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Endangered Hydrocarbons by Lesley Battler

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Petropoetics

***Endangered Hydrocarbons* by LESLEY BATTLE**

BookThug, 2015 \$18.00

Reviewed by **MICHAEL D. SLOANE**

A cut-up collage for the 21st century, Lesley Battler's *Endangered Hydrocarbons* is required reading in a time of global warming and serious climate change. With each and every poem "derived from texts generated in a multinational oil company" (173), Battler makes the personal lyric not only political, but also environmental. Splicing together wellbooks, mudlogs, geological prognoses, meeting notes, histories, critical theoretical works, video games, and travel, real estate, and home décor magazines, *Endangered Hydrocarbons* is an intertextual ecosystem organized into six parts: "Emergence," "Frontier Exploration and Production," "Manuscript Extraction," "Under Attack," "The Justice League of Global Oil," and "Panacea." Each section is teeming with poetic energy, which is perhaps one of the reasons why the poet reminds us that "art is work" (96). This reminder also refers us to real world resources, which fuel and form *Endangered Hydrocarbons* itself. Without a doubt, Battler's collection of poetry is a provocative, playful, and pitch-perfect debut made up of fragments from our petroculture.

From the get-go, *Endangered Hydrocarbons* provokes the reader with its title, which creates a frame of fragility around the use of non-renewable resources while implicitly calling out producers and consumers bound to the oil industry in one way or another. Smartly drawing on the rhetoric around threatened animal species

and evoking extinction as such, the title creates a sense of sympathy for the poetically enlivened chemicals most often found in crude oil. Paradoxically worried for what we are doing to the oily other, Battler's title establishes a fundamental tension that exists today, one that is all too real when world leaders guzzle gas to fly to Paris to talk about climate change. In "Protocols of Global Oil," moreover, a modified version of Battler's title appears as one for the subsection of the poem: "action items to preserve / endangered Canadian / hydrocarbons." After this title, the poem gestures to that which is threatening Canadian hydrocarbons—namely, our acquiescence when it comes to corporations plundering the Athabasca oil sands:

Canada must take
ownership of her
homegrown terror

silence species
dissidence

increase speed
and frequency
of manifestos[.] (131-132)

The speaker uses the topical rhetoric of terrorism to incite the "silence species" to fully acknowledge an environmental injustice and, in turn, speak up through dissenting "manifestos." In encouraging one to rethink and rebel, *Endangered Hydrocarbons* also formally provokes us by disrupting reading conventions in the poem "Peak Oil Exile," which looks both backward to "the Dark Age" (101) and forward to "the bitumen pools of YouTube" (102) while including a marginalized, vertical line of verse severed to no end: "Th / e / yea / r / 19 / 80 / see / ms / a / lon / g / tim / e / ago

/ . / l / wa / s / wr / estl / ing / wit / h / the /
 per / son / al / bac / kgr / ou / nd / of / ins /
 titu / tio / nal / ize / d / rac / is / m / an / d /
 en / de / mi / c / vio / len / ce. / As / to / inj
 / ust / ice" (101-102). The excessive line
 segmentation is not only an aesthetic shock,
 but also a reflection of the speaker's
 traumatic experiences. Without an end
 stop, moreover, the lines suggest that "inj /
 ust / ice" is ongoing, especially in the
 context of environmental degradation
 through the consumption of hydrocarbons.
 The poem ends with a nostalgic desire for
 utopic ignorance and bliss: "even now I still
 dream of the days when i believed we /
 would deliver every one of us to a land
 untouched / by Peak Oil theories" (102).
 This idealism underscores the severity of
 our current ecological crisis. Battler offers
 more than just doom and gloom, however.

Endangered Hydrocarbons is
 seriously playful. In a section from
 "Unearthed" called "armistice," the speaker
 revisits a previous relationship thanks to
 Facebook. Thirteen years after a "fatal
 split," the speaker is surprised to find his or
 her former partner "scaling my Wall of Evil.
 lol" (15). The poem's self-reflexive speaker
 uses Internet slang to out the jokey
 reference to Facebook. Today, this level of
 awareness is the norm; however, the poem
 surprises us when it transforms into a
 Facebook post that is left unseen except by
 us: "this post has been / removed or could /
 not be loaded" (15). While the poem plays
 with the personal, it also reveals an oil
 industry that can facilitate mending missed
 connections: "why not visit me / in Calgary.
 we'll / touch base // i can expense / your
 airfare" (16). Natural resources resound in
 the background.

There are a number of other playful
 poems throughout *Endangered
 Hydrocarbons* like "Offshore Décor," a mock

magazine reporting on things like how
 "fusion is in" (51) or how to "dress your
 subsea / Christmas tree / in cool fossils"
 (53); "Creative Reservoir Workshop," a
 poetic translation of a PowerPoint
 presentation promoting ways to "boost
 your / payload 1,000 to 10,000 syllables / a
 page" (73); "The Leduc Award of
 Excellence," a paneled conversation
 evaluating oil companies' authored novels
 titled after petrochemicals; "Doing Business
 with Poets," a series of guidelines for poetry
 readings by oil tycoons replete with
 comical, yet twisted references like
 "children hidden / in Oulippan labs" (143) or
 "a thousand / rimbards / a day" (145); and
 "Tender Carbon," a Steinian homage to
 Stein's *Tender Buttons*, a modernist writer
 well versed with the lifeblood of her Ford
 Model T, "Aunt Pauline." Battler's "aleatory
 play" (96) is pointed at a world that does
 not fully see how it is driven by
 petroculture, and so we hear this critique in
 the sonic nature of *Endangered
 Hydrocarbons*, too.

Battler's sounds are loud and lovely.
 In "The Petrochemical Ball," the poet holds
 a microphone up to often unheard things
 like the sound of liquefied "pentanes"
 (C₅H₁₂), or organic alkanes with carbon:
 "SHIRRRK-ka pk / SHIIIIIRK-SH-ka / pok-shh
 kapoke-e' / eee' EEE" (57). Or "QUEEEE-
 /AWN," which is a "sonic / anomaly" of
 "ozone / throat / music" (57). This is just the
 tip of the melting iceberg, however.
Endangered Hydrocarbons is brimming with
 uncommon words that not only drive the
 reader to the dictionary, but also appeal to
 the listener's "acoustic receivers" (74) and
 reveal a novel lexical soundscape:
 "SurgiFrac" (18), "toluene" (28), "geocline"
 (29), "diorite" (34), "batholith" (34),
 "phalaropes" (47), and "aniline-tinis" (59).
 Moreover, using her "phrase tasers" (143),

Battler's words work wonders on us both melodically and rhythmically. For instance, the "assonance madness" (96) appears in "Liquefied Natural Gas: The Jungian Interpretation" in these lines: "in an act of early / synchronicity / dionysiacs crack / childproof caps / off cryogenic vials" (62). Elsewhere, in "Hydrocarbons on the Eve of Revolution," we hear lines like "sip a tubular double-double tread gas pedal" or "pop fault traps grope sealing cap slurp hope" (119). Here, Battler's Dadaist tongue twisters foreground sounds that are symptoms of a hurried hyper-capitalism gutting and draining the Earth of its resources.

While we are listening to a line like "the hermeneutics / of pneumatic drills" (67), or any other one in *Endangered*

Hydrocarbons for that matter, we might start to hear and better understand the nature of our petroculture today.

Defamiliarizing business as usual, Battler's much needed debut playfully pushes us to see the bigger picture in and through the micropolitics and environs of the poem.

MICHAEL D. SLOANE, of London, Ontario, is a professor at Fanshawe College. His work focuses on ecological objects in American modernist poetry. Having published on the poetics of contemporary waste, he is now working on several forthcoming edited book chapters for *New Perspectives on Veganism, Modernism and the Anthropocene*, and *Modernism in the Green*. His poetry has appeared in *The Goose*.