

The common rub

Darin Barney

After Oil 3 - Banff, Alberta, October 22-23, 2022

My friend Rhys Williams, a professor of literature who is wondering what he is supposed to do now, passed along a story that depicts a future in which environmental conditions make exposure to the surface of the earth deadly, at least without a respirator. Under these conditions, academic work takes place exclusively online and on-screen, mediated by a system referred to as “the Machine.” “The clumsy system of public gatherings,” we are informed, “had long since been abandoned.” The story is “The Machine Stops,” by E.M. Forster, published in 1909. It begins with a scholar sitting alone in a small room, preparing to give a remote lecture about Australian music. She presses the isolation button so that she will not be disturbed by incessant electronic messages asking her if she has had “any ideas lately.” We are told that, “Her lecture, which lasted ten minutes, was well received.”

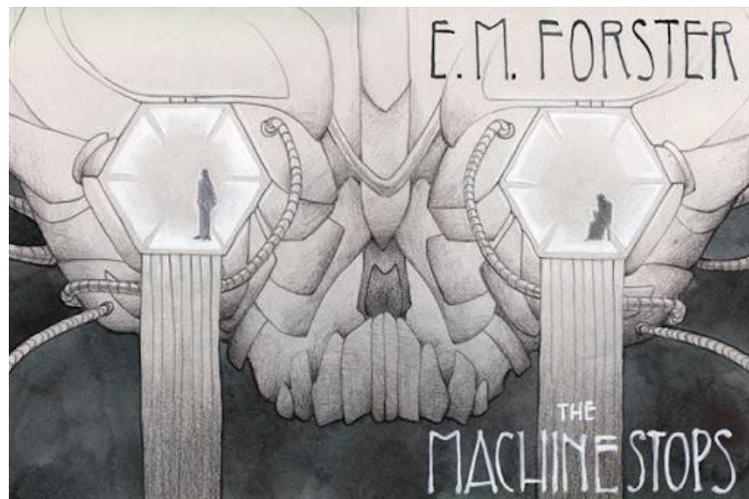


Illustration by Kelly Airo (www.kellyairo.com/)

The story is too painful to read. You should read it. At one point, the scholar’s son arrives with news that he has visited the surface without a respirator and without an Egression permit, and that he managed to evade the Mending Apparatus. An argument ensues. We take the side of the boy. He says, “Cannot you see, *cannot all you lecturers see*, that it is we that are dying, and that down here the only thing that really lives is the Machine? We created the Machine, to do our will, but we cannot make it do our will now...”. Exhausted by her son’s rebellion, the lecturer retreats. “It will end in Homelessness,” she says quietly. “I wish it would,” he replies.

**

Excerpts from *After Oil School 3: What Comes Next?*

“...a liveable, sustainable, and just world historical transformation can only occur through many smaller, more specific changes in being, thinking, working, consuming, relaxing, recharging, relating, and moving.”

“Let’s collectively begin to map ways of being and doing— models, theories, strategies, practices—that move beyond petrospectivity and petroculture.”

“Does what we as scholars and academics think, say, or do matter at all?”

“What is the social and political role of an academic critic? When and how will that critic be able to occupy this role?”

In their essay, “Suicide as a Class,” Stefano Harney and Fred Moten ask us to consider Amilcar Cabral’s address to the Tricontinental Conference of the Peoples of Asia, Africa and Latin America, held at Havana in 1966. The title of the address was “The Weapon of Theory.”

Harney and Moten are concerned with what they describe as “the neo-colonization of black study by the academic-artistic complex” (146). They mean to indicate the tendency for critique, and critical theory, to become a kind of alibi that exonerates its object, a tendency particularly pronounced in the “work” of traditional, petty bourgeois intellectuals who are materially invested in structures they subjectively disavow.¹ It surfaces conspicuously in moments when intellectuals perform the anxiety this contradiction generates by doubling-down on the wager that an improved, purified critique might be political in a way that they, themselves, cannot be. The result, as Harney and Moten observe, is that “at the end of every day we’re left with the sad phenomenon of a petty bourgeois elite play-fighting amongst themselves while black workers try to make some air to breathe” (146). Their aim, they say, is not “to point fingers, either at others or ourselves, but to try to think, in our tradition, anindexically, in loving discomfort, in the common rub” (146).

Harney and Moten’s specific concern is the manner in which “decolonization” has been taken up by Left academics as a subjective or rhetorical commitment in order to cope with the seemingly intractable material and political problem of their objective complicity in structures that reproduce coloniality and racism:

“...the petty bourgeoisie works hard, if often unintentionally, to protect the metaphysical foundations of the very imperialism it critically understands. Its performative intellectual reflexes pass for a fantasy of subjectivity that is predicated on their inability to have it. The petty bourgeoisie claims to speak – from a position it assumes but cannot avow – for those who discover the oxygen it can barely produce; it claims to breathe for those who can no longer

¹ The most demoralizing and depoliticizing phrase in the academic lexicon is “my work.” If you think of theory as “your work,” then you are not doing it right: “And from what practice does theory emerge within the academic-artistic complex? It emerges from a practice in which theory is reduced from a realistic spot of common sense to an abstract, unoccupiable point of individual expression... Theory cannot be wielded by a theorist. It cannot be lifted or aimed alone, by a single voice, or even by a chorus of single voices shouting at the enemy. That’s how our weapon gets pruned from our own dead, individuated hands and is deployed against us...” (Harney and Moten, 148).

breathe. It does this unintended, immaterial labor with the best of intentions while postcolonial malaise is visited not upon actual imperial power but upon the petty bourgeois intellectuals themselves – unwitting, and even unwilling, compradors who ‘choose’ the moralistic (out)rage for rhetorical purity that ‘decolonization’ has become over the endless, fugitive, anti-colonial struggle for the survival of anti-colonial life, which is running out time, as it always has” (146-147).

What if we substitute “fossil capitalism” for “imperialism,” “decarbonization” for “decolonization,” “petrocultural” for “postcolonial,” and “anti-fossil-capitalist” for “anti-colonial,” and read the passage again?

Harney and Moten are trying “to understand the ~~decolonial~~ [decarbonizing] petty bourgeoisie’s strange incapacity to self-nominate either as a class or as revolutionary while proffering an all but constant critique of ~~imperialism~~ [fossil capitalism]” (147). The observation would be moralizing if it were not also self-reflexive: “Hell, we mean well right now, hoping there’s something in what we say that pierces what we assume in saying it. It’s just that such hope is nothing without practice, such faith is nothing without work, without toil, without that constant, active, undergrounding labor whose by-product will have been our disappearance” (147).

It is this spectre of disappearance – of *homelessness* – that haunts the dreams of well-meaning decarbonizing intellectuals, and sends us running for the remedies of theory.



Image by Darin Barney (2022)

The time for theory that claims to breathe for those who can no longer breathe – that offers a remedy – and thereby consoles the theorists making the claim, has passed. Those of us who are objectively committed to the material structure of a system we subjectively oppose instead face the task of our own disappearance, *as a class* – what Harney and Moten describe as “the massive work of autodivestiture,” predicated on “the obliteration of whatever delusions of repair we had” (148-9).

This is how Cabral put it in his 1966 address:

“This means that in order to truly fulfill their role in the ~~national liberation~~ [anti-fossil-capitalist] struggle, the revolutionary petty bourgeoisie must be capable of committing suicide as a class in order to be reborn as revolutionary workers, completely identified with the deepest aspirations of the people to which they belong. This alternative — to betray the revolution or to commit suicide as a class — constitutes the dilemma of the petty bourgeoisie in the general framework of the ~~national liberation~~ [anti-fossil-capitalist] struggle.”

The dilemma is simultaneously moral and political, cast into relief by the material condition of being an academic energy humanist in the time of deep fossil capitalism. In order to play a non-conservative role in the struggle for “a liveable, sustainable, and just world historical transformation,” energy humanists must be capable of committing suicide as class. They must commit to the “constant, active, undergrounding labor” of producing their own disappearance. They must become homeless, and reconstitute their work on different terms. For theory to be a weapon, first it must be turned upon ourselves.²

In British Columbia in the 1950s and 1960s, members of the Sons of Freedom sect of displaced Doukhobors would enact their rejection of property relations and the state’s confiscation of their children for purposes of re-education, by burning down their own houses and standing naked before the flames.



Image: Simma Holt, *Terror in the Name of God: The Story of the Sons of Freedom Doukhobors* (1964)

Very few of us are prepared for this. It is too painful. It is easier to defer the matter.³ Maybe we could just stop flying to attend conferences. Would that be enough?

² Again, Cabral: “We are not going to use this platform to rail against imperialism. An African saying very common in our country says: ‘When your house is burning, it’s no use beating the tom-toms’... this means that we are not going to eliminate imperialism by shouting insults against it...Our agenda includes subjects whose meaning and importance are beyond question and which show a fundamental preoccupation with struggle...We refer here to the struggle against our own weaknesses.”

³ Harney and Moten describe deferral as “the fundamental material condition of the revolutionary petty bourgeoisie.” They write: “When a member of this class says something like after I get tenure, or after I publish my book, or when I get promoted, or once the kids have graduated, or in my second term, or when I start my news blog, this doesn’t indicate strategic miscalculation or a personal flaw, or cowardice, or immorality, no matter who says

Here's how the story ends.

The lecturer and her rebellious son are estranged and do not speak for many years. Her lectures grow shittier, sometimes so shitty that she requests Euthanasia (request denied). One day, a message arrives from her son: "The Machine stops. The Machine is stopping, I know, I know the signs." Surely, he has gone mad, but things are happening. It starts with some trouble with the music – "*when there is nothing left to burn, you have to set yourself on fire*" – and degenerates from there until one day, "without the slightest warning, without any previous hint of feebleness the entire communication system broke down, all over the world, and the world, as they understood it, ended."

such thought crimes should be punishable by cancellation, a sentence often uttered and carried out by the etymologically challenged ones who claim to be against incarceration. However, saying such things, and cancelling the ones who say such things, comprise the fundamental condition of being in that class, even when those who defer fool themselves into thinking they have arrived and even when those who defer have an analysis of their constant non-arrival, having arrived at never having arrived being the ultimate deferral of suicide as a class" (151).