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Journal of American Studies / Volume 46 / Special Issue 02 / May 2012, pp 269 - 272
DOI: 10.1017/S0021875812000163, Published online: 30 May 2012

Link to this article: http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S0021875812000163

How to cite this article:

ROSS BARRETT and DANIEL WORDEN (2012). Oil Culture: Guest Editors' Introduction. *Journal of American Studies*, 46, pp 269-272 doi:10.1017/S0021875812000163

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Oil Culture: Guest Editors’ Introduction

ROSS BARRETT AND DANIEL WORDEN

This special issue advances the first comprehensive account of “oil culture,” the broad field of cultural representations and symbolic forms that have taken shape around the fugacious material of oil in the 150 years since the inception of the US petroleum industry. Exploring the cultural life of oil from a variety of methodological perspectives, the essays in this special issue seek to elucidate the complex role that imaginative representations have played in establishing and contesting oil’s status as the primary commodity underpinning modern economic expansion and a fundamental ontological construct shaping social and political life in the United States and beyond. By addressing the rise of oil as a cultural problem, this issue aims to fill a significant gap in oil scholarship and to intervene in what has become an epochal and highly charged moment in the history of petro-capitalism.

In the wake of the industry’s sesquicentennial and the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, its most devastating ecological disaster of the twenty-first century to date, we believe that the time is right to reexamine the practices, innovations, and conflicts that made the dominance of oil capitalism possible. While much work has been done to track the material and political processes that fueled the growth of the petroleum industry, relatively little scholarship has attempted to account for the myriad ways that oil has saturated American aesthetic practices, cultural forms, and public discourses since the nineteenth century. In exploring the fertile role of oil in the cultural imagination, the essays in this collection model new strategies for understanding a central paradox of oil history: how a natural material understood from its beginnings to be non-renewable and disastrously destructive came to be embraced over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as an unassailable “fact” of everyday American experience. At the same time, by analyzing the ambiguities, gaps, and contradictions that have structured cultural representations of oil, our contributors unearth a history of struggle and ambivalence that might inform

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ongoing attempts to “see beyond” oil capitalism and envision alternative modes of energy production and consumption.

As Amitav Ghosh noted in a well-known 1992 review of Abdelrahman Munif's *Cities of Salt* novels, “the history of oil is a matter of embarrassment verging on the unspeakable.”¹ If, as Ghosh argues, the unsettling material effects of petro-capitalism helped to ensure the invisibility of oil in much of nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature, they also seem to have dissuaded artists, cultural critics, and academics from engaging overtly and explicitly with the oil industry. Indeed, outside industry-oriented scholarship on geology and refining, the humanities have not had much to say about oil until recently. The industry has inspired a small set of usefully comprehensive historical studies and economic analyses, including Arnold Daum and Harold Francis Williamson's *The American Petroleum Industry* (1959–63), Daniel Yergin's best-selling *The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money, and Power* (1991), and Roger M. Olien and Diana Davids Olien's *Oil and Ideology: The Cultural Creation of the American Petroleum Industry* (2000). Written by industry insiders and policymakers, these works offer largely celebratory, and in some cases explicitly triumphalist, assessments of the rise and development of oil capitalism. The past decade has seen a flood of books on topics such as the energy crisis, the Iraq War, and global warming that deal explicitly with oil, like Kenneth S. Deffeyes's *Beyond Oil: The View from Hubbert's Peak* (2005) and Peter Maass's *Crude World: The Violent Twilight of Oil* (2009). As insightful and useful as they might be, these works make no effort to deal with the larger cultural, or ideological, role that oil plays in the US. These studies, moreover, do little to address the complicated political and epistemological problems posed by petro-capitalism. As Imre Szeman has recently noted, oil undercuts our capacity to imagine a world without it:

It is not that we can't name or describe, anticipate or chart the end of oil and the consequences for nature and humanity. It is rather that because these discourses are unable to mobilize or produce any response to a disaster we know is a direct result of the law of capitalism – limitless accumulation – it is easy to see that nature will end before capital.²

Almost invariably concerned with affirming the economic structures that have enabled the suffusion of everyday life with oil, conventional oil scholarship has done little to inspire alternative perspectives on petroleum's inexorable end.

¹ Amitav Ghosh, “Petrofiction: The Oil Encounter and the Novel,” *New Republic*, 206, 9 (2 March 1992), 29.

² Imre Szeman, “System Failure: Oil, Futurity, and the Anticipation of Disaster,” *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 106, 4 (Fall 2007), 820–21.

Recently, however, a number of scholars in the humanities have turned to oil with new critical intensity. This work, of which this special issue is a part, aims to analyze how oil has emerged as both a dominant energy source and an ideological limit to our social imaginary, in the hopes that such an analysis might begin to allow us to think about oil as a historical formation rather than an unquestionable everyday necessity. In a recent editor's column in *PMLA*, for example, Patricia Yaeger asks, "what happens if we sort texts according to the energy sources that made them possible?"³ The idea at the root of this question – that the history of art, literature, or other cultural productions might be periodized into categories such as "the coal era" or the "petroleum age" – resonates with the work of John R. McNeill and other environmental historians who have begun to reorganize the development of Western civilizations into "energy regimes."⁴ By resituating literary and artistic works within such regimes, critics might begin to retrace oil's spectral presence in cultural texts ostensibly unconcerned with petroleum, while reevaluating works like Edna Ferber's novel *Giant* (1952) or Ed Ruscha's *Standard Station* silkscreen paintings from the 1960s that do deal explicitly with the oil industry. Other recent works that seek to bring oil into the foreground of US history and cultural studies include Brian Black's *Petrolia: The Landscape of America's First Oil Boom* (2000), Brian Frehner's *Finding Oil: The Nature of Petroleum Geology, 1859–1920* (2011), and Paul Sabin's *Crude Politics: The California Oil Market, 1900–1940* (2004). Taken together, these studies have begun to reestablish the centrality of oil to US history; to recapture how messy, unpredictable, and contingent oil's rise to dominance was; and to examine the place of petroleum in the American cultural imagination.

Oil complicates not only historical periodization but also the national boundaries that conventionally limit scholarly inquiry. As the primary energy commodity that fuels US industry and agriculture and enables the mobile lifestyle of most contemporary Americans, oil ties the nation's economic fortunes and the stability of everyday life within the United States to the shifting fates of petroleum-producing regions scattered across the world. The global economics and politics of oil demand that we reevaluate the temporal and spatial boundaries of American studies, as well as the "natural" resources that we have neglected as historians and critics of American culture. Accordingly, works like Ed Kashi and Michael Watts's *Curse of the Black Gold: 50 Years of Oil in the Niger Delta* (2010) and Miguel Tinker Salas's *The Enduring Legacy: Oil, Culture, and Society in Venezuela* (2009) should be

³ Patricia Yaeger, "Editor's Column: Literature in the Ages of Wood, Tallow, Coal, Whale Oil, Gasoline, Atomic Power, and Other Energy Sources," *PMLA*, 126, 2 (2011), 305.

⁴ For example, see John R. McNeill, *Something New under the Sun: An Environmental History of the Twentieth-Century World* (New York: Norton, 2001).

indispensable to the new wave of scholarship engaged with oil's position in US political, economic, and cultural history.

The contributors to *Oil Culture* intervene in emerging scholarly debates about the oil industry, ecological thought, and environmental history, and theorize a set of frameworks for the cultural analysis of oil. The issue's essays trace the cultural life of oil from the beginning of the modern oil industry to the present moment, exploring how oil and extractive industry have been imagined in popular fiction, public art, film (including Hollywood movies, promotional films, and documentaries), television, war propaganda, museums and educational institutions, trade periodicals, and the popular press. Drawing on the conventions of several disciplines, the contributors employ a variety of methodological approaches to address the problem of oil culture. While some contributions employ historicist approaches to understand the cultural figurations of oil that arose during the nineteenth-century spiritualist craze and the propaganda programs of World War II, for example, others track the development of certain oil metaphors or discourses across a succession of historical moments. Still other contributions analyze specific cultural objects that offer theoretical insights into oil's position in liberal pluralist and neo-liberal imaginings of American life, the political efficacy of oil documentaries, and the complicated role of petroleum in contemporary and historical imaginaries.

In pursuing these and other objectives, the essays of this collection also share a body of common concerns, identifying a set of recurring problems and tropes within oil culture that call for further investigation. These include the problematic relationships that have taken shape between oil and conceptions of futurity, the deep cultural entanglement of petroleum and apocalypse, and the central role that feeling or affect has played in the interpretation and promotion of oil capitalism. Finally, by tracking the circulation of oil narratives and iconographies across media boundaries, the various contributions identify semiotic fluidity and broad saturation as characteristic aspects of oil culture: open to symbolic appropriation, translation, and redistribution, oil's cultural forms have infiltrated a wide variety of representational practices, attaining a symbolic pervasiveness that has undermined attempts to conceive and represent alternative forms of social and economic organization.