Endangered Hydrocarbons by Lesley Battler

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_Endangered Hydrocarbons_ by LESLEY BATTLER
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A cut-up collage for the 21st century, Lesley Battler’s _Endangered Hydrocarbons_ is required reading in a time of global warming and serious climate change. With each and every poem “derived from texts generated in a multinational oil company” (173), Battler makes the personal lyric not only political, but also environmental. Splicing together wellbooks, mudlogs, geological prognoses, meeting notes, histories, critical theoretical works, video games, and travel, real estate, and home décor magazines, _Endangered Hydrocarbons_ is an intertextual ecosystem organized into six parts: “Emergence,” “Frontier Exploration and Production,” “Manuscript Extraction,” “Under Attack,” “The Justice League of Global Oil,” and “Panacea.” Each section is teeming with poetic energy, which is perhaps one of the reasons why the poet reminds us that “art is work” (96). This reminder also refers us to real world resources, which fuel and form _Endangered Hydrocarbons_ itself. Without a doubt, Battler’s collection of poetry is a provocative, playful, and pitch-perfect debut made up of fragments from our petroculture.

From the get-go, _Endangered Hydrocarbons_ provokes the reader with its title, which creates a frame of fragility around the use of non-renewable resources while implicitly calling out producers and consumers bound to the oil industry in one way or another. Smartly drawing on the rhetoric around threatened animal species and evoking extinction as such, the title creates a sense of sympathy for the poetically enlivened chemicals most often found in crude oil. Paradoxically worried for what we are doing to the oily other, Battler’s title establishes a fundamental tension that exists today, one that is all too real when world leaders guzzle gas to fly to Paris to talk about climate change. In “Protocols of Global Oil,” moreover, a modified version of Battler’s title appears as one for the subsection of the poem: “action items to preserve / endangered Canadian / hydrocarbons.” After this title, the poem gestures to that which is threatening Canadian hydrocarbons—namely, our acquiescence when it comes to corporations plundering the Athabasca oil sands:

- Canada must take ownership of her homegrown terror
- silence species
dissidence
- increase speed and frequency of manifestos

The speaker uses the topical rhetoric of terrorism to incite the “silence species” to fully acknowledge an environmental injustice and, in turn, speak up through dissenting “manifestos.” In encouraging one to rethink and rebel, _Endangered Hydrocarbons_ also formally provokes us by disrupting reading conventions in the poem “Peak Oil Exile,” which looks both backward to “the Dark Age” (101) and forward to “the bitumen pools of YouTube” (102) while including a marginalized, vertical line of verse severed to no end: “Th / e / yea / r / 19 / 80 / see / ms / a / lon / g / tim / e / ago
The excessive line segmentation is not only an aesthetic shock, but also a reflection of the speaker’s traumatic experiences. Without an end stop, moreover, the lines suggest that “inj / ust / ice” is ongoing, especially in the context of environmental degradation through the consumption of hydrocarbons. The poem ends with a nostalgic desire for utopic ignorance and bliss: “even now I still dream of the days when i believed we / would deliver every one of us to a land untouched / by Peak Oil theories” (102). This idealism underscores the severity of our current ecological crisis. Battler offers more than just doom and gloom, however. 

_Endangered Hydrocarbons_ is seriously playful. In a section from “Unearthed” called “armistice,” the speaker revisits a previous relationship thanks to Facebook. Thirteen years after a “fatal split,” the speaker is surprised to find his or her former partner “scaling my Wall of Evil. lol” (15). The poem’s self-reflexive speaker uses Internet slang to out the jokey reference to Facebook. Today, this level of awareness is the norm; however, the poem surprises us when it transforms into a Facebook post that is left unseen except by us: “this post has been / removed or could / not be loaded” (15). While the poem plays with the personal, it also reveals an oil industry that can facilitate mending missed connections: “why not visit me / in Calgary. we’ll / touch base // i can expense / your airfare” (16). Natural resources resound in the background.

There are a number of other playful poems throughout _Endangered Hydrocarbons_ like “Offshore Décor,” a mock magazine reporting on things like how “fusion is in” (51) or how to “dress your subsea / Christmas tree / in cool fossils” (53); “Creative Reservoir Workshop,” a poetic translation of a PowerPoint presentation promoting ways to “boost your / payload 1,000 to 10,000 syllables / a page” (73); “The Leduc Award of Excellence,” a paneled conversation evaluating oil companies’ authored novels titled after petrochemicals; “Doing Business with Poets,” a series of guidelines for poetry readings by oil tycoons replete with comical, yet twisted references like “children hidden / in Oulippan labs” (143) or “a thousand / rimbauds / a day” (145); and “Tender Carbon,” a Steinian homage to Stein’s _Tender Buttons_, a modernist writer well versed with the lifeblood of her Ford Model T, “Aunt Pauline.” Battler’s “aleatory play” (96) is pointed at a world that does not fully see how it is driven by petroculture, and so we hear this critique in the sonic nature of _Endangered Hydrocarbons_, too.

Battler’s sounds are loud and lovely. In “The Petrochemical Ball,” the poet holds a microphone up to often unheard things like the sound of liquefied “pentanes” (C5H12), or organic alkanes with carbon: “SHIRRRK-ka pk / SHIIIIIRK-SH-ka / pok-shh kapoke-e’ / eee’ EEE” (57). Or “QUEEEE-AWNX,” which is a “sonic / anomaly” of “ozone / throat / music” (57). This is just the tip of the melting iceberg, however. _Endangered Hydrocarbons_ is brimming with uncommon words that not only drive the reader to the dictionary, but also appeal to the listener’s “acoustic receivers” (74) and reveal a novel lexical soundscape: “SurgiFrac” (18), “toluene” (28), “geocline” (29), “diorite” (34), “batholith” (34), “phalaropes” (47), and “aniline-tinise” (59). Moreover, using her “phrase tasers” (143),
Battler’s words work wonders on us both melodically and rhythmically. For instance, the “assonance madness” (96) appears in “Liquefied Natural Gas: The Jungian Interpretation” in these lines: “in an act of early / synchronicity / dionysiacs crack / childproof caps / off cryogenic vials” (62). Elsewhere, in “Hydrocarbons on the Eve of Revolution,” we hear lines like “sip a tubular double-double tread gas pedal” or “pop fault traps grope sealing cap slurp hope” (119). Here, Battler’s Dadaist tongue twisters foreground sounds that are symptoms of a hurried hyper-capitalism gutting and draining the Earth of its resources.

While we are listening to a line like “the hermeneutics / of pneumatic drills” (67), or any other one in Endangered Hydrocarbons for that matter, we might start to hear and better understand the nature of our petroculture today. Defamiliarizing business as usual, Battler’s much needed debut playfully pushes us to see the bigger picture in and through the micropolitics and environs of the poem.

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