

Embodiment

Bob Johnson

Breathe in the warm swell of COAL.

Empty your mind of chatter. Recline into child's pose. And let the quiet textures of petroleum caress your body. Congratulate yourself for being here. This is your hour. This is your truth.

Hot yoga emblemizes who we are as a people—it is both metonym and exaggeration of the modern condition. The wild excess of steam heat, the span of vinyl-wood flooring, the plate glass walls and mirrors, and the textures of spandex, polyester, and PVC mats immerse the modern body in a festival of tactile and visual sensations that trace back to the pleasures of combusted carbon. Here, as in our other rituals, modernity's carbon culture is materialized—the body acclimated to the surfeit of coal's heat, conditioned to the touch of congealed oil and natural gas, and joined to a subterranean INFRASTRUCTURE of carbon that delivers these sensations to the skin, ear, and eye.

We inhabit a peculiar moment when even the search for the self delivers us back to the coal mine, the oil well, and the boiler room.

The Eroticism of Fossil Fuels

Our erotic attachments to fossil fuels are “ultradeep,” to repurpose a phrase used by critics of deep-water drilling (LeMenager 2014). They are rooted in the intimate quotidian rituals

of such unlikely spaces as the boudoir, the lavatory, and the yoga studio. This embodiment of fossil fuels neither begins nor ends with the pleasures of the gas-fueled *AUTOMOBILE* and the transoceanic flight; nor is it limited to the sexualized imagery of vehicular mobility and the luminance of the modern city. Such things shape our erotics, but they are only the transparent manifestations of a much deeper phenomenology of carbon.

Put briefly, the embodiment of fossil fuels concerns how the modern soul is disciplined by and made present through the combustion of prehistoric carbons—how it is fleshed out in everyday carbon rites that imbue its sinews with muscle memory, provide material for its imagination and senses, and shape its expectations about being fully human in the twenty-first century.

This structure of embodiment occurs through various modalities.

First, it derives from the body's saturation in a surfeit of mineral heat that carries us beyond the organic forest.

This surplus heat, a fossil heat rather than a traditional organic heat, is the precondition of modern life. It arises from the large, controlled burn that has been going on in boiler rooms throughout the West, and elsewhere, for two hundred years. Today we combust in fossil fuels the equivalent of 21 billion acres of sustainably harvested forest, or more than double our global reserves.¹ Whereas heat in the premodern world had purchase—it was often scarce, limited, hard-earned, and frequently visible to the eye—heat today is simply ubiquitous, assumed, and invisible. According to Dennis Skocz, we are daily conditioned to this surfeit heat that our bodies absorb unconsciously and that appears to us without origin: modernity's "warmth and comfort," he writes, "are not perceived as the effect of anything. They simply are experienced phenomena without a history or an anchor in anything outside themselves" (2010, 18). That heat calms the body when we step into a hot shower, generates the savoriness of soup on a kitchen stove, and provides the security of entering a warm home. It teaches us, Skocz says, "that climate is not an issue and is controllable" (*ibid.*, 20).

The hot yoga studio makes this heat visible while erasing its source. Steam rises from ventilators to provide a sensory contrast to the waterless air of the desert, and hot blasts, exceeding 104°F, invite the body into a ritualistic sweating that is grotesque, therapeutic, and perfectly modern. In this space, modernity's heat is institutionalized and elevated to totem.

Second, fossil fuels are embodied through what Victor Hugo called the "consubstantial flexibility of a man and an edifice" (quoted in Bachelard 1994, 91).

The body, phenomenologists tell us, is co-penetrated by its material environment; for us, an *ARCHITECTURE* of congealed carbons—*ENERGY* transmuted into glass, cement, and

1. The US Energy Information Administration estimates 2010 global energy consumption at 524 quadrillion BTU, of which approximately 84 percent was from fossil fuels, the equivalent of 16 billion tons of coal. In the preindustrial world, an acre of forest could sustainably produce about .73 TCE, so our fossil fuel consumption is the equivalent of 21.7 billion acres of sustainably harvested forests (US Energy Information Administration 2013). For the energy yield of a premodern forest, see Vaclav Smil (quoted in Pomeranz 2000, 308–9).

steel (Bachelard 1994, 3–37). Today, our eyes, ears, and fingertips anticipate a material environment that differs from the world of WOOD and stone that the body once navigated, grated against, and enjoyed. We carry inside us the rough memory of knees hitting cement, eyes lingering on the curve of steel arches, and a sensibility of light refracted through plate glass. Floor-length mirrors and a terra firma of concrete are energy incarnate—and they signal a materiality beyond the forest (Bob Johnson 2014, 21–26).

In the yoga studio, mirrored walls reflect the body back to itself while open steel rafters, floor-length sheet glass, and recessed lighting provide invitations to the eye. This house for the soul might exude the aura of naturalness, but almost nothing in this space does not depend on mineral heat for its fabrication. In the yoga studio, we encounter a harmony of congealed carbons: coal and enlightenment go hand in hand.

Third, we embody carbon through fabrics we wear on our bodies as accoutrements of the self.

Through polymerization—wherein monomers coaxed from hydrocarbons are strung out into chains of polymers and heated into resins—we acquire the elasticity of modern life in the form of spandex, polyester, and various other synthetics (Huber 2014, 302–7). This carbon that makes contact with the flesh, that drapes down our walls, and that is assembled like idols around our bodies, finds its way consciously and subconsciously into the poetics of daily life as memories, nerves, and muscles become “encumbered” with these little quotidian facts (Bachelard 1994, 57).

This other embodiment of fossil fuels is physical and intimate in the yoga studio. It embraces the lissome stretch of spandex across the thigh, the cushion of high-density foam on knees, and the wet touch of polyester wicking sweat away from an overheated body. The tree of life might stand boldly at the entrance to the yoga studio, giving to this space the feel of the unprocessed, but we too are polymerized here, bound in body and mind to these manufactured chains of carbon.

Finally, our embodiment of fossil fuels derives from the unspoken leisure that carbon accords us as it performs disembodied labor behind our walls and beneath our streets.

Today, mineral heat signifies more than simply fuel and materiality; it also implies energy turned into motion, power, or, in short, WORK, with each American burning sufficient carbon throughout the day to generate the power of nine horses or eighty-nine human bodies (Nikiforuk 2012, 71). This vast kinetic work subsidy—an infrastructure of empowerment—is not always visible to the eye, but it leaves its bold signature on our leisure, productivity, and psyche (Bob Johnson 2014, 14–21).

At the close of yoga practice, I anticipate a shower that was not drawn by my hand—nor any other—and I am entitled to a heat not borne of wood nor delivered by foot. Electric pumps move rivers of water (8.3 pounds a gallon and 25 gallons a shower) across deserts to deliver streams to my feet; natural gas lines imbue me with heat and kinetic energy at the flick of a switch; and oil PIPELINES condition me to a universe of horsepower that emancipates me whenever I prefer not to walk, lift, or hew without help. Although the body takes center stage in the hot yoga studio, that body rarely arrives there on its own and never leaves without accruing to itself this heavy attachment to kinetic carbons that generate

and circulate the staggering quantity of water, people, resources, and heat that defines our modernity. Even here in the yoga studio the body is moved by carbon.

But for now—sweet *savasana*.

I take a final drink from a polyurethane water bottle, strip off a pair of nylon-blend prAna pants, and turn the plastic handle of this plastic basin to release the steam of a hot shower. Copper pipelines hiss with gas behind a wall, electric water pumps churn silently, and a burst of water rains down in the desert. As a warm cataract gushes over me, there is only the faintest trace of the FRACKING in California, the drilling in North Dakota, and the strip-mining of Wyoming that gives me pleasure.

I needed this. Soaked in coal and oil, I am now fully and finally in my body.

See also: ADDICTION, ARCHITECTURE, COAL, GRIDS, INFRASTRUCTURE, SPIRITUAL, TEXTILES.