

Oxana Timofeeva
**Ultra-Black:
Towards a
Materialist
Theory of Oil**

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e-flux journal #84 — september 2017 Oxana Timofeeva
Ultra-Black: Towards a Materialist Theory of Oil

People think that they sell oil, but in fact
they are becoming oil.
– Victor Pelevin

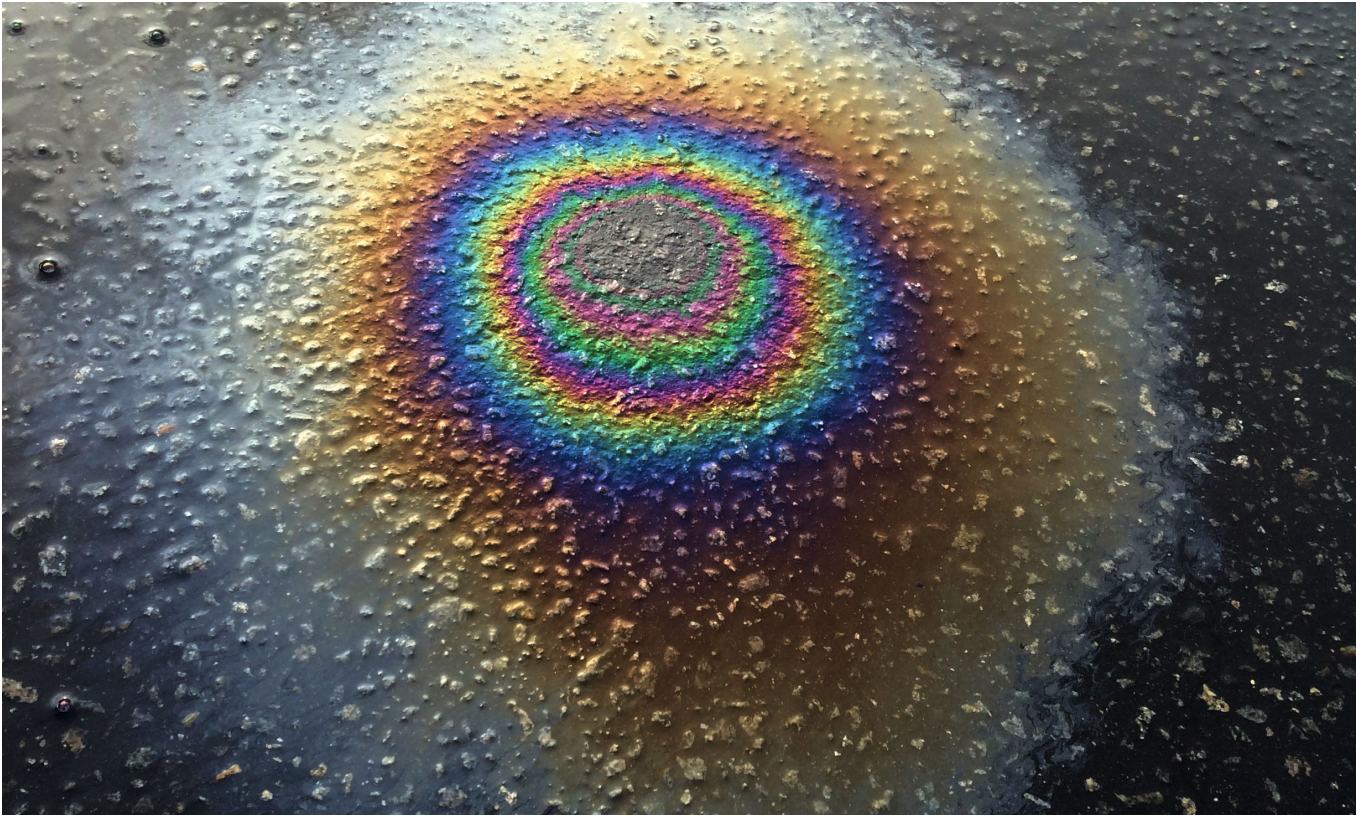
How is it possible to be a materialist today, when many proclaim themselves the only true materialists and build their arguments against the wrongness of the materialism of others? It is tempting to call this epic battle for the flag of materialism a return to the “philosophy of nature.” Such terminology sounds anachronistic, to say the least. Any synthesis of knowledge about the living and the nonliving world under the heading of the philosophy of nature summons the specter of classical Western metaphysics; the philosophy of nature is understood to be pure idealism of the very highest grade. And yet the question of nature, or material reality, continues to be a stumbling block for ontology, the philosophy of science, political economy, and psychoanalysis. All of these discourses continue to do “nature philosophy” by other means. The main difference between today’s philosophers of nature and those of the past is that our contemporaries do not present their subject matter as a mirror of spirit, a universe of God’s creation, or even, as Hegel had it, “the falling-away-from-itself of the Idea,” but seek to discover nature as such, to think about the very nature of nature that is naturally independent of thought, if not opposite to it.

About one hundred years ago, Alfred North Whitehead, a famous English philosopher and mathematician, formulated the problem as follows:

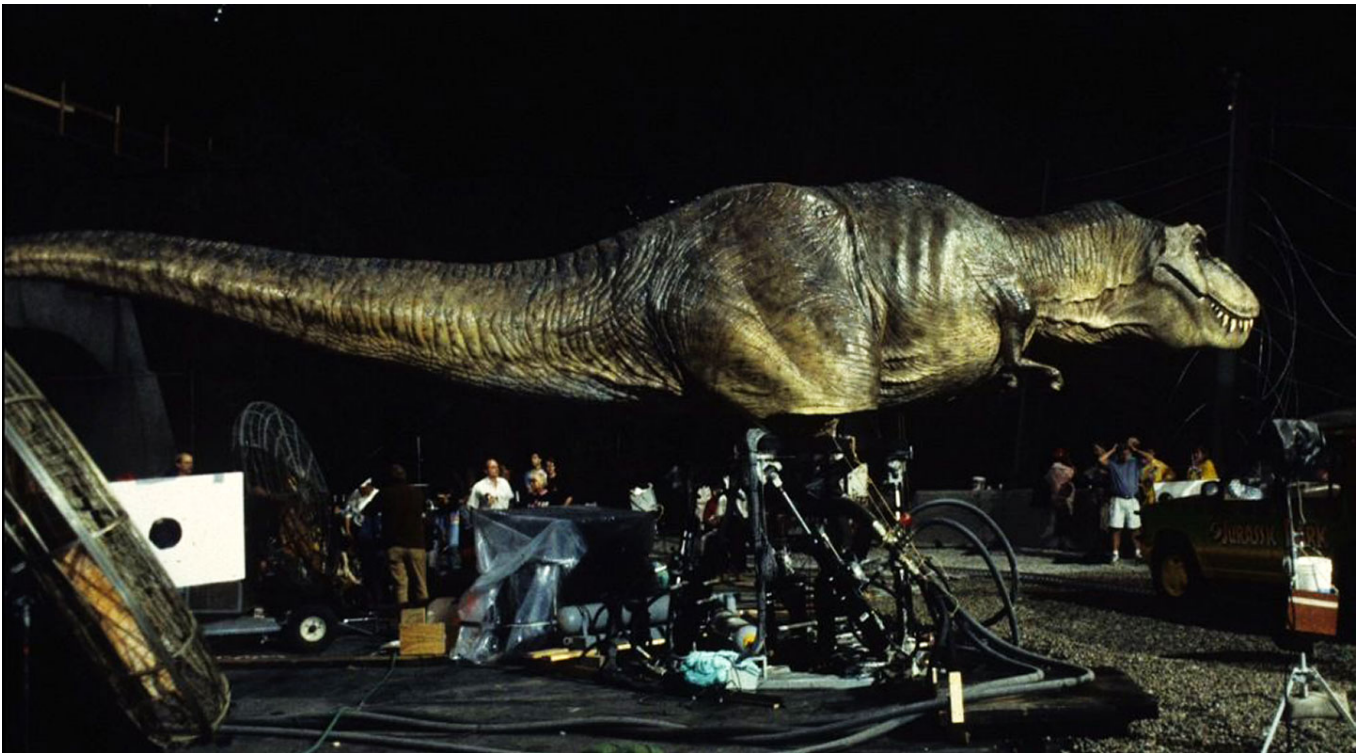
Thus in a sense nature is independent of thought. By this statement no metaphysical pronouncement is intended. What I mean is that we can think about nature without thinking about thought. I shall say that then we are thinking “homogeneously” about nature. Of course it is possible to think nature in conjunction with thought about the fact that nature is thought about. In such a case I shall say that we are thinking “heterogeneously” about nature.¹

Nature is not thought, says Whitehead, and it is difficult to disagree with this statement. Thinking homogeneously about nature is, according to Whitehead, inherent to the natural sciences. It seems that when philosophy follows this attitude and tries to think about nature without thinking about thought, it qualifies itself as materialism, new materialism, or realism. These are new philosophies of nature.

The nature of nature as such can be thought



An iridescent oil slick on top of asphalt, Nevada, 2014. Photo: Rocor/CC by NC 2.0.



An animatronic dinosaur on the set of Steven Spielberg's 1993 film *Jurassic Park*.

as agential (Karen Barad's agential realism); as ancestral or as a real that was already there before us (Quentin Meillassoux); or as objectal, when everything, subjects included, turns into objects (Graham Harman), or even into hyperobjects (Timothy Morton) that now, at the end of the world, rise beyond all our measurements (global warming, etc.). It can be described in older oppositions of subject and substance, or subject and object, or subject and thing (materialist dialectics and transcendental materialism, critical Marxism, psychoanalysis). It can be approached as forms of life (vitalism), as bodies (corporeal, transcorporeal, and incorporeal materialisms, or what Alain Badiou ironically calls "democratic materialism"), or as media and technology. It can be dialectically or nondialectically opposed to technology, or identified with it. It can be represented and symbolized as a constant lack – a lack of resources (extractive economy), a lack of desire (libidinal economy), etc. – but at the same time as an irreducible excess; as a realm of need and necessity, or of hyperchaos and contingency; as something to be defended and preserved (ecophilosophy, deep ecology), or as a threat – a complex of unknown, blind, and potentially destructive forces (dark materialism).

In his book *In the Dust of This Planet*, Eugene Thacker presents a dark materialist philosophy of nature through the lens of horror. The word "world" has, according to Thacker, three different meanings. The first is the *world-for-us*, or simply the *World*; the second is the *world-in-itself*, or the *Earth*, and the third is the *world-without-us*, or the *Planet*. The *World* is anthropocentric, the *Earth* is natural, and the horrifying *Planet* is supra-natural, of fantastic. Regarding the *Earth*, or nature, that in a significant part is "grounded by scientific enquiry," Thacker says that it is "a paradoxical concept; the moment we think it and attempt to act on it, it ceases to be the world-it-itself and becomes the world-for-us."² The author is more interested in the last, supra-natural world, from the (non)understanding of which he is trying to remove all the anthropomorphic projections. He claims that thought is not human, that nature is not natural, that life does not belong to living beings but is rather alien to them, and that perhaps the future of philosophy lies in the mysticism of an inhuman, uncanny dark matter. Such a modern mysticism is not theological, but climatological, and devolves "upon the radical disjunction and indifference of the self and the world."³

Without sharing the mystical spirit of Thacker's philosophy of nature, I generally find this division useful and productive.⁴ However, I would like to suggest that the world-for-us, the

world-in-itself, and the world-without-us are not three separate entities. I rather imagine them as three concentric circles: the smallest is the *World*, the next biggest is the *Earth*, and the biggest is the *Planet* – although these three circles might actually be the same size and even occupy the same place: their difference is not geometrical, but topological.

The first circle is like the home where we live. In this home, everything is familiar; we are surrounded by things that belong to us. We open the doors of this circle and go out: there is a second circle there, where animals and plants dwell without thinking and being thought. This is nature as such, or the world-in-itself, or – to borrow the name that Quentin Meillassoux gives to things-in-themselves outside any subjective relation – the Great Outdoors.⁵ We grab something there (some food, some wood to make a fire, some water, etc.) and go back inside. But we know that there are yet other doors, the doors of nature, that lead towards a Greater Outdoors where even the wildest of beasts do not dare to go, let alone humans. It is populated by gods, demons, dark forces, hyperobjects, and other entities that, for some unspecified reason, we cannot or do not want to explain rationally, even if we created them ourselves.

The cosmic utopia wants to conquer not only nature, but that Greater Outdoors, too. It wants to make it ours – contrary to mysticism, which keeps it secret: in this sense, Russian cosmism presents an interesting alternative to dark materialism. Revolution is not possible in one separate country, but the worldwide revolution is not enough either, as it only involves humanity. The Bolsheviks dreamed of revolutionizing not just society, but nature itself, for nature was considered a realm of unfreedom, inequality, injustice, need, exploitation, and death.⁶ Diverting rivers, blasting mountains, making animals speak: the idea was to transform the *Earth* by means of technology in order to make it, as Andrei Platonov says, more "kind to us."⁷ But even this does not seem satisfactory, as revolution tends to expand further and to become planetary, or cosmic.

Doesn't this desire to conquer the Greater Outdoors tell us that the triple circle of the *World*, the *Earth*, and the *Planet* is still structured like a human habitat, with its composite inner and outer spaces connected by doors that lead in and out? In ancient Greece, the outer part of this structure was called *cosmos*, and the inner one *oikos*. The latter has several meanings – a house, a household, a family, but also a family's property, up to and including slaves. Today these meanings are maintained in the paronymous words "economy" and "ecology." Both economy and ecology are concerned with

nature – either as a living world, environment, *Umwelt*, or as a source and resource. They are conjugate – beyond ecology there is always economy, and vice versa: this is our earthy home, here we keep slaves and exchange oil for money. But this is not the whole story, as beyond the doors of nature, the Greater Outdoors stands and creates anxiety. How is it possible, the world-without-us?

My argument is that this uncanny space or cosmos does not stand out or around the canny space of the *oikos* that we share with other natural creatures, but paradoxically emerges at the very heart of it. Without is within. What appears to us as absolutely alien and monstrous is to be found there, where we would never think of searching for it. Alenka Zupančič puts it very precisely: “The great Outside is the fantasy that covers up the Real that is already right here.”⁸ The fact that it is a fantasy does not mean that it can be neglected. As psychoanalysis teaches us, fantasy is at least as important as what we call reality, and perhaps even more so. The phantasmatic world-without-us is not only attached to the world-for-us, but presents its internal truth. It is *uncanny* and *unhuman* and *unnatural*, where the prefix *un-* does not merely negate, but produces a kind of displacement or resistance that dialectically turns canny, natural, human, etc., into their opposites, while maintaining the ostensible clarity and significance of the original. This is why these new concepts of nature continue to revolve around an old concept of the human, in various directions, including the transhuman, the nonhuman, the antihuman, the posthuman, or the inhuman. Such concepts seem to start from the dismissal of the human, but often end up with what I would call negative anthropocentrism, i.e., anthropocentrism of a centrifugal, rather than a centripetal, type.⁹ While turning away from the hearth of the inner circle, and towards a fantastic/phantasmatic outside that *feels* uncanny, negative anthropocentrism does not depart from a philosophy of nature that rests on the significance of these same distinctions. It is humanism with a monstrous face, we might say.

The etymologies of the words *heimlich* (canny) and *unheimlich* (uncanny), both deriving from *das Heim* – the home, the domestic hearth – were analyzed by Freud, who underlined the ambivalence of *heimlich*, which, on the one hand, “means what is familiar and agreeable, and on the other, what is concealed and kept out of sight.”¹⁰ Freud referred to Schelling’s definition of *unheimlich* as “everything that ought to have remained secret and hidden but has come to light.”¹¹ According to Freud, the feeling of uncanniness – this special kind of fear – relates

to “something repressed which recurs” and thus it is “nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression.”¹² The *unconscious* is not a mysterious substantial reality beyond our psychic life, but a structural formation of the process of repression which, as Lacan explains, coincides with the return of the repressed.¹³ Similarly, the inhuman and unnatural planetary outside of the world can be regarded as the very image of its interior, which returns from the depths of oblivion in a scary shape that we do not recognize. The world constantly turns inside out, and we are the hole through which it does so (by “we” I do not mean exclusively humans, but a much bigger collective of beings that precedes concrete species).¹⁴

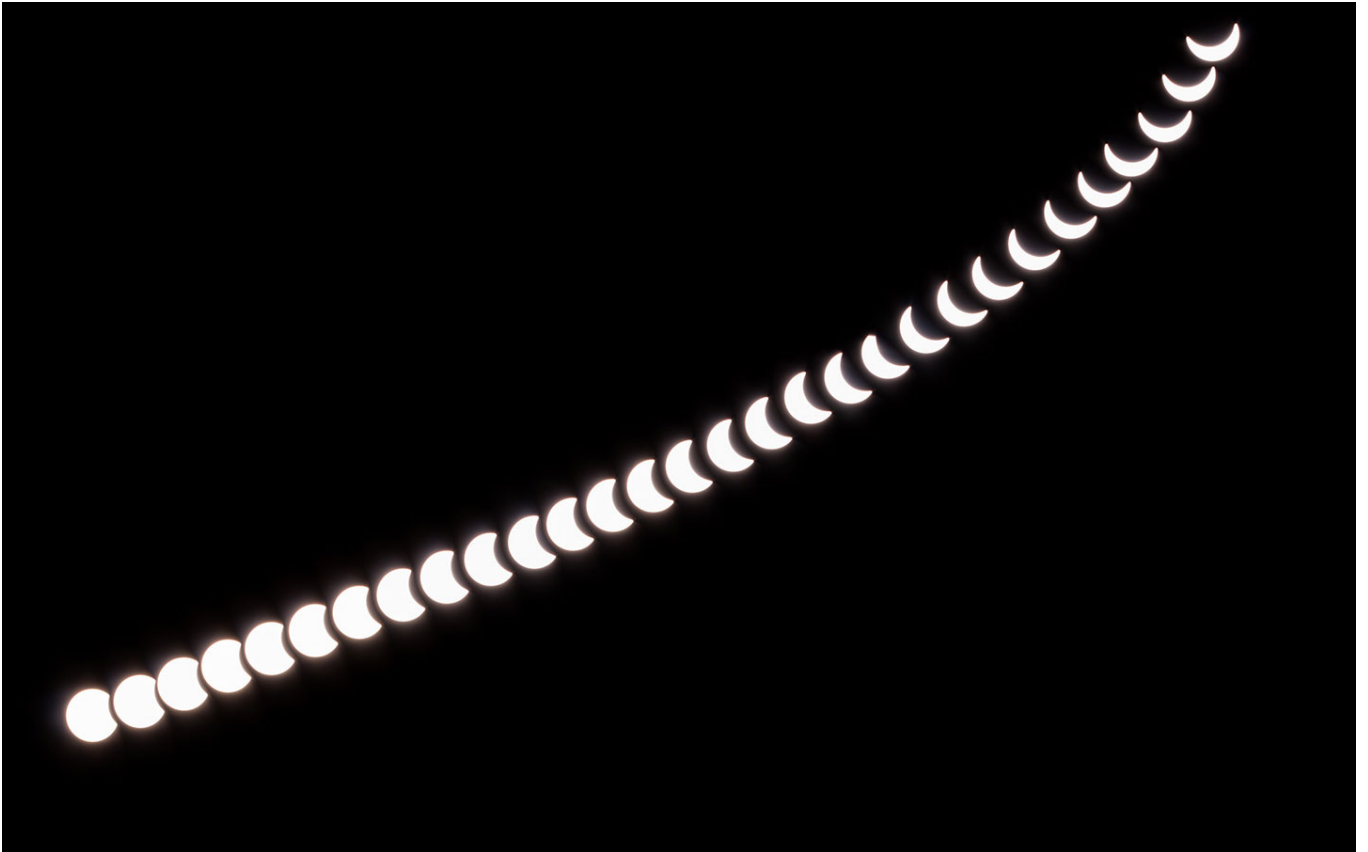
As Georges Bataille writes in his very short essay “Materialism” (1929):

Materialism will be seen as a senile idealism to the extent that it is not immediately based on psychological or social facts, instead of on artificially isolated physical phenomena. Thus it is from Freud, among others – rather than from long-dead physicists, whose ideas today have no meaning – that a representation of matter must be taken.¹⁵

In this sense, Alberto Toscano is right when he says that Meillassoux’s concept of the Great Outdoors, or ancestral real – indifferent to humans and animals – is “ultimately idealist in form.”¹⁶ Interestingly enough, Simon Critchley evokes Bataille’s spirit in his critique of Meillassoux. He recalls a conversation between Bataille and A. J. Ayer, a British proponent of logical positivism, which took place in a Parisian bar in 1951, and

lasted until three in the morning. The thesis under discussion was very simple: did the sun exist before the appearance of humans? Ayer saw no reason to doubt that it did, whereas Bataille thought the whole proposition meaningless. For a philosopher committed to scientific realism, like Ayer, it makes evident sense to utter ancestral statements such as “The sun existed prior to the appearance of humans,” whereas, for a correlationist like Bataille, more versed in Hegel and phenomenology, physical objects must be perceived by an observer in order to be said to exist.¹⁷

To be precise, Bataille’s sun does not really need an observer. “Observer” is maybe not the right word here: one cannot, as Bataille constantly



A partial eclipse of the sun, 2015. Photo: kulatraxas.

repeats, “observe” the sun, at least directly – because it burns the eyes. The sun is that cosmic object that makes me blind, insane, dizzy. The psychological aspect of matter, which Bataille tries to take into account in his own conception of base materialism, should not be underestimated. Matter is principally ambivalent and heterogeneous – as is the unconscious – and cannot be reduced to anything within an epistemic framework. Later, in his book *The Accursed Share*, Bataille expands his critique of political economy to the planetary scale and articulates the need “to recognize in the economy – in the production and use of wealth – a particular aspect of terrestrial activity regarded as a cosmic phenomenon.”¹⁸ This planetary activity is called “general economy” and is opposed to a “restricted” one that only registers the activity of human beings on Earth. The restricted economy is the movement of labor and accumulation (of goods, of capital), whereas the general, planetary economy consists in expenditure and nonproductive consumption. The more we try to accumulate inside, the more destruction comes from the outside. Eventually, the energy from the sun collects and a volcano explodes. Literally or figuratively, this explosion is definitively beyond our control. An ultimately destructive cosmic activity is totally indifferent to humans, but we are involved in it, much in the same way as one is involved in a crime. If we regard this theory as an economic refraction of Bataille’s earlier base-materialist insights, then we have to admit that the general cosmic activity is material, and corresponds to the unconscious that itself, in Bataille, is perhaps best described as “posthuman.” To put it in more psychoanalytic terms, there is a libidinal dimension of planetary ecology and economy, where a universal death drive underlies all other drives.

In the world-for-us, where things operate according to the domestic laws of restricted economy, the unconscious becomes a capitalist unconscious.¹⁹ Existence under a capitalist regime is bound to a general equivalent, or a value form that can be attached to any piece of living and nonliving matter. The world as we know it consists of commodities, and among commodities there is one for which all other commodities can be exchanged: money. Money is both abstract and real; it is a real abstraction that, even if it does not really exist, produces effects in reality. However, this does not give us an entire picture of the structure of the world-for-us. The fact is that money is not an ultimate commodity. It is not an autonomous being. Behind money, there are three main commodities upon which it grows: the first is matter, the second is labor, and the third is time. All three of these are of principal interest, but here I will only

address the first one.

In contrast to money, matter is not an abstraction; otherwise, it would not be matter, but an idea – this is the meaning of what Bataille calls “senile idealism.” Matter as an ultimate commodity is a concrete piece of substance, to which money clings in order to prove that it is real. Such a piece of substance historically stands for the whole material world exchanged for money. It is a material side of the general equivalent, or the Thing of the economy. In old times, the general equivalent was represented by gold. Now such a commodity is – not “officially,” but conventionally – oil.

“Oil is the life-blood throbbing through the arteries of war,” says a fictional Hitler in Julian Semyonov’s famous novel *Seventeen Moments of Spring*.²⁰ No one can seriously dispute this today. Thus, in Reza Negarestani’s *Cyclonopedia*, it is oil that allows us to understand war as a machine, or rather two machines: on the one side there is an Abrahamic monotheism, or jihadist war; and on the other, “Technocapitalist” war, or the War on Terror:

To grasp war as a machine, or in other words, to inquire into the Abrahamic war machine in its relation to the Technocapitalist war machine, we must first realize which components allow Technocapitalism and Abrahamic monotheism to reciprocate at all, even on a synergistically hostile level. The answer is oil: War on Terror cannot be radically and technically grasped as a machine without consideration of the oil that greases its parts and recomposes its flows; such consideration must begin with the twilight of hydrocarbon and the very dawn of the Earth.²¹

Negarestani presents a set of ideas about the nature and origin of oil and its representations. He touches upon a popular comparison between oil and blood and relates it to a theory “according to which hydrocarbons constitute the origin of petroleum.”²² Both oil and blood contain porphyrin, an organic compound that serves as “evidence of a common lineage, the hydrocarbon,” and, in the eyes of the “advocates of the myth of fossil fuels,” porphyrin proves that oil as the blood of the Earth is not just a metaphor. A politico-economic explication of the theory of fossil fuels states that the sources of oil are finite, and in the petroleum wars, blood is the price of oil. To put it very simply, the fossil-fuel theory suggests that oil was produced from organic matter – from the decomposition of various living or dead organisms, from bacteria to dinosaurs. Negarestani notes very briefly that,

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“according to the classic theory of fossil fuels ... petroleum was formed as a Tellurian entity under unimaginable pressure and heat in the absence of oxygen and between the strata, in absolute isolation,” which, from his perspective, comprises “a typical Freudian Oedipal case.”²³ In contrast, Negarestani outlines, in a post-Deleuzian vein, a theory of the non-oedipal, inorganic unconscious, or inorganic demons that, in a parasitic way, “infiltrate an anthropomorphic agency” and “embed their inorganic sentience within the human host.”²⁴ Negarestani’s oil is part of a sort of diabolic cosmic conspiracy that underlies the planetary economy and world military politics and brings together all existing narrations. But the very link between oil and the unconscious is what I find important.

Speaking personally, my first associations with oil are definitely “oedipal” and “organic.” When I was little, my family lived in Surgut, one of the centers of the oil industry in northwestern Siberia. As a schoolgirl, I was very familiar with the “dinosaurs” origin story. It was my mother who told me that the oil was made of their bodies, which were decomposing beneath the ground and the layers of permafrost. On my way to school there was a shallow swamp. Each time I crossed it I had the feeling that the ground was in fact never really solid, not only there but everywhere. What we think is solid ground in fact just covers this tenacious black liquid, a subterranean cemetery of enormous animals that inhabited the Earth long before us. I even believed that the scary dinosaurs could reemerge from the pools created by oil spills, like the Loch Ness monster protruding from the water. Dialectically, oil retained something from that organic life, the death of which was its origin. The oil of my childhood was neither living nor dead, but a living dead, an undead, or an uncanny and utterly inhuman afterlife of ancestral animals. Was the oil there before we humans came along, as would be suggested by a proponent of philosophical realism like Ayer (or a schoolgirl like me in 1986, shortly before the collapse of the Soviet Union)? Or should we admit, in a Batailleian manner, that this proposition is meaningless, not because this substance must be observed, but because, like the sun, it burns?

“The Black Corpse of the Sun” is one of the names Negarestani gives to oil in his book. It makes me think about the color of oil. I saw it get spilled. Nothing can be compared to the blackness of it. The oil is ultra-black. More black than death.

More black than the blackness constructed to justify slavery in the era of colonialism, when people were taken from Mother Africa and sold

to the Americas. More black than the black market today, where human beings, together with drugs and arms, continue to be traded as illegal commodities, whose general investment in the production of value is enormous but whose slave, unpaid, or low-paid “dirty work” (we Russians call it “black work”) is not visible because it is not socially represented. Numerous sweatshops, where migrants and people from poor countries are exploited, are hidden somewhere underground, in basements, bunkers, and tunnels.

The fact is that blackness here designates that which is gratuitous (in the sense of gratuity), as that which goes uncompensated. As David Marriot writes:

For the white bourgeois and worker, from the nineteenth century to the present, blackness is a degraded form of being that cannot as such conserve itself; or, it is seen as an impoverished way of being that can only be put to work as a supplementary labor (for of course work is niggerdom), which means that it cannot profit from itself as capital. In all these readings, blackness is seen as both exorbitant and impoverished, both decadent and deliriously perverse. Its lack of restraint suggests both the collapse of capitalist values and a threat that puts an end to civic duty: the substitution of private consumption for collective duty is here linked to a more general anxiety about an entity driven to negate the very idea of accumulation – hence the extravagant excess of a being that is seen to come from a nihilistic, menacing, undeserving need to consume everything.²⁵

The blackness of the slave is like the blackness of oil in that both are conditions of possibility for surplus, but also incapable of accumulating that surplus themselves, on account of their own, hopeless profligacy.

Remember Marx, who, in his *Economic Philosophic Manuscripts* of 1844, does not really make an essential distinction between a worker and a slave: the point is that exploitation transforms living labor into dead capital. What do a slave, a worker, and oil have in common? The very fact that they are not only the repressed, but the oppressed, not only the unconscious layer of a society in which we exchange matter, labor, and time for money, but that which is exploited, consumed, and burned up in the production of surplus. The worker is exploited as a labor force, the slave is exploited as a “black” labor force, and oil is exploited as a natural resource. If we want to grasp oil, as Hegel would say, “not only

as substance, but equally as subject,” not only as the thing from the Greater Outdoors but as “the Real that is already right here,” we must admit that oil – which, like money, now stands for the whole material universe – is not a master, but a kind of ultimately inhuman black slave, one that literally occupies the lowest – and the biggest – strata of the pyramid of exploitation, and creates the very core of our capitalist unconscious.

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