

The Desperation (Don't Give Up!) Manifesto
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On 9/11, I was three years out of my grad school training in postcolonial studies and Ethnic and Third World Literatures. In intellectual and political terms, what most set me reeling was the resurgence of US imperialist enthusiasm in the weeks, months, and years that followed—a sharp right turn after the purported peace dividend that the Cold War was supposed to promise. I wondered—eventually in print—what this shift meant for postcolonial studies' radical critique of imperialism and its enduring legacies.¹ I began writing this reflection for After Oil 3 with the annual reading of the names of those lost at the World Trade Center droning on (for hours, already) in the next room.

That early 2000s moment of stock-taking—a gut-check reflection about the relationship between the state of the world and what I (we; our disciplinary formation) know how to say and do about it—came to mind as I read “What Comes Next?,” the provocation for our After Oil conversations. The comparison is imperfect, and perhaps squarely inverse. *Why so glum?*, I found myself wondering. Sure, the forests are burning, the ice is collapsing (*melting's* too gentle a word), and even if all CO₂ emissions stopped forever tomorrow we seem pretty well fucked with the carbon future that's already baked in. And yet, as with postcolonial studies amidst the resurgent imperialism after 9/11, our work in energy humanities has never been more urgent.

Moreover, the past two and a half years might represent a generational, world-historical reckoning with the problem(s) of energy that compares with the oil shocks of the 1970s. Pandemic disruptions of business-as-usual taught hard lessons about supply chains as anything but ever-given. The Russian invasion of Ukraine has brought stark fears of energy poverty from the Global South periphery to the frigid, uninsulated heart of former European empires. Even as prices have start to come down, people are reading for oil and factoring in the price at the pump as they calculate their daily lives to an extent that we couldn't have anticipated at the first Petrocultures in 2012. The early weeks and months of the pandemic revealed that *anything is possible*—among other things, that people can change their behavior and adopt new habits almost overnight—but also that *everything is broken* and that people are stupid, or at least fatally disinformable. Global cooperation and national solidarity for the public good are fragile, fleeting, and in some places impossible. One can't deny that the road to the post-pandemic near future will be paved in fossil fuels. But is it really time to give up on transition when transition is finally, kind of, happening here and there, with more widespread public will and technological possibility than ever before? Some shards of anecdotal evidence:

- A few months ago I was informed that parking garage under my Manhattan residential highrise will no longer house gas-powered vehicles after 2030. Sure, that seems way too late, but the announcement was clearly timed to shape decisions made *now*.
- The first time I taught “Literature and Oil” at Columbia I had 5 students. This semester I have around 80. The kids want somewhere to go to get help thinking (and feeling) about the future.

¹ See Yaeger et al, “The End of Postcolonial Theory?”

“What Comes Next?” asks: *Do we have or need a theory of historical change? How will it feel to grow old still making arguments about transition? Do we need to start from failure?*

I wrote a whole book about how seemingly “failed” social movements can both inspire and constrain struggles for change in the present, how unrealized dreams from the past can energize movements for better futures.² When thinking about energy/environment questions, I often find myself drawing on the history of anticolonial struggle for analogies, beginning with Frantz Fanon’s warning not to discount the efforts of previous generations, to see the *longue durée* struggle against colonialism as each generation meeting its moment with the tools available to it. A parallel story could be told about Marxism, a far longer one about Christianity, or, for that matter, Judaism: all three are world-historical creeds that have endured, despite (because of?) long struggles and endless disappointments. *How long can one live in a state of emergency?* (I borrow this question from South African literary critic David Attwell, writing of the anti-apartheid struggle.) What would radical patience mean for energy humanities?

But, some distinctions seem necessary:

- *Petromyopia*: Asking about our “obsolescence,” this provocation conflates energy humanities with the study of petrocultures. Absolutely, let’s put ourselves out of business as petrocritics (as Graeme said in 2016), but let’s continue and fortify the work of EH in realizing post-carbon futures, solarities, etc etc.
- *Timescales*. In January 2017, I was challenged at professional workshop to imagine the impact I wanted my work to have in 5, 20, 100 years. The thought that immediately came to mind is, *will there even be a university then?* How can we calibrate the temporality of geohistorical change with the trajectories of intellectual life, the medium- or long-term future of the university as distinct from the immediate pull of the near future on our work *now*? Related to this question are the hugely important gestures in “What Comes Next?” toward the mismatch between academic careerism and climate collapse; *if I give this document a title, I can put it on my CV... Describing her plans for a book project, a young scholar nervously asked me a few years ago, “but isn’t the Anthropocene kind of over?” (!)*. The timescales and rhythms of academic production aren’t at all compatible with those (whether geologic or political) that shape the future of the Earth.

In some ways “What Comes Next?” is all about time, *temporality*. I vaguely remember emailing with Imre (before the pandemic) about his ideas for this conversation, the need to think about *the next*. As I read this provocation now, something in me recoils against this word, *next*, which might trail with it some tricky/sticky assumptions about temporality, the shape of history, and the parameters and motors of change. “If the time of transition is linear, progressive, and measured, then what is the time of *the next?*,” we read (4). But isn’t the time of *the next* also the time of linear progression, the next term in a series? (As opposed to something like a *phase shift* in which all extant entities and relations are transformed?) A no-nonsense “Next!?” is what a harried shopkeeper or clerk says to hail the next person in line. Or what the scholar’s

² See Wenzel, *Bulletproof* and “Anti-Imperialist Nostalgia.”

internalized inner voice of the profession says in her inner ear, no less than Big Tech or fashion, á la Walter Benjamin: what is this season's bright new thing, big new idea? *Isn't next, the desire for the next, part of the models of growth that has gotten us here?* These rhythms of anticipation are capitalist and neoliberal through and through, no? To adapt the moves that Mark and Imre make in "Impasse Time," is "the next" one more symptom of stuckness?

If energy historians sometimes chide grumpily that there's never been an energy *transition*, because new fuels are simply added to old ones in the energy mix (i.e. energy stacking, energy simultaneity), then maybe we're talking not so much about *the next* as about *the also*. Perhaps something like improv comedy's fundamental logic: "yes, and" rather than "no, but." But "yes, and" can also be understood as a market logic, the sheer proliferation of choice, heedless of consequence, limit, and constraint. And there is probably an urgent need for refusal and negation: to say *no* to so much in the present, to shut the fossil-fueled machine *down*, for good.

How will we know when it's time for sabotage; or, perhaps rather, when (or how) is sabotage time? *Time's up! What are we (you) waiting for?* has long been Andreas Malm's refrain, who goads us to ask whether it's time to start blowing stuff up, or, at the very least, to start turning some valves and letting air out of tires? Yet from comrades Barney, Simpson, et al, I've learned a different notion of sabotage-time, Elizabeth Gurley Brown's "fine thread of deviation," the nearly imperceptible, often anonymous actions, that, undertaken with canny knowledge of a system's workings and weak spots, can add up to big effects. I think of these saboteurial fine threads and tiny steps when "What Comes Next?" scales down from the world-historical to smaller, more granular, quotidian "changes in being, thinking, working, consuming, recharging, relating, and moving" (2) that are undertaken in the interstices, those "uncertain spaces between the present and the future in dozens of domains" (2). (Be the change, in other words? Hmm.)

I was fascinated to discover that the "how to" in Malm's *How to Blow Up a Pipeline* was so unabashedly literal: he remarks upon the post-Cold War loss of practical knowledge about how to do revolution. Even if his account of the sabotage tradition is lamentably narrow—a missed opportunity to transmit a historical understanding of practices of direct action and the philosophies, logics, and dispositions that underpin them—we can nonetheless ask with him, *What other knowledges and knowledge traditions* are at stake, dormant, or necessary, as we ponder a future for energy humanities? (Who is the *we* and what are the knowledges we have, lack, and need?) What other kinds of "how to" manuals do we need to read, or to learn to write?

How does newness enter the world? is the question that sticks with me from Salman Rushdie's novel *The Satanic Verses*. Is that question undialectical, or thoroughly dialectical? What's the relationship between *the new* and *the next*? (And Rushdie's shocking/not surprising grievous fate forces me to recognize that all the old foes might have radical patience too, biding their time....). But when "What Comes Next?" wonders about transition in terms of "real futures," by which it means futures that we want, I am reminded of a different definition, that of the early twentieth century German theorist of utopia, Ernst Bloch. For Bloch, a "real future" was a

radically undetermined one, a future that can't be known in advance or extrapolated from things as they are. Instead, a "real future" remains open to the unanticipated and as-yet unimagined. Is the letting-go of which this glum manifesto speaks also a letting go of the futures that we *can* already imagine, those that we desire? How does newness—or the next—enter the world? "Where are the seeds of the next?" asks "What Comes Next?." Quoting myself (ugh, sorry) in a recent piece about habit and the pandemic, written in spring 2021:

Alongside the new routines that have seeped even into our dreams, the task for this pandemic interregnum is to forge a life-sustaining carapace of habit that is not a mere retreat into the shell of the self, but instead an orientation toward another possible world within this present, "a fold in temporality that opens it up from within to the possibilities of an existence that could rectify the deficiencies of the present" (Terdiman 238). This image of convoluted time as a site of potentiality offers one more way to think along the fold: the challenge to "feel forward into the next world" (Boyer) from the shifting ground of the present, rather than leaning back into the twinned comforts and cruelties of the old one. ("Along the Fold" 144)

On the other hand, in light of the challenge in "What Comes Next?" to "rethink method and politics in the face of impasse," I'm struck by the inadequacy of my own stock moves; "standard tricks of the literary critical trade won't save us here" (Szeman in Yaeger et al, 324). In the face of danger or difficulty, simply deconstruct a term; drag in a reference here and a citation there; hide behind bibliography; retreat to the lyrical. What are other ways to *do* when we contemplate what is to be done? What is the work of our work in the world? What are the broader publics for our work, and how can we learn to address them better?

Even as the world burns, I can't imagine doing any humanities work that wasn't engaged with these questions. If we're looking for theories of historical change, we could do worse than to remember Edward Said's humanist account of contingency and historicity: what has been made by humans can be made otherwise.

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