full of fuel.

Although Ann Arbor is quite “green” for a city, my life now is confusingly resourceful, yet wasteful. I manage a chiropractic office that I drive 33 miles one-way to get to. I drive to Whole Foods near my house almost every day to buy pre-made food, as I am so busy between being a manager to pay for my being a U of M student that I rarely have time or energy to cook my own food; however, I am sure to bring in my reusable grocery bag. I toss those plastic and cardboard containers from the pre-made food into the recycle bin every time, and I’m always the one to remember to bring the bin to the street on Monday nights. I print off page upon page for all the readings I have in my classes, but I rationalize it because it’s important for my education: I learn better from paper than from a computer screen. Perhaps growing up on Beaver Island makes me feel this way, but my errands here seem to take me all over the city instead of being a one-stop shop. Why so many options? Not only does this reality increase the amount of oil I use

to get places, it also increases the pollution in the air we breathe, and it takes longer—anyone else here often feel pressed for time?

During the oil shock of the mid-1970s, Italo Calvino's short story "The Petrol Pump" depicted this feeling of being "pressed for time" in a rather different way, and not only in its striking image of the material remnants of human civilization being fossilized into fuel for some future society millions of years hence. Calvino's narrator feverishly links the familiar anxiety of running out of gas to broader fears of running out of oil: imagining the end of oil is, we discover reading Calvino, very much like imagining the end of the world. Yet "The Petrol Pump" also allows readers to imagine how oil links their lives, even in the mundane present, to those of distant others: "As I fill my tank at the self-service station a bubble of gas swells up in a black lake buried beneath the Persian Gulf, an emir silently raises hands hidden in wide white sleeves and folds them on his chest, in a skyscraper an Exxon computer is crunching numbers, far out to sea a cargo fleet gets the order to change course."⁹ Sometimes these links are hiding in plain sight, like the mountain of petroleum coke (a high-sulfur, high-carbon waste product of the refining of Alberta oil sands) that sprouted almost overnight near Rosa Parks Avenue on the banks of the Detroit River in 2013, its owner, Koch Carbon, awaiting a buyer—likely foreign—for whom the promise of energy would outweigh the peril of emissions.¹⁰ That black mountain in Detroit was the all-too-visible dark side of loving oil—a predicament that Literature and Oil attempts to think through.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jennifer Wenzel, like many other students in Texas, had her undergraduate education at Austin College subsidized by oil and gas royalties. She got turned on to public transportation while earning a PhD in English at the University of Texas at Austin, and she rode her bike to campus year round while teaching at the University of Montana. She commuted to Stonehill College on the I-95 north-east corridor, and she spent more than a decade at the University of Michigan, during the federal bailout of GM and Chrysler and the bankruptcy of Detroit. She looks forward to a more car-free life in New York when she joins Columbia University in the fall of 2014. She has published on the Niger Delta and other environmental humanities topics and is currently coediting, with Imre Szeman and Patricia Yaeger, a collection entitled *Fueling Culture: Energy, History, Politics* (Bronx NY: Fordham University Press, forthcoming).

NOTES

1. Stephanie LeMenager, "Petro-Melancholia: The BP Blowout and the Arts of Grief," *Qui Parle* 19, no. 2 (Spring/Summer 2011): 25–55.

2. Warren Cariou's "Tarhands: A Messy Manifesto," *Imaginations* 2–3 (2012): 17–34, offers a vivid formulation of this image of complicity. On a South African Airways flight I took in May 2014, the pilot included in his announcement a calculation of each passenger's share of the fuel consumed for our journey between Johannesburg and Cape Town.

3. In literary studies, a seminal statement on the relative invisibility of oil in cultural production is Amitav Ghosh's "Petrofictions: The Oil Encounter and the Novel," a review of Munif's *Cities of Salt*, in the *New Republic* (March 2, 1992): 29–33.

4. Imre Szeman, "Literature and Energy Futures," in Patricia Yaeger, "Editor's Column: Literature in the Ages of Wood, Tallow, Coal, Whale Oil, Gasoline, Atomic Power, and Other Energy Sources," *PMLA* 126, no. 2 (2011): 305–26.

5. James Hansen, "Game Over for the Climate," *New York Times*, May 9, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/10/opinion/game-over-for-the-climate.html>.

6. See my essays "Petro-Magic-Realism: Toward a Political Ecology of Nigerian Literature," *Postcolonial Studies* 9, no. 4 (December 2006): 449–64; and "Petro-Magic-Realism Revisited: Un-imagining and Re-imagining the Niger Delta," in *Oil Culture*, ed. Ross Barrett and Daniel Worden (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

7. Antonio Gramsci, cited in Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978), 25.

8. Ogaga Ifowodo, *The Oil Lamp* (Trenton NJ: Africa World Press, 2005), 5.

9. Italo Calvino, "The Petrol Pump," *Numbers in the Dark and Other Stories*, trans. Tim Parks (New York: Pantheon, 1995), 170–75.

10. See Ian Austin, "A Mountain of Black Waste Is Rising over Detroit," *New York Times*, May 17, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/18/business/energy-environment/mountain-of-petroleum-coke-from-oil-sands-rises-in-detroit.html?hp&_r=2&. This open-air pile of petcoke (there are several in Detroit) remained for several months. Some of it was returned to Canada to fuel a power plant operated by Nova Scotia Power; the remainder was cleared away in fall 2013 and reportedly sent to Ohio. The owner of the site, Detroit Bulk Storage, continues to try to find a site to store the tar sands by-product that the Marathon Refinery continues to produce along with other waste. A similar mound of petcoke appeared in early 2014 on the banks of the Calumet River in southeastern Chicago, this time courtesy of the BP Whiting Refinery, a major processor of Canadian tar sands.