

CALL FOR PROPOSALS

Energy, Empire, and Extractivism in the Age of Conrad

May 14-15, 2024, Université Paris Cité, France

**“The earth seemed unearthly. We are accustomed to look upon the shackled form of a conquered monster, but there—there you could look at a thing monstrous and free.”
Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, 1899**

Jean-Baptiste Fressoz’s *Sans transition* (2024) has shown that the succession of energy systems (from wood to coal, oil, nuclear, and renewables) has entailed exponential increases of all previous sources, as all sources are in a symbiotic relation of mutual accretion. For example, the *Civilisation du charbon* (2021) which Charles-François Mathis thoroughly documents from the reign of Victoria and beyond required drastic increases in the production of wood in Les Landes of France. In *La ruée minière* (2024) Celia Izoard has documented that renewables will require unprecedented exponential rates of increase in the extraction of minerals, if production levels of “energy, empire, and extractivism” are maintained. All the more acute, then, is our current crossroads, for recent scholarship in the field of energy humanities and environmental history has raised awareness of how the entanglement of extractivism and empires spells the entropic end of systems of life on earth. In other words, the autonomy of the human, perhaps an Enlightenment ideal, backfires, as humanity’s heteronomy returns but this time shackled to a monstrous free unearthly earth. From a “form” – with all the implications of “formalization” of matter – which human and even Humean custom believed by its habits to have conquered and contained, the earth becomes a “thing,” a *terra incognita* (Timothy Clark 2015). Such uncanniness, which we experience today as one product of “modernity,” does not sit well with our customary periodizations. As Jesse Oak Taylor writes, it “opens into a world of planetary synchronization in which the Victorian past becomes not merely proximate but densely, literally, atmospherically, and combustively present in the substance of a shared geological moment” (2016). The combusive presence of the age of Conrad is what this symposium proposes to make palpable.

The shared geological moment that we live in, however, needs to be nuanced as we extend our spatial compass. “Periodization is no simple matter when we consider that different modes of energy use persist simultaneously (the oil era is also the coal era and, for millions around the globe, also the era of dung, wood, and charcoal) not merely between different sites across the world but within them.” (Jennifer Wenzel 2017). These “other” energies abide in “our” white, carbon-intensive modernity, though sometimes forgotten or repressed. Turned invisible, repressed in the “basement of modernity” (Bob Johnson 2014) as the blind-spot of imperialism, systemic racism and capitalism, extractivism has allowed “a modern bourgeois self to evolve that was untroubled by the collateral human and environmental damage” – to which we might add the damage in the subaltern bodies of workers, enslaved people, as well as the bodies of non-human animals (François Jarrige 2017).

This symposium does not so much ask that we go *back* to the age of Conrad but that we embrace the combusive synchronicity and a-synchronicity of extractivism and empire to better understand our present and, by bifurcation (Bernard Stiegler) or imagination (Aurélien Barrau), heed the future. To do so, we invite papers that take earnestly what Graeme Macdonald has mischievously called “the resources of fiction” (2013). “Humanities research, Jamie Jones writes, is well suited to the tasks of imagining a future beyond fossil fuels and of understanding exactly how and why we have become so deeply enmeshed in destructive energy systems” (2019). “Energy, Empire, and Extractivism in the Age of Conrad” hopes to do just that.

Joseph Conrad’s (1857-1924) life and work offer a unique perspective on the emergence of the Anthropocene as a planetary condition. Conrad’s career as a sailor during the transition from sail to steam gave him an intimate understanding of the connections between the “world system” of the economy and the Earth system as manifest in winds, tides, and ocean currents. Conrad’s journeys touched on every inhabited continent, and exposed him to the violence of the extractivist frontier, most famously in the Congo which remains a vital site of both resource extraction (including the cobalt that is essential for both media technologies, like cell phones, and green technologies like electric cars). Conrad transformed these experiences into enduring works of modernist fiction that are, in turn, plagued by racism and misogyny. Thus, his work provides a particularly useful site at which to explore the intersections between empire, racism, extractivism and energy systems, and the question of how to work with historical artifacts that carry such toxic burdens. On the occasion of the centennial of Conrad’s death, this symposium welcomes papers attending to energy systems in Conrad, his contemporaries, or the subsequent writers and artists who have responded, or can be read in conversation with, his works. In different ways, energy, empire, and extraction challenge the concept of national and geographical boundaries. With Conrad’s writing as a particular case for study but also an instigation to investigate writers contemporary to him, across linguistic and geographical and what have become national borders, this symposium is particularly interested in

- new ways of reading literary texts that focus on extraction and energy, and invite or require changing reading paradigms (emergent unreadability, Anthropocene reading, for e.g.)
- the energy unconscious in texts that have not been read nor flagged as energy humanities texts (regionalism, travel writing, the international novel, the naturalist novel, the rise of psychoanalysis, pragmatist philosophy, for e.g.)
- what happens when we flip foreground and background and we put energy systems and extractive regimes at the fore of our interpretative modes
- ways in which literature testifies to, reveals, critiques, imagines or re-imagines these energy systems
- *mutatis mutandis*, in analogous cases, from any literature across the globe during or responding to the case of Conrad, the ways in which the Anthropocene, or its synonyms, emerge as a planetary condition in literature

A keynote address by Prof. Jesse Oak Taylor (University of Washington, USA) will explore Conrad’s “planetary modernism” as an experiment in the Earth System Humanities.

With “energy” as lodestone binding empire and extraction, papers might inhabit or veer in the following categories:

Environmentalism
World Literature
Modernism
The planetary
Energy humanities
Extractivism
Race and racism
Postcolonial studies
Anthropocene reading

Submission Details:

Please send a word of interest by **March, 1st**.
250-word abstracts and a brief biographical note due by **April, 15th** to
eeeCON24@gmail.com

Scientific Committee:

Thomas Dutoit, Université de Lille/CECILLE ULR 4074 LARCA UMR 8225
Cécile Roudeau, Université Paris Cité/LARCA UMR 8225
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Keynote Speaker:

Jesse Oak Taylor (University of Washington, Seattle, USA) is the author of *The Sky of Our Manufacture: The London Fog in British Fiction from Dickens to Woolf* (2016), which won both the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE) book award in ecocriticism and the Sonia Rudikoff Prize for a first book in Victorian Studies from the Northeast Victorian Studies Association (NVSA), and co-editor of *Anthropocene Reading: Literary History in Geologic Times* (2017) among numerous other publications, including multiple articles and chapters on Conrad. He is a recipient of the Bruce Harkness Award from the Joseph Conrad Society of America.

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