

The prism of petrol: drive, desire and the energy unconscious in Anna Kavan's *Ice*¹

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Abstract

This essay argues that psychoanalytic modes of interpretation can help us understand and intervene in the blockages

and fantasies hindering the exodus from fossil fuel use that contemporary science tells us is urgently necessary. A reading of Anna Kavan's 1967 science fiction novel *Ice* reveals an "energy unconscious" at work by which petroleum fuels a violent and masculinist resolution to the alienation and fragmentation experienced by the protagonists. Such interpretations allow us to recognize how culture and subjectivity are shaped by petroleum, opening a space to work towards framing new narratives and values.

Keywords: energy unconscious; petroleum; petroculture; apocalyptic fiction; psycho-analysis

...when we identify a boundary or limit ... we nonetheless modify that limited situation, that situation or experience of absolute limits, ever so slightly by drawing the situation as a whole inside itself and making the limit now part of what it had hitherto limited, and thereby subject to modification in its own turn.

— Fredric Jameson,
The Seeds of Time, xvi³

That we live at a moment of mounting, seemingly irreconcilable contradictions in our relationships to infrastructure, energy and the environment is registered daily in the news and weather reports. In our politically polarized times, with extreme climate events emerging monthly, even the last refuge of common, polite parlance—the weather—can lead one into uncomfortable territory and is best to be avoided. In the era of global, anthropogenic climate change, formerly reliable iterations of a common, middle ground crumble beneath our feet like so many sinkholes amidst the oil-evacuated shale. At this writing, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change is meeting in Katowice, Poland to attempt to come to terms with how nations will respond to the news that we have little more than a decade to drastically limit global emissions of carbon into the atmosphere. At the same time, mass protesters in France are causing a national crisis that began with discontent over a fuel tax and has developed into

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³ Fredric Jameson, *The Seeds of Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), xvi.

disruptive, civil unrest about the rising costs of living. On the one hand, climate science is in overwhelming consensus about the need for a concerted, global effort to refashion our energy infrastructures and effect a rapid, orchestrated exodus from dependency on fossil fuels. On the other hand, popular will in many Western nations, whose politics and culture have been shaped by the interests of oil companies for decades, seems increasingly captured by nostalgia for modes of living that can no longer be sustained, so the science tells us, if the planet is to continue to support life as we know it. Between knowledge and action falls the shadow, and to believe that technology will rescue us from the impasse only reinforces the paralysis that characterizes our contemporary moment.

For we already have or are well on the way to developing the technological means necessary to navigate a transition to cleaner, more sustainable forms of energy, even within the constrained timeframes left to us. What is missing, as revealed by the protests in France over fuel taxes, or in Canada with mounting frustration over governmental reticence to build new oil pipelines, is a sense of wide solidarity informed by a truly progressive vision for a better future. In the contemporary West, left-leaning politics have been informed by two major trends: industrial unionism and social protest movements. While the latter contains a strong environmentalist tradition as one of its threads, the larger terrain of social justice remains fragmented amidst constellations couched in terms of identity, and lacks a unifying vision that could translate these struggles into a truly intersectional bid to transform the overarching economic and political systems that perpetuate both inequality and environmental degradation. As for the workers' movement, even while it struggles to adapt to seismic changes in the global division of labour it remains wed to modes of production thoroughly soaked in the economies and subjectivities petroleum enables, giving birth to the kind of reactionary inclinations that help support the rise of populist demagogues and their exclusionary, tribal fantasies.

In the midst of these fractures, leaks and blockages, telling symptoms emerge that point to the possibility of submerged structures whose outlines might yet point the way to unrealized future transformations. The “Yellow Vest” protesters in France, for instance, have adopted as a symbol of solidarity the bright, reflective vests that French motorists are required by law to have in their cars as a safety measure should they require roadside assistance. This recoding of statist automotive culture into a symbol of mass protest highlights the ways in which fantasies of mobility and freedom are enmeshed within legislative and economic regimes that are themselves crucially dependent on hydrocarbons. By performing the position of motorists stranded by the roadside, the Yellow Vests metaphorically express the feelings of distress and inertia that decades of austerity have imposed upon an embattled middle class. The spark that has ignited this recent conflagration, the rising environmental and social cost of petrol, reveals how this elemental substance pools at the centre of a tangled network of material realities and cultural signifiers. By threatening to restrict the flow of petrol into the tanks of ordinary citizens, Macron's policy inadvertently hit upon a traumatic kernel of the Real, that place where signifiers collapse into singularity and time itself seems to warp and snarl. No longer relegated to the racialized suburbs, protest erupted in the very centre of Paris in perhaps the most dramatic civic unrest the city has seen since May of 1968; acrid fumes from burning cars mixed with tear gas and aerosol paint marking the Arc de Triomphe. This protest movement, even while demanding a reversal of the fuel tax, both expresses itself through and strikes at the very infrastructures upon which petroculture depends, constituting a *passage à l'acte* whose lineaments reveal an inability to reconcile conflicting demands—between social reproduction and social mobility—within a fantasy of “the good life” whose conditions of possibility are rapidly dissolving.

While grappling with these blockages and impasses, what conceptual tools can help the left situate itself as a vanguard for bringing about the social change that such environmental and social crises reveal as urgently necessary? Given that the barriers to imagining and working towards more just and sustainable relationships to one another and the environment are, at this point, largely cultural, political and economic, the humanities and social sciences have a key role to play in the emerging conjecture. Such is the wager of a growing field of inquiry called Energy Humanities that, drawing from multiple disciplines, works to direct attention to the ways in which energy has remained a constitutive blind spot in our understanding of the arts, cultures and politics of modernity.⁴ Examining the particular

⁴ For resources related to this expanding field, see: Dominic Boyer and Imre Szeman, “The Rise of Energy Humanities: Breaking the Impasse,” *University Affairs* 12 (Feb. 2014) <https://www.universityaffairs.ca/opinion/in-my-opinion/the-rise-of-energy-humanities/>; *Energy Humanities: an anthology*, eds. Imre Szeman and Dominic Boyer (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2017); *Fueling Culture: 101 Words for Energy and*

material qualities, histories and modalities of energy regimes provides novel schemas for periodizing culture, allowing us to look beyond the predominant, contemporary scenarios of disaster to a space in which we might imagine new social, political and economic possibilities.⁵ Equally crucially, the Energy Humanities offer theoretical tools for addressing the urgent questions we currently face regarding the shape that our future collective lives might take if we are to navigate the mounting crises in values, expectations and ways of life associated with transitioning from fossil fuel dependency. As two members of the Petrocultures Research Group, Imre Szeman and Jeff Diamante write,

Over the course of this century, we will undergo an energy transition—a shift from an economy and society based on energy derived from fossil fuels to one based on a mix of energy forms. This transition will constitute the greatest social experiment in human history: a planned, plotted and predetermined shift from one kind of society—the petrocultures we inhabit today—to another. At Petrocultures, we see this energy transition as an opportunity for a transition to the kind of society long imagined by the left: collective, equitable and just in all of its practices and principles.⁶

That energy transition is coming is a certainty, but the shape this transition takes will depend as much upon changing culture and values as upon developments in technology. Only by paying close attention to the ways that fossil fuel dependency has shaped our world, experiences and relationships will we be properly equipped for the adventure in reimagining society outlined by Szeman and Diamante. And yet, the massive energy outputs supplied by the hydrocarbons that have fueled modernity remain an under-theorized background to our lives and societies. We come into the contact with its fumes at the gas pump, and we glimpse it in the rainbow skin shimmering atop a roadside puddle, but we rarely stop to consider how so much of our experience, from the shape of our cities and highways to the ways we experience them, to the food we eat and the commodities we consume, to the way we respond to dramatic changes in the weather, are thoroughly suffused by the material and social realities of petrol.

Petroculture and psychoanalysis

It is in the attempt to address this gap that contemporary cultural criticism is most in need of the interpretive tools of psychoanalysis and the concept of the unconscious in particular. Whatever purchase the Freudian and post-Freudian heritage might be grappling to maintain at a moment when the individual, bourgeois subject is supposedly eclipsed by “post-Oedipal” forms of subjectivity, this blurring and acceleration of the sense of self cannot yet be divorced from a dependency on the economic, political and social structures that petroleum has shaped as the dominant energy source of the modern era, and may even be one of petroculture’s signal effects. The simultaneous ubiquity and invisibility of energy as a matrix for experience and culture lead Patricia Yeager to posit the “energy unconscious” as a term to express the “different kinds of erasures” suffered by energy in textual representations,⁷ a move that follows Fredric Jameson’s theorization of the “political unconscious” as all of the historical convolutions of group affiliation and mode of production that a text must grapple with and resolve through various narrative and formal strategies.⁸ Deciphering the suppressed socio-political conflicts and traumas that structure a text and comprise its determinative, latent content becomes possible through careful attention to its various displacements, incongruities, stylistic innovations and condensations, reconstituting it as a vehicle for accessing historical realities that would otherwise remain obscure. The text in this understanding, despite its various tactics of displacement and deferral, is not merely an ideological machination or instance of bad faith, the debunking of which will provide access to some obscured, foundational realm of truth. Rather, the realities that a text absorbs and shapes into novel

Environment, eds. Imre Szeman, Jennifer Wenzel and Patricia Yeager (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017); Stephanie LeMenager, *Living Oil: Petroleum and Culture in the American Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); Timothy Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil* (New York: Verso, 2011); *Petrocultures: Oil, Politics, Culture*, eds. Shena Wilson, Adam Carlson and Imre Szeman (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2017); Petrocultures Research Group, *After Oil* (Alberta: Petrocultures Research Group, 2016); Antti Salminen and Tere Vadén, *Energy and Experience: An Essay on Nafthology* (Chicago: M-C-M, 2015).

⁵ Imre Szeman, “System Failure: Oil, Futurity, and the Anticipation of Disaster,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 106:4 (Fall 2007): 805–822.

⁶ Imre Szeman and Jeff Diamanti, “Beyond Petroculture: strategies for a left energy transition,” *Canadian Dimension* (Feb. 17, 2017). <https://canadiandimension.com/articles/view/beyond-petroculture-strategies-for-a-left-energy-transition>.

⁷ Patricia Yeager, “Editor’s Column: Literature in the Ages of Wood, Tallow, Coal, Whale Oil, Gasoline, Atomic Power, and Other Energy Systems,” *PMLA* 126.2 (2011): 309.

⁸ Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as Socially Symbolic Act* (New York: Routledge, 1983).

narrative structures would be inaccessible and un-representable but for the transformative dream work provided by a text's artifice.

Such a lens gives us new tools with which to examine the landscapes of petromodernity as well as the cultural fantasies that both respond to and help shape our experiences of such. Take, for example, the way so much shared public space in large, Western urban centres has been, since the end of World War Two, refashioned to accommodate automobiles and the lifestyles these vehicles enable. A landscape tailored to cars as the predominant form of transportation creates a disjunction between the privatized, comfortable experience of navigating space from within a car and the much greater resistance, danger and discomfort met by pedestrians, cyclists and other travelers who, by choice or necessity, navigate this system from outside the automobile's protective shell. This fracture puts a new twist in the old Marxist idea of estrangement or alienation (*Entfremdung*): whereas the capitalist mode of production is described as alienating workers from the process and product of their labour, from each other, themselves, the natural world and the human species as a whole, the act of driving *alienates us from this alienation*, providing a spurious sense of identity and continuity with the built environment, just so long as we experience it from behind a steering wheel.⁹ Strip malls, box stores, industrial quarters and parking lots are ugly and alienating spaces to navigate by foot, the zero-level of human experiences of motion. They become tolerable and even pleasurable, however, when experienced in motion, from the seat of a car; quite often, only when experienced rapidly and in passing are they aesthetically bearable. Furthermore, in a world of warming climates and unpredictable weather it is one of the diabolical ironies of petroculture that the last, relatively safe, comfortable space from which we might experience the natural world itself might be the privatized enclosure of an air-conditioned car.

In a world subsumed by automotive infrastructure, our experience of freedom is largely constrained to the twin acts of driving and buying things, without our necessarily being aware, at a conscious level, of the *attachment* to these behaviours that this systemic constraint fosters. Driving is one of the few, quotidian forms of freedom left to the array of subjects who compose the post-war fiction of a middle class. Furthermore, it is an activity that is still largely overcoded with fantasies of the masculine domination of space and distance. But when the structure of feeling related to this conditioning of desire and subjectivity is challenged, as it has been in the French example of the fuel tax threatening to increase the price of both car travel and commodities, protesters taking to the streets find themselves adapting the consumerist/automotive infrastructure to enact collectivist forms of agency that the normative uses of such spaces structurally attempt to foreclose.

Thus, even while the specific content of the Yellow Vest protests is reactively bound to petroculture's rapidly receding, largely white, masculinist visions of 'the good life,' their embodied enactment performs modes of collective desire and agency in excess of the regulatory and disciplinary measures that, supported as they are by law, economy and the built infrastructure, remain the unconscious and ubiquitous matrix for subjectivity and citizenship. By driving around and buying things we participate in the dream of petrol, which remains a hidden motor, a libidinal stain shaping desires, expectations and relationships. More accurately, it is petroleum that is *dreaming us*, even to the point of undermining the environmental conditions and democratic social structures that allow us to imagine a future our children and grandchildren might be able to inhabit. Such a predicament evokes the Freudian death drive: our strange attachment to that which harms us. Slavoj Žižek has famously described this as "the way immortality appears within psychoanalysis," propelling us to "the endless repetitive cycle of wandering around in guilt and pain," and as a passionate attachment "to a surplus which sticks out and derails the ordinary run of things."¹⁰ Such a description fits our uneasy, contemporary relationship with an energy regime that is disrupting the very lifestyles that depend upon it. But this cyclical motion also energizes its own contradictory moments of slippage, like the Yellow Vest protests, which, akin to the Lacanian sinthome, exhibit a kind of instinctual wisdom as they attempt to safeguard embattled subjectivities while attacking the very structures that make the intolerable deadlock possible. Petroleum, in this reading, binds "enjoyment to a certain signifying, symbolic formation which assures a minimum of consistency to our being-in-the-world."¹¹ It is that which destroys and sustains us at the same time, the loss of which threatens total

⁹ Karl Marx, "Economic and Philosophic Manuscript of 1844," *The Marx-Engels Reader, Second Edition*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1978), 70-81.

¹⁰ Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2009), 62.

¹¹ Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (New York: Verso, 1989), 81.

dissolution of the self, and social anarchy. We do not seem able to bear the thought of giving up our dependency on fossil fuel, and yet this is exactly what must be done if we are to survive. What might emerge from such a deadlock, given informed analysis and timely intervention, is a solution that transcends the coordinates of the impasse, pushing us beyond the outmoded cultural imaginaries that created the blockage and towards forms of solidarity that might prove truly progressive and novel.

If there is to be a future Earth fit for human habitation, its energy grids will comprise a combination of resources with a good proportion of wind, wave and solar in the mix. Such a shift entails, not just changes in technology, but also changes in how we relate to each other, our environment, and our sense of the past and future. The present crisis is an opportunity to make good on the promises for better, more equitable societies that our brief, amorous encounter with fossil fuels have made possible even while simultaneously thwarting and corrupting their realization. At the current moment, pervasive fumes obscure the way forward. In the absence of a well-articulated ideological vision, primitive, irrational drives can warp our judgment and mar our ability to clearly confront and respond to the urgencies of the situation.¹² Our journey towards a workable future thus requires that we transverse the many fantasies by which petroculture has beguiled and blinded us with the immense capabilities fossil fuels have mobilized for reshaping infrastructures, thoughts and feelings.

This adventure offers considerable opportunities for cultural criticism to expose the way petroleum remains a hidden but substantial element within contemporary narratives such as film and literary production, sometimes conspicuous by its absence, other times disguised by narrative and formal elements. As Amitav Ghosh argues, the dominant narrative structures of modernity are not well suited to registering the kind of environmental realities and collective forms of agency that might allow us to clearly perceive and respond to climate change. While relatively ghettoized literary productions, such as poetry, science fiction, fantasy and horror do provide techniques for representing the uncanny, numinous agency of the environment, such forces seem out of place in the most celebrated of contemporary literary forms, the realist novel. With its emphasis on individual moral agency on the one hand and a natural world that remains a relatively inert backdrop to human endeavor on the other, the realist novel as we have inherited it, argues Ghosh, cannot accommodate the unique kinds of climatological events that are becoming common in the Anthropocene. Nor has the novel been widely used to illustrate collective agency, a mode that is necessary to representing the work of innumerable people and processes that have incrementally but steadily delivered us to the instable environmental situation we now face. In light of such omissions, Ghosh asks us to imagine how our own art and literature will look to the readers of a perceived future:

...will they not look, first and most urgently, for traces and portents of the altered world of their inheritance? And when they fail to find them, what should they—what can they—do other than to conclude that ours was a time when most forms of art and literature were drawn into the modes of concealment that prevented people from recognizing the realities of their plight? Quite possibly, then, this era, which so congratulates itself on its self-awareness, will come to be known as the time of the Great Derangement.¹³

However, while Ghosh calls for new artistic strategies to frame and narrativize the collective challenges we currently face, a psychoanalytic register might also help uncover, in the received literary canon, voices whose moment of articulation might have preceded their conditions of intelligibility.

A world frozen over

“I was lost, it was already dusk, I had been driving for hours and was practically out of petrol.”¹⁴ So begins *Ice*, a post-apocalyptic novel that British writer Anna Kavan published in 1967. Anna Kavan is the name that Helen Ferguson adopted, borrowing it from one of the characters in an earlier novel, after the dissolution of her second

¹² I am drawing here from Lacanian analyst Leslie Chapman’s reflections on “Right-wing populism and the Real” from his blog *Touching the Real*, May 8, 2017, accessed Dec. 11, 2018. <https://therapeia.org.uk/ttr/2017/05/08/right-wing-populism-and-the-real-part-1/>

¹³ Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press), 11.

¹⁴ Anna Kavan, *Ice* (Penguin Classics, 2017).

marriage. As the last of her novels to be published before her death in 1968, *Ice* is unusual for its departure from the confessional realism that characterizes most of her work. Though named the best science fiction novel of 1967 by Brian Aldiss, *Ice* inhabits an hallucinatory realm between realist and sci-fi genres, charting a Kafkaesque journey through an unraveling world where time, space and identity have come unstuck in the midst of environmental catastrophe brought about by the aftermath of nuclear war.¹⁵ The first-person narrator exhibits a tenuous relationship with the world, confessing early on that, “Reality had always been something of an unknown quantity to me.”¹⁶ Drugs proscribed to address the trauma of a broken relationship produce in the narrator dreams and waking hallucinations in which the lost object of his desire appears “as a helpless victim, her fragile body broken and bruised,” the envisioning of whom elicits sadomasochistic pleasure: “These dreams were not confined to sleep only, and a deplorable side effect was the way I had come to enjoy them.”¹⁷ The narrator pursues this vision of *joissance* throughout the novel in the figure of a thin, albino woman, named only “the girl,” with white, blazing hair, “almost transparent skin” and “prominent, brittle wrist-bones.”¹⁸ As an emaciated cipher, the mirage-like image of the girl also refracts the environmental catastrophe that hounds the protagonists in the form of massive sheets of ice advancing across the continents, apparently the result of a nuclear winter but taking on cosmic significance as a revolt of the natural order against planetary life itself:

All night long freezing stars had bombarded the earth with ice-rays, which penetrated its surface and were stored beneath, leaving only a thin crust over a reservoir of ice cold. In this sub-tropical region, to see the ground white with rime and feel it frozen hard underfoot gave the impression of having stepped out of everyday life, into a field of strangeness where no known laws operated.¹⁹

This description of a “field of strangeness” could equally well capture the sense of the *unheimlich* that accompanies contemporary experiences of a changing climate.²⁰ It occurs towards the end of the novel, after the narrator has pursued the girl over sea, land and air, braving numerous hardships and adventures, and finally catching up with her in what was once a festive seaside town near the tropics. By the time he reaches the goal of his quest, dark clouds have engulfed the town:

I knew it meant only one thing: the glaciers were closing in. Instead of my world, there would soon be only ice, snow, stillness and death; no more violence, no war, no victims; nothing but frozen silence, absence of life. The ultimate achievement of mankind would be, not just self-destruction, but the destruction of all life; the transformation of the living world into a dead planet.²¹

This striking passage anticipates by more than a decade Foucault’s articulation of biopolitics as the moment when politics places the existence of human life itself under question.²² It anticipates, as well, more contemporary descriptions of the Anthropocene as a new geologic era in which humans have become a determinative geological force, with incalculable repercussions for planetary life.²³ But what is interesting about Kavan’s vision of planetary collapse in the context of contemporary, human-driven climate change is the way her constellation of characters and relationships provides a symptomatic topography for the kind of energy unconscious to which Yaeger and Gosh draw our attention. Arriving at an appreciation of this dimension will first require an examination of the psychological, interpersonal dynamics at play in the novel, analysis of which will then allow us to see the figure of petroleum lurking in the background, disguised by the apocalyptic, post-nuclear milieu.

¹⁵ Brian W. Aldiss, “Kafka’s Sister,” *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* Vol.3 No. 2 (1991):17.

¹⁶ Kavan, 4.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 164.

²⁰ Sigmund Freud, “The Uncanny,” in *The Uncanny*, trans. David McLintock (New York: Penguin Books, 2003):123-162.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 143.

²³ Contemporary use of the term “Anthropocene” to designate a new geologic epoch was proposed by Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer, “The ‘Anthropocene,’” *Global Change Newsletter* No. 41 (May 2000): 17-18. For some examples of how this idea has been addressed in critical theory and the humanities, see, Dipesh Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History: Four Thesis,” *Critical Inquiry* Vol. 35, No. 2 (Winter 2009): 197-222; Roy Scranton, *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene: Reflections on the End of a Civilization* (San Francisco: City Light Books, 1999).

An unholy trinity

The narrator and girl are complemented by a third figure, that of the imposing and formidable “warden,” creating a triad. The warden appears to be the alter-ego or fantasy-transformation of a painter we meet in the opening chapters of the book, the man whom the girl has married after she leaves the narrator. Powerful and overbearing, the warden has mesmerizing blue eyes that bend others to his will, and his sadistic confinement and abuse of the girl seems to sustain the protagonist’s desire as he struggles throughout the novel to “rescue” her while simultaneously being enticed by her predicament. After being introduced as the painter/husband, the warden subsequently appears in more mythic garb as the ruler of a remote, northern European fiefdom where he is described as “a law unto himself, not to be judged by the usual standards.”²⁴ His absolute dominion over the life and death of the girl constitutes the warden as a sovereign exception, while the latter inhabits the position of “bare life” that grounds his power, following the relationship Giorgio Agamben describes by which the exceptional figure of *homo sacer* legitimates biopolitical regimes of power through tacit connection with the sovereign.²⁵ Such biopolitical scenarios are common in apocalyptic imaginaries, where the stripping away of institutions and norms due to an exceptional crisis reveals power structures that are generally hidden from view. If we accept Agamben’s claim that “*homo sacer* presents the originary figure of life taken into the sovereign ban and preserves the memory of the originary exclusion through which the political dimension was first constituted,” then the girl in *Ice* is more than just a place holder to sustain the narrator’s fantasies of masculine agency and desire.²⁶ Rather, her fragile, emaciated form is linked to the deterioration of the brittle, frozen landscape itself, revealing these two registers, personal desire and the planetary apocalypse, as twin symptoms of the male narrator’s damaged psyche and the “originary exclusion” that formed its patriarchal structure. The specific, violent and ultimately petrocultural form this exclusion takes, however, remains obscure for much of the novel, disguised as it is by the dream work of the narrator’s own hallucinatory journey.

In *Ice*, the narrator’s feverish pursuit of the girl is framed by the imminent threat of social and environmental collapse—the complete loss of Earth’s biome—in the form of the impending ice age: without this calamitous situation, the warden might transform back into the aristocratic artist we meet in the opening chapters of the book. Indeed, many points throughout the novel offer intimations that both the warden and the girl are merely aspects of the narrator’s own conflicted and fragmented sense of self. At one point, we are given a flashback (or an hallucination) of an encounter the narrator experiences in the warden’s High House wherein the girl is sequestered in a sound-proofed bedroom “so that whatever took place there would be inaudible beyond its four walls”:²⁷

It was clear that [the warden] regarded her as his property. I considered that she belonged to me. Between the two of us she was reduced to nothing; her only function might have been to link us together. His face wore the look of extreme arrogance which always repelled me. Yet I suddenly felt an indescribable affinity with him, a sort of blood-contact, generating confusion, so that I began to wonder if there *were* two of us...²⁸

This and many other passages reveal the narrator’s Kafkaesque journey from modern civilization at the start of the novel to a mythical, northern realm, through many war-torn and ruined landscapes, to the sub-tropical city where he finally has a substantial encounter with the girl, to be a fantasy device sustaining both the displacement of his own aggressive tendencies onto the figure of the warden and the illicit *jouissance* he experiences over the suffering of the girl. Janet Byrne describes this triad as “a color separation of sorts: placed one on top of another, they make up a complex pattern of color, an intricate psychological texture, a disturbing opalescent color exposure” that reveals “the haphazard, unthinking way of life to which everyone had been reduced.”²⁹ The question raised by this perspicuous analysis is *which way of life?* In the novel, human society reverts, with a few notable exceptions, to residual, archaic

²⁴ Kavan, 39.

²⁵ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 83.

²⁷ Kavan, 37.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 85, italics orig.

²⁹ Janet Byrne, “Moving Toward Entropy: Anna Kavan’s Science Fiction Mentality,” *Extrapolation* Vol. 23 No.1 (1982): 9.

forms where mere survival in the midst of brutal violence dominates. But where Byrne detects an ahistorical, cosmological vision of entropy informing the way these three characters become “more vivid” as the plot advances, without them ever fusing together, from the perspective of the energy unconscious the trinity of warden, narrator and spectral girl do indeed coalesce, revealing themselves as so many refracted strata of the rainbow prism of petroleum.³⁰

From desire to drive

Throughout much of the novel, the girl is reduced to the role of a passive victim whose engagements with the narrator consist of flight, resistance and refusal. By the time he finally catches up with her, however, in a beachside house in the sub-tropical city about to be engulfed by advancing glaciers, she has found a sense of relative autonomy and a voice that now confronts and challenges the narrator. After treating him in a supercilious, dismissive and taunting manner, the narrator presses her and she breaks down in tears, confessing her motivation: “Whenever I see you, I always know you’ll torment me ... kick me around ... treat me like some sort of slave ... if not at once, in an hour or two, or next day ... you’re sure to ... you always do.”³¹ In response to this, the narrator confesses: “I was startled, almost shocked. The words presented a view of myself I much preferred not to see.”³² This is the precise point where the warden and narrator do seemingly merge, for the former does not again appear after this late moment in the text. Leading up to this turning point, however, the narrator has already become, by slow degrees, akin to a “law unto himself,” taking enjoyment in the subterfuge, betrayals, thefts and murders that his pursuit of the girl necessitate as he navigates the war-torn landscapes of an unraveling planet. This transformative process provides a glimpse into the mechanisms of *drive* that underpin the theatre of desire sustaining the action of the plot. For, though the narrator regularly exercises cunning, dissimulation and violence in his pursuit of the girl, it is not until the last leg of his journey, when he commandeers the military car of a fallen soldier and plows through a border security detail that he seems to really start enjoying himself. Janet Byrne singles out *Ice*’s “most expressive single metaphor” as “a deathly ride in a car that seems not to be driven but instead has assumed a power of its own which it imputes to the paralyzed driver.” She goes on to note how cars “appear everywhere in [Kavan’s] writing in the most unnatural spots,” arguing that “Fleeting connections with these heavy mechanized animals give Kavan’s characters the sense of real-world power that they normally lack.”³³ Byrne’s observations here strongly evoke an energy unconscious, asserting a kind of technological fix to the fragmentation, restlessness and emasculation experienced by the narrator:

The chase had a bracing effect on me. Singlehanded I had defeated the organized force which had been used against me. I was stimulated, as if I had won a fast and exciting game. At last I felt normal again, my old self, no longer a despairing traveller in need of help, but strong, independent, powerful. *The mechanical power I controlled had become my own.*³⁴

The restorative power that returns the fractured, tormented narrator his sense of agency and identity is the energy of petroleum, several cans of which he discovers in the back of the car, “far more than I needed to get to my destination.”³⁵ It is the same energy the narrator lacks at the opening of the novel when we first encounter him, lost and almost out of gas, on his way to visit the artist and the girl, his former partner, in their country chateau.³⁶ At the moment of restoration, mediated by the petrol-powered armoured car, the narrator also articulates the logic of drive that has hitherto fueled his adventures from the back seat, as it were. What he experiences is a sense of pleasure:

I was pleased with my achievement, and with myself. I did not think about the killing involved. If I had acted differently I should never have gotten here. In any case, the hour of death had only been anticipated slightly, every living creature would soon perish. The whole world was turning

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Kavan, 178.

³² Ibid.

³³ Byrne, 9-10.

³⁴ Kavan, 163, italics mine.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid., 3.

towards death. Already the ice had buried millions; the survivors distracted themselves with fighting and rushing about, but always knew the invincible enemy was advancing, and that wherever they went the ice would be there, the conqueror, in the end. The only thing was to extract what satisfaction one could from each moment. I enjoyed rushing through the night in the high-powered car, exhilarated by the speed of my own skillful driving, by the feeling of excitement and danger.³⁷

Here, the narrator confronts what he later recognizes as “all my pointless rushing from place to place” and replaces it with a focus on “the ceaselessly shrinking fragment of that time called now”³⁸, but the form this recognition and reversal takes is only seemingly paradoxical once one takes into account the petro-logic of drive: in the midst of impending, environmental collapse, the narrator takes pleasure in the act of driving itself, the now placated girl beside him in the passenger seat: “All I wanted was to get into the car and drive and drive, until I was somewhere far away where I could forget all this.”³⁹ Such a constriction of temporality coupled with the flattening of space evokes Fredric Jameson’s reflections on the antinomies of postmodern culture, whereby “time has in effect been reduced to the most punctual violence and minimal irrevocable change of an abstract death,” and is transformed into space itself through the repetition and reiteration of the same.⁴⁰ The compulsive nature of this imperative coupled with spatial-temporal implosion suggests we are in the presence of the unapproachable vanishing point of the Real, where the collapsed signifier announces itself through a series of uncanny, experiential effects. Throttling through the snow and ice, in the shadow of the advancing glaciers, the reconciled man and woman find solace in the warm interior of an automobile:

Human life was over, the astronauts underground, buried by tons of ice, the scientists wiped out by their own disaster. I felt exhilarated because we two were alive, racing through the blizzard together ... The world seemed to have come to an end already. It did not matter. *The car had become our world*; a small, bright, heated room; our home in the vast, indifferent, freezing universe.⁴¹

This apocalyptic vision of violent, petrol-driven reconciliation sutures the gendered, interpersonal, psychological and environmental tensions that propel the plot of *Ice* in the same manner that the real-world practice of driving provides an anodyne to the alienation from self, other and environment produced by late capitalist petroculture. Though we ostensibly use cars to get *somewhere else*, in a world that has been so thoroughly reshaped to foster automotive and consumer desire, all somewheres tend to blur into an icy sameness while the pleasure of driving becomes an end in itself. Herein lies one of the central contradictions of car culture: a world shaped in the image of petroleum becomes increasingly hostile to grounded, human relationships and experience, to the extent that one of the few, remaining spaces of refuge becomes the interior of a car. Petroleum perpetuates itself, refashioning the world in an accelerating loop, capturing human desire for difference and transformation in a compulsion to repeat akin to the death drive.

Conclusion: beyond the prism of petrol?

Though steeped in cold-war imagery of a nuclear winter, Kavan’s novel speaks down the decades to us, the inheritors of the hydrocarbon age, for whom the figure of “the frozen vacuum of an ice age, life reduced to mineral crystals”⁴² evokes the mineral heritage of petroleum and the world it has wrought.⁴³ The novel’s most breathtaking stylistic innovations depict shimmering columns of ice, oftentimes equating them in some manner with the body of the girl herself. Céline Magot recognizes a political dimension in the layers of association the body of the girl is made

³⁷ Ibid., 163-4.

³⁸ Ibid., 177.

³⁹ Ibid., 176.

⁴⁰ Jameson, *Seeds*, 21.

⁴¹ Kavan, 181. *Italics mine*.

⁴² Ibid., 182.

⁴³ For a discussion of the imbrication of nuclear and petroleum energy regimes and their relation to aesthetics, see: Brent Ryan Bellamy, Michael O’Driscoll and Mark Simpson, “Introduction: Toward a Theory of Resource Aesthetics,” *Postmodern Culture* Vol. 26 No.2 (January 2016), Project MUSE, doi:10.1353/pmc.2016.0010

to carry, identifying her as “an ideological construction that reveals the effect of misogynistic pressures in a paternalistic society.”⁴⁴ A petrocultural lens allows us to further examine how the oldest and most fundamental of social hierarchies—the sustained inequalities of gender—are reproduced in the age of petroleum as masculinist forms of violence visited upon ourselves, each other and the planet. Cara Daggett offers the term “petro-masculinity” to describe how our use of fossil fuel serves “as a violent compensation for the anxieties provoked by both gender and climate trouble.”⁴⁵ Daggett follows the insights of petrocultural and postcolonial theorists in pointing out the violent, authoritarian forms of power that have attended the development and use of fossil fuels abroad, even while they were domestically hidden behind Fordist lifestyles predicated upon cars, suburbs, the nuclear family and the white, male wage.⁴⁶ With traditional forms of hegemonic masculinity under duress in the post-Fordist era, Daggett charts the emergence of a reactive hypermasculinity in which “burning fossil fuels can come to function as a knowingly violent experience, a reassertion of white masculine power on an unruly planet that is perceived as being increasingly in need of violent, authoritarian order.”⁴⁷ Anticipating the contemporary rise of Western, authoritarian politics by several decades, Anna Kavan’s novel provides a topographical portrait of the kind of violent, reactive, petro-masculinity examined by Daggett. Imprisoned in the confines of the car in the novel’s closing scene where the two characters propel themselves through the icy oblivion, the girl’s fate is intimated by the sense of comfort the narrator takes in the revolver he carries in his pocket.⁴⁸ The pair has become reconciled as accessories of a blind, unreflective, masculinist drive towards oblivion, propelled by the elemental substance—perhaps the true identity of the warden—which we can now recognize as hydrocarbons.

Read through the contemporary prism of petrol, Kavan’s vision of a world laid waste by advancing glaciers become a figure for the bleached oceans, paved farmlands, denuded rainforests and choked, polluted cities produced by fossil fuels. As the physical world around us shrinks through privatization, extraction and infrastructural encroachment, and as our sense of future possibilities collapse into an increasingly cramped iteration of ‘the now,’ like the protagonists of *Ice* we take refuge in the last space that promises a tiny bubble of protection, agency and enjoyment: the intimate, privatized space of the automobile. The expenditure of primal force provided by the accelerator brings momentary relief, sets the world in motion again about us, promising mobility, trajectory, escape, but the cost of this *jouissance* is the contribution each such moment makes to the billions of tones of carbon collecting in the atmosphere, warming the planet and wreaking havoc with weather, water and ecosystems. This compulsion to repeat is the logic of the death drive, and the genius of Kavan’s novel lies in the figurative language that her characters provide for mirroring our predicament back to us.

As an inspired emanation of the energy unconscious, *Ice* deserves a foundational spot in the newly forming canons of Energy Humanities and climate fiction. The visions of ruination and calamity that Kavan’s prose feverishly confronts serve as a contrast to what Bellamy, O’Driscoll and Simpson identify as the ideological, phantasmatic “resource aesthetic” of “exchange without waste or excess mirroring the belief in a balance of nature that will always right itself regardless of humanity’s incursions.”⁴⁹ The brief treatment provided here does not do full justice to the evocative insights Kavan’s novel might provide for contemporary ecocritical analysis, having omitted, for instance, a strange vision wherein the warden kills a polar bear and takes refuge, with the girl, under its bloody skin.⁵⁰ Passed over as well are those few utopian moments when the narrator apprehends an order that seems to transcend his fixations upon the sex, violence, disorder and speed. These centre mostly upon his fascination with a race of mysterious and seemingly pan-dimensional lemurs that he has attempted to study, before being derailed from this project by his obsession with finding the girl.⁵¹ Additional hints of an alternative world order are provided by the

⁴⁴ Céline Magot, “The Palimpsest Girl in *Ice* by Anna Kavan,” *Miranda* 12 (2016): 11.

⁴⁵ Cara Daggett, “Petro-masculinity: Fossil Fuels and Authoritarian Desire,” *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* Vol. 41 No.1 (2018): 29.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 30–31. Daggett’s analysis here draws from Timothy Mitchell’s *Carbon Democracy*, Andreas Malm, *Fossil Capital: The Rise of Steam Power and the Roots of Global Warming* (Brooklyn: Verso Books, 2016), and Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, trans. Joan Pinkham (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000), among others.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁴⁸ Kavan, 182.

⁴⁹ Bellamy et.al., np.

⁵⁰ Kavan, 159.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 142–3.

proto-socialist vision of a political movement working to maintain goodwill and communication in the midst of the mounting chaos.⁵² Such details provide a minor motif amidst *Ice*'s sounding notes of mounting cataclysm. However, when attended to with an ear sensitive to petroculture and the dream work of the energy unconscious, they might provide useful signposts to understanding and responding to our urgent, contemporary predicament.

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⁵² Ibid., chapter 8.