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# Living Oil: Petroleum Culture in the American Century by Stephanie LeMenager

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***Living Oil: Petroleum Culture in the American Century* by STEPHANIE LEMENAGER**

Oxford U P, 2014 \$49.95 USD

Reviewed by **BART H. WELLING**

In a recent essay, one group of scholars defined global warming as a “super wicked problem” (Levin et al. 123). Without question, global warming’s just-as-evil twin, oil, poses a super wicked problem for ecocritics. All of us have surely grappled at some point with questions of complicity in our modern “petroculture,” and we all have excellent reasons both to long for and to dread the end of the Age of Petroleum. Anyone who has wondered how ecocriticism should respond to oil, or who has driven or flown to an ALECC or ASLE conference (in other words, pretty much all of us), would do well to read and discuss Stephanie LeMenager’s outstanding new book. Not only does *Living Oil* take on the super wicked problem of oil with candor, humor, theoretical depth, historical precision, and a rare blend of critical ambition and down-to-earthness, but the book fashions a type of scholarship that is beautifully adapted to the subject: as heteroglossic and bioregionally situated as oil industry self-representations are monoglossic and disembodied; as deeply invested in nimble realism, self-questioning, dialogue, and cultural resilience as post-oil narratives are (frequently) mired in grim certainties and despair. The first “petrocritical” monograph written from an ecocritical standpoint, *Living Oil* sets a high bar for future scholars. But it also welcomes debate, maps out crucial lines of inquiry, and models productive approaches to oil for ecocritics who may have felt overwhelmed

by the problem, wondering how they might even begin to address it.

LeMenager begins, wisely, neither by attacking the oil industry nor by issuing dire predictions about peak oil, but by acknowledging that we have entered an era of *tough* oil rather than no oil, and by exploring her own—and America’s—highly contradictory “ultradeep” (3) relationship with petroleum. *Living Oil* is all about “bad love,” a “destructive attachment” (11) that overshadows the future of the biosphere, but that also defines us as moderns, and may even be central to our species identity. “Can the category of the human persist, practically speaking,” LeMenager asks, “without [film, music, novels, magazines, online genres, and many other cultural forms] indebted to fossil fuels?” (6). Any number of post-apocalyptic books and movies assert that without oil the category of the human *cannot* persist, at least in its current form, but LeMenager is less interested in narratives predicated on the idea of oil’s future absence than in ones that analyze petroleum’s complicated past and present impacts on people and nonhuman beings in places ranging from Santa Barbara and Los Angeles to Fort McMurray to the Niger Delta.

LeMenager’s focus on region—materialized (one of her favorite words) in the form of first-person descriptions of oil museums, interviews with anti-oil activists, and on-the-ground investigations of oil fields, in addition to literary analysis—succeeds in breaking global problems down to more manageable questions, histories, and human-scaled concerns. In doing so, her variety of regionalism successfully challenges capitalist abstractions, such as the “dream of disembodied energy” (150), on which modern petrocultures are based. Not coincidentally, LeMenager’s place-

based approach makes *Living Oil* a much more interesting and accessible work of petrocriticism than some essays that focus on oil's transnational histories and geopolitical dimensions without mentioning its deeply felt impacts on workers' bodies, ecosystems, and individual people and animals. The book is full of smart claims, but it never loses sight of the smog, roadkill, stains, and spills—along with relatively unproblematic and even liberating experiences—that characterize the world made by petroleum for people and nonhuman beings who *live* oil every day.

Significantly, the title also pertains to petroleum as (at least partially) living *substance*, a remnant of once-living things that, it turns out, can serve as home to ancient species of microorganisms, and can frequently behave as if it has a mind of its own. LeMenager displays none of the reluctance that one finds among some petrocritics when it comes to dealing with the weird physical properties and quasi-biological “behaviors” of oil; nor does she shy away from ethically messy engagements with the filthy intimacies of human-oil relationships. This is the first book in the humanities, to my knowledge, to come with its own life cycle assessment (LCA), owning up precisely to its situatedness not just as discourse in the usual critical and socioeconomic contexts but as an energy-dependent physical object in the biosphere. (The news from the LCA isn't entirely bad; the publishing of academic books, finds LeMenager's collaborator Sougandhica Hoysal, compares favorably to the production of cheeseburgers.) One of my favorite sections in *Living Oil* describes how visitors to the La Brea tar pits in Los Angeles sometimes find their shoes sticking to the lawn, and how they can interact with exhibits that invite

them to “Discover what it feels like to be trapped in tar” (147), experiencing oil from the perspective of threatened mammals rather than privileged consumers.

In her introduction, LeMenager describes *Living Oil* as a “spilled book” (18)—an accurate way of characterizing this rule-breaking, polyphonic, and sometimes deliberately meandering blend of literary and film criticism, interviews and e-mails, archival research, memoir, reportage, and other genres. Some readers may wish for a more linear and comprehensive study of the literature and cinema of petroleum. And such books will undoubtedly be written. But to what end? In its formal and thematic commitments to “materializing the ecologies of modernity” (184), in its attunement to the dystopian dissonances and ragged edges where the utopian harmonies and clean lines of modern energy cultures break down, *Living Oil* strikes me as the most meaningful and ethically productive kind of book that a humanities scholar could write about petroleum at this point in history. LeMenager argues persuasively that “The effort of rematerializing the ground slipping beneath our feet . . . [is] the humanistic complement to the work of engineers and geologists and hydrologists and city planners and county health agencies and environmental justice activists to create a more resilient energy regime” (193). I hope that the book will inspire ecocritics around the world to carry out bioregional analyses of oil and oil narratives wherever they live. These efforts will help us, our students, and our non-academic neighbors imagine viable alternatives to the super wicked worlds of oil.

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