

## Whose Monsters? Post-Carbon Futures, Halle, September 2021

**Eric Boyd**

Looking back over my notes from the week at the Post-Carbon Futures Summer School hosted by the Institute for Social and Cultural Anthropology and the Centre of Interdisciplinary Regional Studies at Halle University it is difficult to imagine a more intensive week spent going beyond simple discussion of what a liveable future may look and feel like, and deep into an interrogation of just how such of future can be manifest from the multiple disciplines present among my colleagues. Indeed, our discussions often hinged on the relevance and input that such academic groundwork could have on determining such a future, how our work may extend beyond the mere representation of various case-studies into active roles within the communities of our informants and beyond to the political economy, like being caught in the middle of a perpetually moving möbius strip.

The week began – for me at least, I had missed the introductory meal on the Sunday due to a late train from Berlin and the official introductory meeting on the Monday morning due to a sharp and severe development of a cough and cold-like symptoms that disappeared as quickly as they developed - with a field trip around Halle Neustadt, a settlement that expanded the western margin of the city in 1967 during Halle's secondment to the GDR. Thus began part one - Energopolitics and Urban-Industrial Entanglements - of our Summer School, with an introduction to sheer scale and ambition of socialist architecture and its capacity to enmesh domestic and industrial life into an effective quagmire of communal purpose and care.

The differing and yet familiar forms that the enmeshment and entangling of these often heavily gendered spheres was to be described and interrogated throughout the proceeding presentations by Eeva Keskülla and Siarhei Liubimau over the course of the next 24 hours. A primary theme running through both talks was the notion of 'post-', the implication of an enticingly linear political-economic narrative. Keen as ever to avoid what Eyal Weizman calls a "cascading linear logic," – and yet here I am, hypocritically providing a very linear description of the week - it became hard to shake the notion that everything ordained as 'post-' something, is also necessarily 'pre-' some

other, enveloping, transitory assemblage of economic, political, social and technological actors.

Our field trip to thermal power station of Stadtwerk Halle also highlighted the increasingly transitory nature of energy production on a city-wide scale. The accidental doubling of the power plant as a nesting site for tiny songbirds and great swooping birds of prey was of little concern next to the ever-pressing question of how to incorporate the shifting, non-linear mosaic of temporalities and actors that both produce and consume energy in a post-socialist, intra-capitalist, and pre-whatever-subsumes-us-next into our discussions for the week ahead.

### **Enter part two of the program: Energy Pasts, Energy Futures.**

Part two of the Summer School inserted the themes of multiple convergent and divergent temporalities and the varying forms of utopian-thinking that emerge across and beyond the hydrocarbon frontier into our discussions for the week. Both Felix Ringel's presentation and workshops and Mette High's reading focused on an unwavering, insurmountable presentism that runs throughout the current sociopolitical and economic dynamics of oil and bridge-fuel infrastructures. Mette's reading was a particularly startling insight into the pursuit of oil-utopias founded on the predatory and yet religiously ordained acts of energy market actors in the American Midwest; 'And I looked, and behold a pale horse: and his name that sat on him was Gatekeeper to Drilling Contracts, and Hell followed with him.'

Just when I thought I had a handle on this, Abdou Maliq Simone patches-in via Zoom and blows everyone's minds with a lyrical, liquid monologue that exploded any notion of the city as a static and definitively bounded site of human/non-human inter- and intra-actions. The rhythm of Simone's piece implored you to stop and try to take just what may be going on at any given minute within the urban sprawl you inhabit Luckily, the next scheduled session was a screening of narrationless documentary Habitat by Werkleitz, a beautifully paced meditation on the spectral and marginalised inhabitants of a former mining town that sits on the largest manmade reclamation lake in Germany. This film challenged the presentism with which we had been engaged during the second part of the program. Habitat put forward the silences, the absences,

the unremitting temporal dynamics of both a landscape and people inescapably haunted by their pasts. It provided a lens through which we could view and think through just what we had encountered so far during our time at the summer school.

By this time the conversations over breakfast at the hostel were focusing more and more on research practice and methodologies, conversations ranged from how to avoid producing work as a linear teleology? Is it possible to communicate what we encounter in the field without incorporating it into some kind of traditional narrative arc? How do we sit with the messiness of research, go from dwelling in its obfuscating mosaic of information, encounter, and experience, to articulating this amalgamated yet amorphous network?

But no time to dwell on these questions, we had a bus to a lignite mine to catch. Personally, I'd never seen an operational open-pit mine before, and the blasted moonscape that the bus reared up upon was a more ferocious sight than I ever gave open-pit mining credit for creating. The tour of the mine was led by the mayor of local town, a doctor of sports medicine, and a man willing to attempt a logical link between natural geomorphological accretion of coal deposits to neoliberalism's given right to exploit those deposits for massive energy output and consumption. Love your monsters.

The field trip that morning was a valuable reminder of the recalcitrant materiality of what many consider a dinosaur industry, a kind of business model ghost-species still visible and active in the landscape. The unavoidable, non-negotiable material presence of the open-pit lignite mine was an unforgiving emblem of the late-industrial era to which we still belong.

Amy Walker's presentation on the morning of the final day provided an evocative and poignant reminder about what happens to a community that is forced to transition away from the extraction of carbon intensive resources in the absence of the provision of any form of economic replacement. Amy's talk highlighted the deep entanglements of industry, domestic life, agency, political economy and the privatisation of wealth, and class at play when an industry is forced out of its community. It seemed to sum up our discussions of the week, how to deal with such messy entanglements within our own work, and beyond this, how to do this under the guise of social research while

maintaining the dignity of our informants, be they human or not, material or emotional, post-carbon or still deeply entrenched in the muck of our carbon-intensive lives.

## References

Latour, Bruno. 2011. Love Your Monsters. Why We Must Care for Our Technologies As We Do Our Children. *Breakthrough Journal* 2, p.19-26.

## About the Author

Eric Boyd is a PhD student in Social Anthropology at the DurhamARCTIC Research Centre and Durham Anthropology, University of Durham. His research project “Mine expansions into urban landscapes and changing ontologies?” examines how resource materials are not only produced by extractive communities, but are crucial actors in the production of ontologies within those communities.