

## 5 Energy, climate and the classroom

### A letter

*Imre Szeman*

Dear x,

You asked me the other day: what does it feel like to teach about the environment? You wanted to know: does teaching about the environment ... well, does it *work*?

As you know, for the past decade I've been trying to make sense of the ways in which we have come to understand—or more to the point, have failed to truly grapple with and comprehend—the nature and character of our petro-modernity. We could never have been modern except for our access to coal, oil, and gas, which provide us with an unprecedented amount of cheap energy. Everything we have come to associate with modernity—from its characteristic speed and contraction of space, to its technologies and infrastructures—is possible only as a result of our access to these remnants of ancient life. I've described modern culture as a *petro-culture* to emphasize the role of the *ur*-commodities that form the all too real base on which the superstructure of everything else has been built—even those elements of the mode of production that are typically identified as the base! (A new map of base and superstructure would have everything floating on a top of a rapidly diminishing sea of oil, an Atlantis that the gods don't submerge as punishment but leave stranded on a dry ocean bed.) Despite the fact that we have shaped ourselves in relation to these specific sources of energy, until recently, we have largely failed to name them in theory or culture. It is important that we start thinking about our—and by 'our' I do mean all of us, the whole globe—culture as a *petroculture* because we need to understand all of the ways we are subjects of oil. We need to understand this because our major source of energy, now and for the near future, which fuels global society in a fundamental way, is also the principle cause of global warming and of other forms of environmental damage. Our petro-culture—which is to say, what and who we are—is what generates global warming, every day and in every way.

It's impossible to address global warming without significant changes in our use of fossil fuels. This is widely known. Making these changes means becoming different subjects who embrace a different collectivity and sociality—subjects who decide to no longer be creatures of petroculture. This is less well known. We don't just need to find new sources of energy and cut down on our use of fossil fuels. We need to invent new ways of being, belonging, and behaving—and to do so quickly. It's an intimidating proposition. It means that we not only need to change

the energy source on which we depend, but also need to change everything else. We have no models of such intensive and extensive social transformation, especially not in a short time frame (necessitated by global warming) and in a society in which almost everything is geared, with the help of fossil fuels, to produce more and more ... and more.

In winter 2014, I taught a graduate class in environmental studies called "Resource Culture: Oil in Fiction and Theory." In this seminar, the students and I took the challenge of interrogating the petro-fictions that animate our petrocultures head on. We examined a range of recent essays and books that re-narrate the history of petroculture or which strive to uncover its animating philosophies, including Timothy Mitchell's *Carbon Democracy*, Dipesh Chakrabarty's "The Climate of History," Allan Stoekl's *Bataille's Peak*, Stephanie LeMenager's *Living Oil*, and Andrew Nikiforuk's *The Energy of Slaves*. A key, early intervention into the cultural politics of oil was novelist Amitav Ghosh's "Petrofictions," an essay in which he laments the lack of attention in American fiction to all things related to oil (Ghosh 1992). While not wishing to deny the reality or importance of Ghosh's basic insight—the United States in the twentieth century is also a Middle Eastern country, and yet there is nothing in its fiction of its tragic, ongoing misadventures in the region—my students and I also looked at those few fictions that *have* attended to the social importance of oil.<sup>1</sup> That these are all *science* fictions wasn't lost on us; the continued lack of 'normal' fictions dealing with oil was telling about how we still view the stuff (out of sight, out of mind!). We ended the course by examining two provocative essays on the role of oil in contemporary fiction as well as in broader narratives and rhetorics of social and cultural life at the present time: Peter Hitchcock's "Oil in an American Imaginary" and Graeme Macdonald's "The Resources of Fiction" (Hitchcock 2010; Macdonald 2013).

The big take away? More information, more science, more certainty about global warming isn't what will do the trick. Macdonald's essay starts with a prophetic epigraph from Italo Calvino's 1974 short story, "The Petrol Pump": "I should have thought of it before, it's too late now" (Calvino 1974 [1966], p. 170). One of the central issues that we had to address in the course was how we stand in relation to crisis. We asked ourselves: how do we think, understand and narrate the social significance of fossil fuels in order to avoid multiple crises, and two in particular: the socio-political crisis that will undoubtedly attend the declining availability of oil and coal, and the environmental crisis of global warming that is the outcome of burning the stuff even when we know we shouldn't? One of the intriguing developments in contemporary critical theory has been attention to the socio-psychological figures and mechanisms we use to avoid confronting our political realities. As much a component of modernity as oil—distinct psychic and linguistic modes of being that accompany the scale and complexity of the modern that fossil fuel engenders—there are multiple mechanisms through which we have learned to disarticulate (or, indeed, never allow to concatenate) the link between knowledge and action that shapes political possibility (or should shape it). It is plainly not enough to identify the relation of oil to the environment to produce change. It was important in the course to attend to the insights about our

intellectual and affective relation to crisis, and the challenges this poses to our common understanding of the function of our knowledge systems. And so we spent time thinking and talking about cruel optimism through Lauren Berlant and petro-melancholia via LeMenager, and also pondered the specific difficulties of figuring global warming through encounters with Timothy Morton's hyperobjects and Rob Nixon's idea of "slow violence" (Berlant 2011; LeMenager 2011; Morton 2013; Nixon 2011). Indeed, for students in literary and cultural criticism, one of the most productive sites at which to probe the operations of our resource fictions was through an assessment of the modes of being and behaving generated by cultural narratives. In *Small is Beautiful*, E.F. Schumacher notes, "it is always possible to dismiss even the most threatening problem with the suggestion that something will turn up" (Schumacher 2010 [1973], p. 29). Many of the students' seminars attended to (de)formation of subjectivity that pairs an indefinite teleology with such disinterest, inaction or incapacity.

What was it like for the students to throw themselves into these texts, these ideas? It was tremendously empowering for them. The class was held in a building at the University of Alberta overlooking the deep North Saskatchewan River valley that cuts Edmonton in half. The city's presence near the Alberta Oil Sands means that it is impossible to live there and not be alive to the realities of the fossil fuel industry and how it shapes work and life. The students in my class had been longing to address and assess fossil fuel culture as part of their graduate studies, to connect it to the texts and concepts they had encountered in literary and cultural studies, and to make it part of their broad assessment of the politics of contemporary society and the operations of power. Through critical discussion and debate, "Resource Culture" gave them the opportunity to put some issues of the day directly on the table. The texts we read argued convincingly that our relationship to fossil fuels is less scientific and technological than cultural and social. The role of narratives of being and belonging, of imaginaries and desires, and of hopes and fears in shaping our understanding of and relation to oil and the environment gave legitimacy and strength to the investigations undertaken by my students. Their skills as literary and cultural critics were needed to plot next steps on the difficult road ahead. There was nothing special about the way that I organized this course; in many ways, because I didn't know how the students might treat the content, I was timid about messing about with its form. The excitement for the students came from recognizing how important—indeed, essential—the humanities were to figuring out the past, present, and future of petro-modernity.

This, at least, is part of the story.

It might seem as if what I'm about to say stands as a contradiction to the feelings of capacity and possibility that my students experienced when they turned their attention to oil. But I'll say it anyway. Each and every class began abuzz with intellectual energy; three hours later, however productive our analysis and discussion might have been, our critical interrogations drawing up flashes of insight, we ended up grim and silent, a despondency that we pushed aside with sharp, sarcastic meta-comments and promises to work hard on next week's readings. As we learned about resource culture in each class, we slid from possibility to impossibility,

from an opening to closure, and from the capacity to make changes to the way we exist in relation to oil to feelings of impotence in the face of the detailed maps about oil modernity that we drew together, which seemed to make such changes improbable.

I know that this affective slide was partially my fault. In each class, I pushed my students to think about what we might learn from how each writer frames our relationship to oil modernity. All too often, those writers who attended to the trauma of our dependence on fossil fuels were as capable of outlining, productively and insightfully, the characteristics of oil modernity as they were in arguing that there's not much we can do to change the direction in which we're heading. It was—it is—important to insist on the all too real significance of fossil fuels in shaping contemporary culture. We can name the problems and consequences of continuing to depend on oil to the degree that we do. And we can also identify the ways in which contemporary society *doesn't* react to analyses of both the impact of its use and of looming energy limits. From different starting points, whether reading Morton or Berlant, my students and I moved, maybe too quickly, to the same conclusion: though we were able to identify what's what about oil, power, and society, and did so with ever greater precision and specificity, we didn't always add to our knowledge about what we could do to change our relationship to oil. Instead, more often than not, we repeated the breaks between knowledge and political possibility that haunt our relationship to oil and to global warming. What is to be done? We didn't have the slightest idea.

From hope to despair, from optimism to pessimism. A thrilling and exhausting class! If we were able to return the next week with renewed energy it was in part due to the fact that we treated the class itself as an exception. The rhythms, patterns, and codes of everyday life outside of class made it seem as if all was okay. While in class, we went after the tendency to which Schumacher points. Outside of class, we made due with the collective shrug of the shoulders that lets us fill up the tank of our cars and treat this strange mechanical act as the most normal thing in the world.

If we have come to believe that our social being constitutes something of an error through and through—a traumatic discovery, to say the least!—the only possible solution is that we become something completely other. It's a high impossible demand. We don't want the outcome of a fuller insight into the character of our societies as petro-societies to result in a feeling that genuine political change is impossible. That's not much of a politics. In "Petrofictions," Ghosh notes that, for the most part, oil culture is "a Problem that can be written about only in the language of Solutions" (Ghosh 1992). Part of the problem in the class was that we all wanted to read for immediate, direct and simple solutions to the problem of oil. How could we not, given all that is at stake, and given that time is of the essence? We learned that limiting knowledge to pure utility is one of the principle protocols of petroculture, and a big reason why we find ourselves in the predicament we're in. Isn't this way of knowing encapsulated in Martin Heidegger's idea of "standing reserve"—a theoretical concept materialized in the vast oil farm of tanks at Cushing, Oklahoma? (Heidegger 1977). Cushing has as much right to be named the capital of the twenty-first century as places like Shanghai or Dubai.

There's another way to think about petrocultures, I think, one that doesn't minimize the significance of oil to modernity and to our social and environmental future, but which nevertheless generates political capacity rather than paralysis. This year, I had an opportunity to re-read a text that I hadn't cracked for some time: Fredric Jameson's *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Jameson doesn't talk about oil and energy *at all* when talking about late capitalism, which to my mind constitutes a limit to his narrative of political, social and cultural shifts and transformation. Near the beginning of the book, Jameson points to a problem that can arise when one tries to paint the big picture. He writes:

The more powerful the vision of some increasingly total system or logic—the Foucault of the prisons book is the obvious example—the more powerless the reader comes to feel. Insofar as the theorist wins, therefore, by constructing an increasingly closed and terrifying machine, to that very degree he loses, since the critical capacity of his work is thereby paralyzed, and the impulse of negation and revolt, not to speak of those of social transformation, are increasingly perceived as vain and trivial in the face of the model itself.

(Jameson 1991, pp. 5-6)

Jameson insists that we need to identify and analyze a “cultural dominant,” since without it “we fall back into a view of present history as sheer heterogeneity, random difference, a coexistence of a host of distinct forces whose effectivity is undecidable” (Jameson 1991, p. 6). However, the identification of a cultural dominant need not rule out political possibility. At the outset of a book that will outline in great detail the forces and dimensions of late capitalism, and which might thus come across as naming a total system from which there is no escape, Jameson connects a political project to his endeavor: “to project some conception of a new systematic cultural norm and its reproduction in order to reflect more adequately on the most effective forms of any radical politics today” (Jameson 1991, p. 6). It is hard to draw an exact or easy parallel between the project of identifying a cultural dominant and the project of (for lack of a better way of describing it) naming an *energy* dominant; the forces and significance that one might want to assign each dominant are distinct, to say the least. Everything we read in “Resource Culture” could be seen as making a total system even *more* total. (You think we live in a biopolitical society? Well guess what? It's not just biopolitical, it's an *oil* biopolitical society!). Fossil fuels *are* a cultural dominant, even if rarely named as such. What reading Jameson again reminded me is the reason why we map cultural dominants, which is to better “grasp our positioning as individual and collective subjects and regain a capacity to act and struggle which is at present neutralized by our spatial as well as our social confusion” (Jameson 1991, p. 6). Even in the face of global warming and a petroculture in which it is (in some sense) oil all the way down, this remains a laudable and important goal. The point of naming an energy dominant is to understand our social confusion so we can begin the task of acting, struggling, becoming something new, together.

Were I to teach a class on “Resource Culture” again, I’d do it differently. I’d have students read texts about petrocultures, so as to have them learn about the depths of our interpellation with fossil fuels. But I’d also have them read and think about the ways in which we live collectively today, and how we might live together differently in the future. No course can do everything it needs to do—I get that. Still, I think that I should have focused not only on an investigation of the oil and energy in shaping petroculture, but also on an exploration of the ways in which we understand *collectivity*. I would add texts such as Ursula K. LeGuin’s *Dispossessed* (1974) or Naomi Oreskes and Erik Conway’s *The Collapse of Western Civilization* (2014), two accounts of futures in which energy is figured differently than it is today, both of which keep the problem of collectively front and center (LeGuin 1994 [1974]). I think, too, that I would move away from ‘big picture’ theoretical framings of oil as a determinant resource and include works such as Kolya Ambramsky’s edited collection, *Sparking a Worldwide Energy Revolution: Social Struggles in the Transition to a Post-Petrol World* (2010), which discusses *collective actions taking place around the world*. Finally, if attitude, affect, and sentiment are key to environmental change (whether to enabling or disabling it), I would focus even more directly on exploring these in my course design, by turning (for example) to the work of the scholars writing in the Public Feelings project,<sup>2</sup> and from there, to a consideration of the ways in which women have been interpellated within petro-modernity in a specific manner that needs more critical attention than it has received to date.

I said it before: energy shapes our ways of being, and being together. The way we have wanted to think about oil is to come up with a substitute energy source that would effectively allow us to paint oil out of the picture while keeping our current forms of subjectivity and collectivity. This is our most dangerous environmental fantasy *and* our most dangerous political one as well. If we need to change *everything* in the way that I have suggested in this letter, then we need resources to imagine and figure the changes that we’ll need to make. If I teach a course about oil and global warming again, I’ll make sure to provide my students with some of those resources, so that the capacities and possibilities that energize them don’t collapse into uncertainty and despair. Let me put it this way: if global warming is about how we live together, shouldn’t we be learning about just that: interrogations of the process of social and political change, analyses of the systems that produce late capitalist collective life? Could one not imagine a class on energy and the environment that spent most of its time knee deep not in the muck of oil, but in the political theory and utopian imaginings of new social forms?

I’d better go. I have to get ready to go and teach.

Take care,

Imre

## Notes

- 1 These fictions included: J.G. Ballard, *Concrete Island* (New York: Harper, 2008); Steven Amsterdam, *Things We Didn’t See Coming* (New York: Anchor, 2011); and Paolo Bacigalupi, *The Windup Girl* (San Francisco: Night Shade Books, 2009).

- 2 Books in the Public Feelings project include Ann Cvetkovich, *Depression: A Public Feeling* (Durham: Duke, 2012); Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*; and José Esteban Muñoz *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

## References

- Ambramsky, K. 2010. *Sparking a Worldwide Energy Revolution: Social Struggles in the Transition to a Post-Petrol World*. Oakland, CA: AK Press.
- Berlant, L. 2011. *Cruel Optimism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Calvino, I. 1996 [1974]. "The Petrol Pump." *Numbers in the Dark and Other Stories*. Trans. Tim Parks. London: Vintage.
- Chakrabarty, D. 2009. "The Climate of History: Four Theses," *Critical Inquiry* 35: 197–222.
- Ghosh, A. 1992. "Petrofiction." *New Republic* 2 March 1992: 29–34.
- Heidegger, M. 1977. "The Question Concerning Technology," *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*. New York: Harper Torchbooks: 3–35.
- Hitchcock, P. 2010. "Oil in an American Imaginary." *New Formations* 69.4: 81–97.
- Jameson, F. 1991. *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- LeGuin, U. 1994 [1974]. *Dispossessed*. New York: Harper.
- LeMenager, S. 2011. "Petro-Melancholia: The BP Blowout and the Arts of Grief." *Qui Parle* 19.2: 25–55.
- LeMenager, S. 2013. *Living Oil: Petroleum and Culture in the American Century*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Macdonald, G. "The Resources of Fiction." *Reviews in Cultural Theory* 4.2 (2013): 1–24.
- Mitchell, T. 2011. *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil*. New York: Verso.
- Morton, T. 2013. *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Nikiforuk, A. 2012. *The Energy of Slaves*. Vancouver: Greystone Books.
- Nixon, R. 2011. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Oreskes, N. and Conway, E.M. 2014. *The Collapse of Western Civilization: A View from the Future*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Schumacher, E.F. 1973 [2010]. *Small is Beautiful: Economics as if People Mattered*. New York: Perennial.
- Stoekl, A. 2007. *Bataille's Peak: Energy, Religion, and Postsustainability*. Minneapolis MN: University of Minnesota Press.