

Literature and Oil
Prof. Jennifer Wenzel
First paper assignment: Oil Inventory

Prompt:

In the introduction to his book *Orientalism* (1978), Edward Said writes:

"In the *Prison Notebooks* Gramsci says: 'The starting point of critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is, and is 'knowing thyself' as a product of the historical process to date, which has deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory.' The only available English translation inexplicably leaves Gramsci's comment at that, whereas in fact Gramsci's Italian text concludes by adding, 'therefore it is imperative at the outset to compile such an inventory'" (25).

Said quotes Gramsci in order to suggest the necessity of examining one's own personal relationship to the subject matter being studied. For Said (and Gramsci), creating an inventory of the "infinity of traces" that history has left in you is a first, necessary step in intellectual investigation. (The language of sedimentation is fortuitous!)

This assignment asks you to create such an inventory in terms of oil. What kinds of traces have history and contemporary society, with regard to oil, left in you? How do you "know yourself" in relation to oil? Or, how have you been coming to know yourself in relation to oil since this course began?

The scope of this assignment is 4-5 double-spaced pages: that is, rather brief. There are numerous ways that you might construe this assignment.

You might use one (or more) of the essays we've read as a point of departure, and reflect on your response to them in terms of your own relationship to oil, anxieties of resource depletion, and fictions of surplus. You might also take a more creative approach. An "inventory" is quite literally an organized list (e.g. retail stores take inventory of their stock), and you might use the form/genre of a list of oil's "traces" in you. You might write something like a "diary" that traces the presence of oil in an ordinary day. You might do something like Calvino's "map" of the narrator standing at the pump while emirs fold hands and Exxon accountants tally profits. You might create a graphic representation along the lines of Russell's *Oil, an Endangered Species*. You might write a brief (not-so?) fictional story that joins "running out of gas" to "running out of oil." You might do something else that does this work of examining the traces of oil in you, in a form that I haven't described.

ALTERNATIVE OPTION: You might choose to perform this "inventory" as a more conventional literary analysis of Calvino's "The Petrol Pump": that is, if you prefer, you can discuss the traces of oil as you see them running through one of the stories and the characters, as opposed to the way you see the traces of oil deposited in your own life. But remember Gramsci's word "infinity": consider both the obvious and less obvious traces of oil.

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The criteria for evaluating this assignment will be evidence of *thoughtfulness* and *serious engagement* with the ideas that we've discussed in the course so far. You should also take care with your work, and invest enough time in it that it reflects your thinking clearly and communicates it effectively: i.e., allow enough time to brainstorm, draft, rethink, revise, proofread.