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To cite this article: Imre Szeman & Jennifer Wenzel (2021): What do we talk about when we talk about extractivism?, Textual Practice, DOI: [10.1080/0950236X.2021.1889829](https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2021.1889829)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2021.1889829>



Published online: 19 Feb 2021.



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AFTERWORD



What do we talk about when we talk about extractivism?

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ABSTRACT

The term 'extractivism' has quickly become the name for every process and practice through which value is generated for capitalism. Given this conceptual ubiquity, what analytic function does this term actually serve? This Afterword to a special issue on Extractivism reflects upon possible reasons why scholars in the humanities have recently become interested in resource extraction, among which is the desire for one's scholarly work to respond to a gathering sense of planetary environmental crisis. Such engaged scholarship may, however, be premised on faulty assumptions about the realms of discourse and experience where it can have effects. Extending Stuart Hall's insights about the need for both commitment and circumspection regarding the work our research can do in the world, this essay considers the relationship between resource extraction as a moment and process under capitalism (or socialism), and extractivism as an ideology and cultural logic that permeates social imaginaries as well as literary and other discourse. Keeping an eye on the materiality of relations and processes dubbed "extractive" is one way of avoiding the conceptual creep, metaphorical inflation, synonymical restatement, and loss of analytical precision that is now developing in the use of the term 'extractivism.'

Taken together, the essays gathered in this special issue of *Textual Practice* examine the possible connections between literature and literary criticism, on the one hand, and political economy and its relationship to the earth, on the other. For the authors of these essays, for many readers, and for the two of us, such conjunctions are neither counterintuitive nor startling. In many corners of literary and cultural studies, including the environmental and energy humanities, the role of human actions in both causing and confronting environmental injustice is among the most urgent questions of our time, about which these interpretive disciplines can offer important insights. We see the essays gathered here in this special issue as a powerful contribution to this necessary endeavour.

In this Afterword, we want to look anew at some of the assumptions and premises that have sometimes undergirded arguments about literature and the environment – to read such ‘against-the-grain’ interpretations, once more against the grain – in order to breathe new life into what may have become dead metaphors. What interests us here are the ways in which extractivism and the literary or aesthetic are increasingly discussed in humanities scholarship as proximate – even identical – phenomena. Inspired by and in solidarity and conversation with these essays, we want to offer some observations about the possible limits and contradictions of such rhetorical moves, with a view toward forging a more rigorous and circumspect understanding of the work our work can do in the world.

What, in other words, do we humanities scholars talk about – or take as given, leave unspoken – when we talk about extractivism? And just why are we talking about extractivism *now*?

In his compelling and helpful Introduction, special issue editor Justin Parks rightly locates the emergence of the discourse of extractivism in Latin American political economy and political ecology, where *extractivism* names a mode of economic production in which ‘natural resources’ are taken out of one geographic location – often on a colonial periphery – and utilised as ‘raw materials’, that is, as inputs to industrial processes elsewhere.

One fundamental question to ask is whether (or when, in what circumstances) the process described above merits the name *extractivism*, rather than *extraction*. In other words, when does the *act* of resource extraction become a policy, an ideology, or a logic of extractivism? Extraction has served economies in other parts of the world, in colonial peripheries other than Latin America. In a perverse cycle, raw resources are dragged out of the earth and back to the colonial metropole, as feedstock for the manufacture of a ‘modernity’ to which the periphery is supposed to catch up – culturally, socially, and politically – but in the absence of the natural resources or industrial base that would make it possible to do so. But in what circumstances exactly do these acts of extraction expand into an ideology of extractivism, what Christine Okoth aptly calls here an ‘expansionary and portable extractive logic that permeates political and textual life’?

Consider, for example, the idyllic vision of ‘the good old days, before the arrival of the white man’, that Nelson Mandela recalled village elders talking about when he was a child:

Then our people lived peacefully, under the democratic rule of their kings and their *amapakati* [councillors], and moved freely and confidently up and down the country without let or hindrance. Then the country was ours, in our own name and right. We occupied the land, the forests, the rivers; we extracted the mineral wealth beneath the soil and all the riches of this beautiful country. We set up and operated our own government, we controlled our own armies and we organised our own trade and commerce. The

elders would tell tales of the wars fought by our ancestors in defence of the fatherland, as well as the acts of valour performed by generals and soldiers during those epic days.¹

Mandela's once-upon-a-time vision of precolonial order in southern Africa includes not only deliberative, democratic self-rule, but also what we might call resource sovereignty: collective ownership of 'land, forests, rivers', as well as subsoil mineral wealth. In the 'good old days', all of this natural wealth was disposed across and for the benefit of society as a whole, without class stratifications, Mandela remembered hearing the elders say. Speaking in the dock in 1962, on trial for incitement of a labour strike and for leaving the Republic of South Africa illegally, Mandela called forth this vision of happier days both as a rebuke to the apartheid present, and as a model for what could be: a post-apartheid society along the lines of the non-racial, democratic South Africa envisioned in the 1955 Freedom Charter, which pledged that 'the mineral wealth beneath the soil, the Banks and monopoly industry shall be transferred to the ownership of the people as a whole'.²

Does the 'extract[ion] of wealth beneath the soil' envisioned here merit the name *extractivism*? For Mandela in his moment, the answer would surely be no, since resource sovereignty was understood to underwrite those just and democratic societies of the imagined past and future. We can point to any number of actually-existing postcolonial states for which nominal political sovereignty has entailed either continuing extraction and export of natural wealth to former or newfangled colonial powers, or the capture of natural wealth by national elites – as in Thomas Waller's incisive analysis of Mozambique in this special issue.³ Perhaps counterintuitively, we might also say that visions of a just human society that are *premised upon* and undergirded by the extraction of natural wealth would be extractivist at their very core. Recall Dipesh Chakrabarty's lyrical observation, 'the mansion of modern freedoms stands upon an ever-expanding base of fossil-fuel use'⁴—a powerful image that suggests the increasingly unstable, hollowed-out foundation upon which petromodernity stands.

The contradiction here is that extractivism can name (at least) two very different things: either ruthless looting of the environment for the benefit of a distant few – in short, colonialism – or a developmentalist ideology of social welfare premised on the extraction of natural resources – in short, postcolonialism, if we take this term in its original sense of the reclamation of sovereignty or statehood by the peoples of a colony. As evidenced by twenty-first century neo-extractivisms in Latin America, which constitute renewed attempts to use extraction to enable social developments yet to be delivered, postcolonial extraction can look a lot like its colonial counterpart.⁵ Yet these two moments and two rationales for extraction are distinct, identifying different configurations of power and privilege in relation to the use

of natural resources. In his satiric 2008 novel *The Wizard of the Crow*, Kenyan novelist and critic Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o captures these multiple senses of extractivism with the sardonic slogan, 'A loot-a continua'. Ngũgĩ's dark pun on the anti-imperialist refrain, *a luta continua* (the struggle continues), indicts both the neo-imperialist alliances of postcolonial states and local elites with 'big American, European, and Japanese companies' in extracting 'forests, ... [or] any natural resource', and also the fundamentally attritional orientation toward ecosystems implied in extractivism: 'They knew how to take but not to give back to the soil. The unregulated clearing of forests affected the rhythm of the rains, and a semidesert was beginning to creep from the prairie to the hills.'⁶

The relations between extraction as a concrete, physical practice, on the one hand, and extractivism as the cultural and ideological rationale that either motivates extraction or is the consequence of it, on the other, are necessarily complex and difficult to untangle. Helpful in this regard are William Cronon's observations about the deleterious implications of the ideology of wilderness in the United States. Among these implications, Cronon identifies a putatively environmentalist impulse that 'tends to cast any use [of nonhuman nature] as *ab-use*, and thereby denies us a middle ground in which responsible use and non-use might attain some kind of balanced, sustainable relationship'.⁷ Cronon argues that only by forging 'an environmental ethic that will tell us as much about *using nature* as about not using it' could we begin to 'learn ways of imagining a better world for all of us: humans and nonhumans, rich people and poor, women and men, First Worlders and Third Worlders, white folks and people of colour, consumers and producers – a world better for humanity in all of its diversity and for all the rest of nature too. The middle ground is where we actually live. It is where we – all of us, in our different places and ways – make our homes'.⁸ Four decades earlier, Raymond Williams made a similar point about the role of nature in the forging of human cultures: 'I believe the central problem of our society, in the coming half-century, is the use of our new resources to make a good common culture; the means to a good, abundant economy we already understand'.⁹ For both Cronon and Williams, an environmental ethic does not rule out the use of non-human nature *in toto*. It names, instead, a more complex and challenging orientation than seems to be presumed in many expressions of environmentalism, which as a founding principle look askance at the human use or disturbance of nonhuman nature.¹⁰

The central importance of natural resources in the practice and analysis of extractivism thus demands further thinking about this use (and abuse) of nature. The key question, even more fundamental than the relationship between extraction and extractivism, is this: by what set of imaginative, cognitive, economic, and other material operations does nature *become* figured

as a resource? (Consider, for example, a question that both of us have considered in our work: how do fossils become fuels that power both engines *and* imaginations?) Too often, nature is always-already construed as ‘natural resource’, an orientation that can be described as a ‘resource logic’, in which humans understand nature primarily as something other than themselves, disposed for their use, and subject to their control. This orientation aligns with what Andrei Terian describes in this special issue as ‘extractive discourse’, and with Laura Castor’s observation that ‘liberal economic theory’ posits the exploitation of nature as a “‘natural’ right”. In resource logics, nature has always-already entered economics as ‘natural resources’: stuff-waiting-to-be-sold-and-used, along the lines of what Martin Heidegger called *das Bestand*, the standing-reserve.¹¹ (And, as C. Parker Krieg helpfully reminds us here, Heidegger locates this orientation toward nature in the *Ruhrgebiet*, Germany’s version of ‘coal country’.) Following Cronon’s and Williams’s line of thinking, the ‘abuse’ at work in resource logics inheres not so much in enfolding nonhuman nature within human economic activity, but instead in construing relations with (and the value of) nonhuman nature primarily, or even solely, in *economic* terms, and further, in a particular mode of the economic: capitalism. When nature appears before us solely as natural resource, other kinds of relation and value – ecological (including human flourishing within ecosystems), spiritual, cultural, aesthetic – are disregarded, becoming unthinkable and sometimes even materially unavailable, when ‘tak[ing] without giving back to the soil’ becomes the norm.¹² It is this framing of the operations of resource logics that has come to be understood as extractivism, which we would venture is becoming one of the predominant ways of imagining human relations to the non-human in environmental discourse today.

Given the exponential growth and intensification of resource extraction in recent decades, often facilitated by new technologies, as well as the mounting evidence of their attendant environmental and social harms, critical attention to these processes across the academic disciplines is obviously necessary. Yet, we might ask, what are some of the limits and unconsidered implications of this emergent discourse in the environmental humanities around extractivism?

First might be the question of travelling theory: how well do the geographical, politico-economic, and material-ecological relations named by *extractivism* translate beyond a Latin American context, or across time from the early phase of colonial conquest in the sixteenth century to the twenty-first-century present? This question is raised explicitly by Terian, and tacitly by other authors’ attention in this special issue to sites in Romania, Ukraine, Saudi Arabia, Mozambique, Ghana, the U.S. Gulf Coast, and New Mexico; it lies, too, at heart of Parks’s instructive assessment of ‘resource poetics’ in Appalachia. Indeed, the itinerary of our own

argument, ranging across worlds and continents, assumes a considerable conceptual reach and mobility for extractivism. Still, perhaps it is better to write of *extractivisms*, in order to attend carefully to the dynamic and diverse particularities of relation across space and time.

Second might be the risk of conceptual creep and adjectival ubiquity. Just as *Anthropocene* seems to be increasingly – and often rather loosely – invoked as a new synonym for modernity, there is a danger that *extractivist* may become the adjective and epithet *du jour*. Along with longstanding invocations of neoliberal globalisation, ‘settler colonialism and extractive capitalism’ (to cite one recent expansionist account of extractivism) have now been added to an excoriating litany of exploitative badness – that is, the villainous forces shaping the past and present and deranging the future.¹³ Our concern about this litany derives not from any doubt about the malevolence of these forces; rather, we wonder about the vitiating effects of a lack of terminological precision in adjectives whose modifying, specifying force threatens to dissolve into synonymic restatement. In too much discourse today, all colonialisms are settler colonialism, and all capitalism is extractive, just as a notional neoliberalism has long been the very air we breathe. Instead, what if we hold on to extraction as a specific moment in, or aspect of, particular versions of economic production, with implications for labour, value, and profit? This approach would insist upon understanding extraction (or extractivism) not as a synonym for capitalism but as one potential aspect of it, which stands in dynamic relation to other parts (and which also, as is sometimes forgotten, played an important role in other economic modes, not least the political ideology and technological developmentalism of the former Soviet Union). With regard to the particular role of extraction within capitalism: Is the metabolic rift between country and city identified by Marx (and traced through cultural imaginaries by Raymond Williams) properly described as *extractive*?¹⁴ How are neoliberalism’s promises premised on extraction? Are all instances of privatisation or asset-stripping to be understood as ‘extractivist’, rather than only those which involve things like land enclosures or mining concessions? What, we ask, is *extractive* (or *extractivist*) about extractive capitalism, if, as Imre Szeman has observed, extraction is on its way to becoming simply ‘the name for any process through which value is generated for capitalism’?¹⁵

The answer, we think, must have something to do with materiality. Extractivism demands critical attention to the stuff of nature upon which capitalism (or socialism, for that matter) does its work of accumulating surplus value. The itineraries of material flows charted in extractivism’s Latin American genealogy indicate several kinds of rift – geographic, social, metabolic/ecological – that create disjunctures in the value extracted from, produced by, and returned to sites of extraction and the lifeworlds in which they are embedded. And if materiality *matters* in these ways, then the use of

extractivism as a conceptual umbrella term may be inadequate, in at least two ways: first, inadequate to describe the variety of social relations constellated around different kinds of resources – not only fossil fuels, but also, say, ores, rubber, bauxite, tin, lithium, sugar, cacao, diamonds, gold, lumber, etc.; and second, inadequate to describe how these different resources and relations register in, or otherwise intersect with, cultural production.¹⁶ That is to say, to the extent that one might want to speak of an extractivist aesthetic, there is perhaps not one such aesthetic, but many.

More simply and crudely, in the terms laid out above, we might say that *extractivism* names a human instrumentalisation of nonhuman nature: the use of nature only as a means toward human ends – or, to be slightly less crudely universalist, a means toward the ends of some subset of humans. The key point is that extractivism, in this specifically material and ecological sense, is only one form of instrumentalisation among many others. In the proliferation of extractivism-talk, however, we notice another troubling aspect of conceptual creep. Enlisted to describe other kinds of exploitative relations – say, among humans, or between humans and other sorts of things, such as texts – ‘extractivist’ expands into a synonym for ‘instrumentalist’, in which use implies abuse. This metaphorisation, we argue, involves a simultaneous dematerialisation, losing the very thing that gives extractivism its conceptual bite.

This dematerialisation has rather different implications, depending upon what sorts of relations are being described as extractivist. As Thomas Waller helpfully explains with regard to political economy, contemporary resource extraction under global capitalism has become deeply entangled with broader trends toward financialisation, so that profits are to be made more upon dematerialised *abstractions* of money than upon the gritty materiality of ‘raw materials’ themselves, in ways qualitatively different from earlier transformations of resources into money. This example offers an important insight about the close and sometimes counterintuitive relationships between extraction and abstraction, words that come from the same Latin root, even if they name putatively distinct processes of ‘taking out’ and ‘taking from’.

The proliferation of extractivist metaphors outside the realm of economic production has a more troubled, often unconsidered relation to the problem of dematerialisation. Particularly tricky are the slippages entailed in the reflexive gestures of literary critics and other humanities scholars who examine other kinds of production – of, say, knowledge, or literature and literary criticism – through the lens of extraction. ‘The colonialist theory of most efficient information retrieval’ is Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s apt formulation to describe the stance of First World-located feminists seeking to produce knowledge about or from – rather than with – women in the Third World.¹⁷ The isomorphism between this model of knowledge

production and models of economic production based upon resource extraction may seem evident, but the 'colonialist theory' invoked by Spivak is that of anthropology rather than political economy. The operations through which a person becomes a 'native informant' are not identical to those through which nonhuman nature becomes a 'natural resource'.¹⁸ Edward W. Said taught us long ago to recognise disciplines across the humanities and social sciences as modes of power/knowledge constellated in Orientalism and European imperialism. He also insisted, however, upon the varied, 'uneven exchange' among 'power political', 'power intellectual', 'power cultural', and 'power moral'.¹⁹ With regard to extractivism as a critical framework, Said's insight suggests that the potential gains of identifying congruences among various modes of (ab)using things (human, nonhuman, or inhuman; inanimate or inanimate; material or immaterial) to make or get other things, in situations of unequal power, may be far outweighed by the loss of conceptual precision and force necessary to understand and intervene in the interwoven politics of nature, labour, and knowledge.

With regard to literature and literary studies, the import of extractivist metaphors is complex and multivalent. Attention to the actual materiality of books or their digital equivalents – as in Christine Okoth's insightful consideration here of TV, computer, and tablet screens – is a salutary reminder of the crucial terrains and itineraries beyond that magical relay between word, eye, and mind that are implicated in the act of reading. The publishing industry exists within global capitalism, not in hygienic isolation from it. Recent theories of world literature modelled after Immanuel Wallerstein's world-systems analysis assume a congruence between economic and literary peripheries. This framework, which attends to the ways that literature is imbricated within economic production, is able to grasp, for example, how the extraction and export of bauxite from Ghana can be read through the same lens as the production of a book like Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968). Tracing continuities in economic and affective relations before and after Ghana's Independence, Armah's novel grounds the postcolonial disillusion of its unnamed protagonist partly in his job as a railway employee responsible for tracking the movement of trains carrying minerals and timber from the Ghanaian interior to the 'waiting Greek ships in the harbor'. The 'wailing whistle of an old steam engine ... brought with it a vague taste of sorrow.'²⁰

Indeed, this link between economic and literary production was the key insight in Jennifer Wenzel's 'Petro-Magic-Realism: Toward a Political Ecology of Nigerian Literature', which identified similarities among what we might now call 'extractive' economies involving commodity exports of palm oil, petroleum, and literature-for-publication by metropolitan presses; the nineteenth-century Euro-African trade in palm products was itself a shift toward 'legitimate' commerce after the British abolition of the

slave trade.²¹ Yet what does it mean to understand *literature* as a commodity within the translocal itineraries assumed by the framework of extractivism? Terian argues here that ‘magical realism was indeed born as a reaction to extractivism’ – an observation that must be juxtaposed with arguments by critics like Graham Huggan, Sarah Brouillette, Stephen Slemon, and Michael Valdez Moses, about the ways in which magical realism also functions as a marketing category for publishers or a homogenising catch-all notion of exotic ‘difference’ for readers.²² If literature is something like an extractable commodity, then its very production is subject to pressures of demand. Waller emphasizes the pressure of such metropolitan expectations on literary production; he argues suggestively that the spectral non-referentiality of João Paulo Borges Coelho’s *Campo de Trânsito* must be understood in terms of the ‘correspondence between dematerialised forms of capital and the abstractions of narrative modes’, in which the ‘hemorrhaging of domestic capital’ registers stylistically as a refusal of ‘local colour’.

Learning to read for extractivism while not *doing* extractivism is, it seems, no simple matter, given these ways in which readers are implicated in the economics of literary production, as well as the proliferation of mining metaphors to describe the acts of reading and interpretation. Yet is reading *really* so similar to mining? Is meaning *really* a finite, non-renewable resource, whose production depletes the source (and immiserates those at the site of extraction)? Is the energy consumed or produced by processes of interpretation truly like the burning of fossil fuels? Cronon might argue for a ‘middle ground,’ an interpretive relation of use that is not abuse. With regard to the recent emergence of energy humanities, we would situate Elizabeth Barrios’s central claim – that literary critics did not learn to read oil novels as instances of petroculture until they confronted the threat of climate change – within a much longer, geographically-varied history, to which her own essay attests with its attention to a decades-long tradition of oil novels and petrocriticism in Venezuela.

Literary, literary-critical, and broader civic attention to fossil fuels (perhaps, interestingly, less so to other kinds of extraction) has long been driven by crisis, whether (to name only a few) the dislocations of the ‘oil encounter’ at drill sites around the world, the oil shocks of the 1970s (and subsequent scarcity panics), U.S. wars in the Persian Gulf, the execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa in Nigeria, and the one-two punch of Hurricane Katrina and the Deepwater *Horizon* blowout in the U.S. Gulf Coast. As Frederick Buell has shown, denial about fossil fuels has been punctuated by these moments of periodic crisis and concern, which predate sustained public concern about climate change.²³ Barrios’s excavation of a robust, longstanding tradition of fiction and criticism in Venezuela implicitly contradicts claims (such as those famously made by Amitav Ghosh, writing in 1992, in the wake of the first Gulf War) about the dearth of ‘oil novels’ or lack

of critical interest in them, although this exception might well reinforce the rule for which Ghosh argues in his more recent book.²⁴ Remember Chakrabarty's assessment of the connection of democracy with energy: seldom has fossil fuel use been explicitly connected with the shape of political forms, and their possibilities or impossibilities (which is not the same as saying that oil has not had a role to play in geopolitics).²⁵ Despite the constitutive role played by fossil fuels and other forms of extraction in shaping *every* aspect of *every* element of modernity, both in and beyond energy crises, literature has rarely imagined extraction to be anything more than a means of achieving power and money, when it has attended to energy and extraction at all.

Given this constitutive absence, one which is not filled in by recent literary-critical attempts to locate oil fictions wherever they might be, the consolidation of the energy humanities still offers an important transnational forum and comparative perspective to conversations that had previously been contained within national or regional literary traditions (e.g. Venezuela/Latin America or Nigeria/Africa). The lesson we draw from reading Barrios's essay, given its attention to the Venezuelan example, is the imperative to historicise and provincialise claims about the 'we' constituted by petromodernity, so that energy humanities does not entrench as an unexamined universalist norm what are actually bourgeois North American subjectivities shaped by 'fictions of surplus', and by distance from sites of extraction.²⁶ Indeed, we find surprising and instructive resonances among Okoth's account of the historical intersections between mineral extraction and racial subjection at Elmina Castle (whose very name bears the trace of these superimposed economies), Andrei Rogatchevski's account of miners' underground solidarities in Ukraine and beyond, and Krieg's account of 'coal optimism' in Appalachia. These fascinating essays resist the too-easy analytic gesture of simply lumping in humans with nonhuman nature as objects of extraction; they tease apart processes involving the extraction of wealth from beneath the soil and above it, on the one hand, from the related but distinct operations of racialisation or class stratification and solidarity, on the other. In his account of what Stephanie LeMenager might call *loving extraction*, Krieg attends to ambivalent attachments of those whom an extractivist framework might describe simply as exploited or immiserated.²⁷ Affect seems to follow a different trajectory in the imaginary than resource flows do in global capitalism – an insight with important implications for politics, as we suggest below.

Our argument up to this point has focused on the dangers of conceding too much conceptual ground to a concept of extraction that has become generalised and generalisable. One of the perils of extractivism is that it tends to flatten the ground, collapsing historical, geographical, and cultural distinctions that should be important to fully understanding the specific operations of extraction, including the ideologies and imaginaries that surround it at

any given time and in any given space. There is a second peril that emerges out of this generalisation of extraction, in what might seem at first glance to be a contradictory process. Extractivism enables extraction to become a process writ large, the name for *any kind* of taking out or drawing out – whether of iron ore and oil, value, work, data, or meaning, or indeed any other process that appears to fit the mould. There's no problem *per se* with the metaphoric or rhetorical use of extraction to speak to the outcomes of different practices; literature professors have long urged their students to extract meaning from the texts they're reading, or to exploit quotes they borrow from others in order to make their own arguments. The problem we are pointing to emerges only when an equivalence is drawn between extraction of this kind – meaning, via the reading of a literary text – and a very different mode of extraction of different sorts of objects: mining coal, drilling for oil, harvesting timber.

Why have these broad connections been made? What critical impulse drives the use of extractivism to simultaneously flatten the ground and, at the same time, to expand the field of extraction to name incommensurable processes at work in very different kinds of practices and activities? For the two of us, the answer lies in a gathering sense of urgency and planetary emergency. Environmental literary criticism has taken on a difficult mission. Like other forms of contemporary criticism, the environmental humanities not only aim to interpret and understand (let's say, to keep things simple) representations of environment and nature within cultural expression, but also to assess the politics of texts, practices, and performances – and to intervene in these politics. This interpretive work – the work of making careful sense of multivalent processes of mediation – is carried out in relation to a set of questions that demand *immediate* answers: climate change and the threat posed by human activity such as extraction to everything on the planet, living and non-living. There is a necessary urgency to this work; there is a desire for critical writing to be part of the solution to climate change, to participate in whatever way it can in activating new relations and imaginaries that would, for example, take the place of resource logics. Everything depends on it.

But just how can literary criticism have an impact on the environment? How can it effectively take on the dual mission it has set itself as a critical practice? The two of us have certainly struggled with these questions ourselves, as we've wondered about how a professionalised practice with a very small audience composed almost exclusively of fellow professionals can intervene in climate change and other crises with the same impact that, for instance, movements of Indigenous people or large eNGOs have managed to do. As humanities scholars, what form does our politics take? Just whom are we speaking to when we write about processes like extraction? Pondering a similar set of questions, Lawrence Buell suggested that

professors and teachers of ecocriticism had an impact through a kind of 'trickle down' effect: students who took classes with environmentally-minded critics would slowly spread the word, so that environmental consciousness would move through the population like a virus and change dominant ideologies about nature subtly, but powerfully.²⁸ As we have all learned, some viruses do spread quickly. But others move very slowly indeed, especially given the number of students enrolled in English programmes, and the fewer still who take classes devoted specifically to ecocriticism.

Extractivism seems to offer a way around some of the anxieties and doubts that surround this nagging question of why we do the work we do, in the midst of the troubles we face. If *extraction* names simply the removal of natural resources from the earth, there really isn't very much that literary criticism can say about it, at least not for the reasons and with the effect it hopes to have by assessing extraction in the first place. There are other disciplines that speak to specific politics surrounding a site of extraction with more force than we do, and there are other voices – journalists, policymakers, those working for NGOs, filmmakers, and artists – who have more successfully raised attention to the systemic violence that attends extraction.

But note: the moment one adds the suffix *-ism* to the noun, extraction is transformed into a system or ideology, a representational and symbolic space linked to the use (and abuse) of nature-as-resource. Here, suddenly, extraction is made available to humanists, who can set themselves the task of naming and codifying the elements comprising this ideology, whether understood as extraction's backstory or the ongoing mechanisms that permit the violent continuation of extraction. The gritty materiality of extractivism is a way of getting one's critical hands dirty, in a good way. For literary critics, this work on ideology takes place in relation to literary texts, tracking how they tacitly participate in the production of extractivism, which is always understood in advance to extend well beyond the literary into other representational realms, or probing those texts that imagine themselves as also naming extractivism – a form of literary politics distinct from merely registering or representing extraction itself. By *naming*, we have in mind the kinds of moves that bring into focus the hitherto unsaid, unseen, tacit, implicit, ambient, air-we-breathe assumptions, norms, and forces that suffuse texts and lifeworlds alike – sometimes through a figure-ground reversal in which the taken-for-granted becomes impossible to ignore. One might say that a particularly sophisticated mode of such naming also looks reflexively at the critic's own practice and situation, so that possible (if problematic) homologues between, say, reading and mining loom large.

It is probably for this reason that extractivism gets written into all manner of practices. The presumption is that a dominant ideology is absorbed by

every practice, by every aspect of a given configuration of power.²⁹ Thus, once one starts reading for oil or looking for extractivism, one finds and names it everywhere – but on freshly flattened ground. And after such naming, then what? Out in the world, the digging continues. This is not to say that critical or pedagogical work has no effect, but to acknowledge that the site of its intervention is almost never the site of extraction. And that a critical goal set in advance of reading any given text is likely to find holy grails that impede a more complex understanding of the text, the world, and the critic's place in it. (Relevant here is the sometime reduction of 'theory' to a pre-constituted set of assumptions about the precise nature of social and political forces and practices, taken from outside the realm of the literary, and 'applied' to the text at hand, thereby demonstrating the validity of the theory – as opposed to attending to the modes of intelligence and forms of mediation at work within the text and the critic's relation to it, and how they intersect with those forces and practices in ways that the 'theory' cannot predict.) All too often, in other words, naming extractivism as an ideology to be interrogated means the critic knows in advance how to think about the text, rather than thinking with it, or watching it think.

At worst, the invocation of a word like *extractivism* may be a shortcut for establishing one's political *bona fides*, possibly in a litany of badness as described above. The invocation of a concept like Jacques Rancière's 'distribution of the sensible', for example, may assume that the critic can muster sufficient leverage or traction to accomplish the work of *redistribution*, while forgetting that critics and authors inhabit the regime of the sensible on which they hope to work.³⁰ Or that other kinds of redistribution – for which criticism and theory offer less immediate results – remain urgently necessary. And still, out in the world, the digging continues. The two of us worry, in other words, about these ways in which literature and literary criticism imagine for themselves a lead role in the game of politics that is almost in inverse proportion to their actual social import at the present moment – wanting, like Mungau in Borges Coelho's *Campo de Trânsito*, to see the world with bigger eyes than those we possess. As Krieg writes bleakly, there is a world of difference between literature understood as a mode of affect management, on the one hand, and undertaking 'material struggles for democratic control over the means by which society reproduces itself', on the other. A similar tension is at work in Parks's citation of Mark Nowak's trenchant query, "Where are the poems in dialogue with these global peoples' movements?". To put it all too bluntly: despite the laudable (and necessary) ethical and political aims that underlie the literary critical interrogation of extractivism, in the very worst forms of its expression it risks becoming simply a means of making it possible for criticism to believe itself to be participating actively in environmental change, by contributing disciplinary insights that can come from nowhere else. Okoth perhaps

has a similar concern in mind when she observes that literature's role is not merely diagnostic, 'pointing to sites of extraction across the globe and lamenting the state of ecological damage. Rather, literature can identify the forms that extraction produces and appropriate those same forms in pursuit of politically and culturally formal reinvention'.

The tenor of our reservations about some of the ways extractivism is being invoked might be misread as an argument in favour of 'postcritique'.³¹ None of the points we have made here are intended to suggest that literature and literary criticism don't have a politics or can't participate in political struggle because meta-critical methods of writing and reading are wrong *per se* in approaching the reality of extraction. But if they do have a role in political struggle, it is a more complex one than the current political imaginary of the environmental humanities (and, yes, much of the energy humanities, too) often suggest. In the hope for an effect that might take place with the speed, immediacy, and scale required for a political transformation to mitigate global warming, a critical reckoning with the *limits* of thinking, writing, and speaking may have been pushed aside. In 'The Politics of Utopia', Fredric Jameson reminds us: '[Utopia's] function lies not in helping us to imagine a better future but rather in demonstrating our utter incapacity to imagine such a future – our imprisonment in a non-utopian present without historicity or futurity – so as to reveal the ideological closure of the system in which we are somehow trapped and confined'.³² Here and elsewhere in his writing, Jameson (hardly a proponent of postcritique) examines a figure or genre not in order to directly assert its political capacities, nor to appeal to a public that he intends to transform via his criticism; indeed, one can see him cringing at the effort to lay his utopian cards on the table in *An American Utopia: Dual Power and the Universal Army*.³³ Rather, Jameson engages with the literary and its specific forms and functions in an effort to understand what we know, but also what we don't know. Acknowledging such limits can yield crucial insights into the operations and function of ideology; it can also produce insights regarding constraints on the political force of literature. If we were to reckon fully with the 'utter incapacity' to imagine a utopian future, extractivism would likely be approached with more circumspection. Any critical use of the concept of extractivism would also have to be attentive to the fantasy of direct political transformation contained in this concept, which may well limit and inhibit politics *precisely* because the concept seems so easily to affirm the politics.

The impulse to engage with extraction within literature derives out of a felt sense of urgency and responsibility that is certainly preferable to the alternative. The essays gathered in this special issue of *Textual Practice* offer inspiring evidence of the potential import of such critical practices. One of the most important things that these essays have helped the two of us to understand and articulate is that the political work of environmental

criticism may lie somewhat elsewhere than in the broad arenas that it may hope to engage and address, via extra-literary concepts such as extractivism. The Anthropocene and criticism of the concept do similar kinds of work, and face similar limits – they are ubiquitous in critical thinking attendant to the deep ideologies fostering environmental destruction, but almost nowhere present in broader public discussions of environmental futures.³⁴ In ‘Cultural Studies and its Theoretical Legacies’ (1992), Stuart Hall makes a point that resonates with the argument we have been making here. He writes:

Against the urgency of people dying in the streets, what in God’s name is the point of cultural studies? ... At that point, I think anybody who is into cultural studies seriously as an intellectual practice must feel, on their pulse, its ephemerality, its insubstantiality, how little it registers, how little we’ve been able to change anything or get anybody to do anything. If you don’t feel that as one tension in the work that you are doing, theory has let you off the hook.³⁵

On a first reading, it might seem as if Hall is dismissing the practice of cultural studies altogether, throwing his own rich and expansive practice as a critic in the dustbin. But this would be to miss the point he is making. Hall insists here that literary and cultural criticism needs to keep alive the pressure of the irrelevance many of us feel about the capacity of our work to have a political impact – even and especially in disciplinary formations, like cultural studies or environmental and energy humanities, that hope to engage the concerns and imaginations of ordinary people in the world, beyond the academy and its canons. Hall also warns us to be wary of the invocation of theories that ‘let you off the hook’, thereby easing these tensions, doubts, and frustrations; too often, using theory in this way pushes us in the wrong direction. To tarry with this tension would be to inhabit a different sort of ‘middle ground ... where we actually live’, in which ‘abuse’ would be something like a willed blindness to the real limits of intellectual praxis, even in a politically engaged mode. To Hall’s ‘people dying in the streets’, one could add climate change, or the social and environmental harms of resource extraction – issues too urgent for us to allow a too-easy use of theory to let us off the hook.

There is a work that literature can do, in narrating life both within and against the unbroachable limits of the experience of any given moment. There is, too, an essential work that criticism can do, but the two of us envision that work to consist not in jumping the walls that literary texts were unable to surmount, but rather in taking on the difficult task of understanding the character of these barriers, while attending to criticism’s own conceptual limits. Too often, a concept like extractivism lets us off the hook of the all-too-real and essential struggle of knowing just how to confront the material realities that attend resource extraction,

substituting words for politics, no matter how powerful those words might be.

Notes

1. Nelson Mandela, “Black Man in a White Court”: First Court Statement 1962’, in *The Struggle is My Life* (Pathfinder Press, 1990), pp. 201–40.
2. Congress of the People, ‘Freedom Charter’ (1955), reprinted in *Culture in Another South Africa*, eds. William Campschreur and Joos Divendal (New York: Olive Branch, 1987), pp. 242–45.
3. See, for example, Antony Anghie, *Imperialism, Sovereignty, and the Making of International Law* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005); and Conor Gearty, ‘Do Human Rights Help or Hinder Environmental Protection?’, *Journal of Human Rights and the Environment*, 1.1 (2010), pp. 7–22.
4. Dipesh Chakrabarty, ‘The Climate of History: Four Theses’, *Critical Inquiry*, 35 (2009), p. 208.
5. For analyses of the contemporary politics of extraction in Latin America, see Martín Arboleda, *Planetary Mine: Territories of Extraction under Late Capitalism* (New York: Verso, 2020); Thea Riofrancos, *Resource Radicals: From Petro-Nationalism to Post-Extractivism in Ecuador* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020); and Maristella Svampa, *Neo-extractivism in Latin America: Socio-environmental Conflicts, the Territorial Turn, and New Political Narratives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).
6. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, *The Wizard of the Crow* (London: Harvill Secker, 2006), p. 206.
7. William Cronon, ‘The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature’, in *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, (New York: W.W. Norton, 1995), p. 85.
8. *Ibid.*, pp. 85–86.
9. Raymond Williams, ‘Culture Is Ordinary’, in *Cultural Theory: An Anthology*, edited by Imre Szeman and Timothy Kaposy (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), p. 57.
10. An example of the ethic to which we point to here is Allan Stoekl’s articulation of ‘restrained sustainability’—a mode of ethical being-in-relation to nonhuman nature which is constitutively alert to the dangerous self-certainties which accompany all appeals to sustainability. See Stoekl, “After the Sublime,” After the Apocalypse: Two Versions of Sustainability in Light of Climate Change’, *Diacritics*, 41.3 (2013), pp. 40–57.
11. See Jennifer Wenzel, *The Disposition of Nature* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019), p. 148; and Martin Heidegger, ‘The Question Concerning Technology’, in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), pp. 3–35.
12. See Joan Martínez-Alier, *The Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cheltenham: Elgar, 2002), p.149. Such relations of practice to value are ubiquitous in environmental thought. For Wendell Berry, for instance, the ‘moral order’ determined by fossil fuel energy is wholly distinct from that shaped by the use of biological energy. See ‘The Use of Energy’, in *The Unsettling of*

- America: Culture and Agriculture* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1977), pp. 81–95.
13. Macarena Gómez-Barris, *The Extractive Zone: Social Ecologies and Decolonial Perspectives* (Duke UP, 2017), p. 6.
 14. The reference here is to Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1973).
 15. Imre Szeman, 'On the Politics of Extraction', *Cultural Studies*, 31.2-3 (2017), p. 444.
 16. It's for these reasons that we're ambivalent about the designation of hydroelectric power projects as extractivist, since they are not ruthlessly attritional in the same way as the removal of non-renewable minerals from the subsoil. Indeed, the 'Faustian model of development' cited here by Parks seems to understand itself as *anti*-extractivist, in the sense that it 'aims less for immediate profits than for long-range development of productive forces, which it believes will produce the best results for everyone in the end.' Our point is not to deny the significant displacements and unintended environmental consequences of large dam projects, but instead to insist on teasing out similarities and differences between various modes of energy production. One advantage of such circumspection and precision is that it draws attention to the ways that harnessing renewable energy at scale can indeed entail social and environmental harm in ways somewhat different from clearcutting forests or digging holes in the ground. The reference to the Faustian model of development is taken from Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (London: Verso, 1991), p. 74. See also Dominic Boyer, *Energopolitics: Wind and Power in the Anthropocene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019); and Cymene Howe, *Ecologics: Wind and Power in the Anthropocene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019).
 17. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *In Other Worlds* (New York: Routledge, 1988) p. 179.
 18. On the congruence between uneven relations of economic production and scientific knowledge production under colonialism and neo-colonialism, see Paulin J. Hountondji, 'Recapturing', in V.Y. Mudimbe (eds.), *The Surreptitious Speech: Présence Africaine and the Politics of Otherness 1947–1987* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), pp. 238–48. Showing how Africa has long been posited as the source of facts and data for Western theory, Hountondji outlines both an analogy and a complicity between economic extraction of natural resources and scientific 'extraction' of the raw materials of knowledge (Ibid., 240–42). (In other words, these processes are not only similar; one is the condition of possibility for the other.) The specificity of relation between economic and epistemological production is lost if these two modes are flattened into a diffuse, dematerialized 'extractivism'.
 19. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), p. 20.
 20. Ayi Kwei Armah, *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968), pp. 21, 23.
 21. Jennifer Wenzel, 'Petro-Magic-Realism: Toward a Political Ecology of Nigerian Literature', *Postcolonial Studies*, 9.4 (2006), pp. 449–64.
 22. Graham Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins* (London: Routledge, 2001); Sarah Brouillette, *Postcolonial Writers in the Global Literary Marketplace* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Stephen Slemon, 'Magic Realism as Postcolonial Discourse', in *Magical Realism: Theory, History,*

- Community*, edited by Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris (Durham: Duke UP, 1995) pp. 407–26; Michael Valdez Moses, ‘Magical Realism at World’s End’, *Literary Imagination: The Review of the Association of Literary Scholars and Critics*, 3 (2001): pp. 105–33.
23. Frederick Buell, ‘A Short History of Oil Cultures: Or, the Marriage of Catastrophe and Exuberance’, *Journal of American Studies*, 46.2 (2012), pp. 273–93.
 24. Amitav Ghosh, ‘Petrofiction: The Oil Encounter and the Novel’, *The New Republic* (March 2, 1992), pp. 29–34.
 25. See Matthew Paterson’s assessment of the alarming absence of attention to climate change in the field of International Political Economy. ‘Climate change and international political economy: between collapse and transformation’, *Review of International Political Economy*, forthcoming 2021. For Paterson, climate change means that ‘the world is unlikely to look sufficiently similar to our various current understandings of states-markets-firms, globalized capitalism, professional networks, imperialism, or whatever other underlying set of premises we base our IPE on’ (n. pag.).
 26. Imre Szeman, ‘Literature and Energy Futures’, *PMLA*, 126.2 (2011), pp. 32–36.
 27. Stephanie LeMenager, ‘Petro-Melancholia: The bp Blowout and the Arts of Grief’, *Qui Parle*, 19.2 (2011), pp. 25–55.
 28. Buell’s claim is even more limited than implied here. The ‘trickle-down’ he names takes places primarily *within* academic practice. He writes: ‘intra-field impact followed by trickle-down percolation is what serious academic work should seek in any case. Without that, the second and third challenges—of professional legitimation and of changing the direction with the field—will never be successfully met’. There are aspects of Buell’s argument cognate with our own. He argues that making the environment ‘a permanent concern for literary and other humanists’ is where literary criticism can make its environmental impact, ‘even more than through acts of pedagogical or activist outreach’. What disappears here is the urgency that we spoke of earlier—the kind identified in the 2018 Special Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), which urged action by 2030 to limit global warming to 1.5% above pre-industrial levels. See Lawrence Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), p. 133; and IPCC Special Report (October 2018), available at: <https://www.ipcc.ch/sr15/>.
 29. In much recent critical work, Raymond Williams’s classic distinction between dominant, emergent, and residual forms of ideology appears to have disappeared. Ideology now always assumes a dominant form, producing a clean, direct similitude between text and context. The truth is messier and harder to parse. See Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 55–71.
 30. Rancière discusses the ‘distribution of the sensible’ in a number of books and essays. See especially Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London, UK: Continuum, 2004).
 31. Prominent texts associated with postcritique include Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015) and *Uses of Literature* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), and Toril Moi, *Revolution of the Ordinary* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018). For an important rejoinder, see Caroline Lesjak, ‘Reading Dialectically’, *Criticism*, 55.2 (2013), pp. 233–77.
 32. Frederic Jameson ‘The Politics of Utopia’, *New Left Review*, 25 (2004), p. 46.

33. Frederic Jameson, *An American Utopia: Dual Power and the Universal Army* (New York: Verso, 2016).
34. Leslie Sklair's study of 1000 newspapers from 100 countries largely confirms his initial hunch about this concept: 'while many academics, environmentalists, social scientists, humanities scholars, and creative artists do engage actively with issues of the Anthropocene, most educated and cultured elites do not. I also suspect that the mass of the world's population have either never heard of it or if they have, they have no clear idea about it'. One of the early conclusions of his still-ongoing study is that 'generally speaking, there is little sense of urgency in the reporting of the Anthropocene in the mass media. As I suggested above the "good Anthropocene" is predominant'. The 'good Anthropocene' Sklair refers to identifies it as a natural process creating opportunities for science and business, and a process that can be managed via technological fixes. See 'The Anthropocene Media Project: Mass Media on Human Impacts on the Earth System', *Visions for Sustainability*, 10 (2018).
35. Stuart Hall, 'Cultural Studies and its Theoretical Legacies', in David Morley and Kuan-Hsing (eds.), *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Culture*, Chen (New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 272. The context in which Hall makes these comments speaks directly to the circumstances of the Covid-19 pandemic. Hall notes that the AIDS crisis highlights 'our marginality as critical intellectuals in making real effects in the world'. And yet, in addition to being a fatal illness (at the time Hall was writing), AIDS was also a site of struggle over representation—who was represented and who was not, which pleasures were appropriate and inappropriate, and who got the benefit of scientific research or medical resources and who did not. Hall writes: 'cultural studies is about the constitutive and political nature of representation itself, about its complexities, about the effects of language, about textuality as a site of life and death. Those are the things cultural studies can address' (p. 273).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).