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Book Review Forum: Response

Let me begin by expressing gratitude to the editors of *Victorian Studies* for dedicating this review forum to *Extraction Ecologies and the Literature of the Long Exhaustion* and for the invitation to reflect on my project in response to and in dialogue with these three reviews. I also want to express my thanks to the reviewers for the time they have spent with my book and its arguments. As a scholar I have learned and benefited from the work of these three critics, and it is a privilege to now be in the position to respond to their responses to my work. Written scholarship is at its most interactive in forums such as this, and from 2020 to 2022, interaction has been a resource in short supply, so I am all the more grateful for the exchange.[1]

Extraction Ecologies is a study of the rise of industrial extraction and of how the industrialization of underground resource extraction interacted with literary form and genres from the 1830s to the 1930s. This is the book's particular contribution, but it is also, more broadly, a prehistory of the literature and culture of climate change and the Anthropocene, one that is intended to explore the roles of language and culture, of genre and discourse, in extenuating and, sometimes, mitigating the environmental degradations of extractive industry

and imperial extractivism. How can humanities scholarship possibly intervene in environmental catastrophes of such long duration and awful extent? Contemplating such scales and degrees in the course of writing this book has certainly led me to a perspective of critical humility, which *Extraction Ecologies* expresses in part by establishing limits on what it attempts to achieve. And yet, in my view – and I presume most readers of this forum will agree – humanities scholarship *can* and *does* work slowly and collaboratively to influence and change language and thought. In terms of this broader goal, *Extraction Ecologies* is one contribution among many: a book written at the precipice of a new era, feeling and thinking its way toward a new understanding of the modern world, in dialogue with other writers and critics in the environmental humanities.

Even should the worst catastrophes be averted in the era to come – and I remain hopeful that they will, despite mounting evidence to the contrary – it is evident that we are living through a moment of acute social and environmental change. Much suffering is already happening; much is yet to come. A beast of *some* manner of roughness is slouching toward Bethlehem, and whether that roughness translates to 2 degrees or 8 degrees Celsius is yet to be determined. Critics witnessing the dawn of this base new world are perhaps inevitably drawn to reconsidering

the past that birthed this rough beast – including its literary histories. Narrative and discourse are, of course, central to the culture that has produced and been produced by the long exhaustion, to use my term from the book. Such a realization raises questions about the work of criticism: Have we been asking the wrong questions of literature? Has literary criticism been too apt to treat texts as immune from environmental concerns? Has it participated in the pernicious conceptual opposition between humans and nature that many environmental thinkers see at the root of modern ecological crises? Reading texts differently is surely no protection from wildfires, hurricanes, and wet-bulb temperatures, but the way we read texts is a symptom of and a guide for patterns of thought and perception, and it is remarkable, in this moment, to work one's way through a portion of the literary archive and to realize how little of the environmental knowledge of this archive has been reckoned with by critics at all.

My book seeks to explore the epistemological and representational dimensions of extractivism, which I define in two ways: as, to use my book's words, a "complex of cultural, discursive, economic, environmental, and ideological factors related to the extraction of underground resources on a large, industrial scale" (6), and as, to use Naomi Klein's words, a

"resource-depleting model" a "nonreciprocal, dominance-based relationship with the earth," and "the opposite of stewardship, which involves taking but also taking care that regeneration and future life continue" (Klein 169). Like Klein, my entry into this term and topic was through work in Latin American studies, which was itself profoundly influenced by work in Indigenous studies; critics in these fields have been at the forefront of scholarly attention to extraction and extractivism, thanks to the influence of anti-extractive political movements, often led by Indigenous groups in parts of the world that have been directly shaped by colonialism, such as South America, Canada, and Australia.

Grappling with such a large epistemological and material problem as extractivism, I sought for my book an angle that could be adequately explored in the scope of a monograph. One of the choices I made, in limiting my topic, was to focus on the extraction of mineral resources and not organic recourses like fish or timber, though a case could certainly be made for the exhaustive trajectory of those resources as well. This touches on what is currently a much-debated question in literary and cultural studies of extraction, and while my book was already in-press when Imre Szeman and Jennifer Wenzel published their 2021 article, "What Do We Talk about When We Talk about Extractivism?," their concern about "conceptual creep and

adjectival ubiquity" (510) was one that I also had in working on my book, which is part of why I decided to limit my focus to underground mineral resources and why I aimed to avoid "getting lost in the metaphorics of mining," as my book puts it, by paying attention to meta-critical concerns such as textual extracts or surface reading (3). For me, there was a straightforward reason to narrow my focus to underground mineral resources, as I explain in my introduction: such resources provide "the overwhelmingly dominant example of resource finitude in the context of historical thought from the 1830s to the 1930s. Trees and fish could, after all, grow and reproduce; gold and tin could not" (8).

Chris Otter, in his new book *Diet for a Large Planet: Industrial Britain, Food Systems, and World Ecology* (Chicago, 2020), shares my book's interest in the catastrophic environmental consequences of the Industrial Revolution, but his focus is on food and agriculture – renewable resources. Though we work in different disciplines and focus on two different regimes of industrialized production with distinct material and temporal qualities, his review of my book finds our approaches to be concordant. I think Otter is right to say that "almost every resource vital to the perceived progress of Britain's industrial progress generated profound fears of exhaustion" (pg#). The "large planet philosophy" that Otter's book uncovers is a form of

denial, denial of the limits of the natural world, and in the industrial era, such denial can be found with respect to resources at all points on the non-living/living continuum. In my view, mineral resources occupy a special symbolic relation to exhaustion in the literary archive because of their non-reproducibility, which is why my book focuses on this domain, but the mentality of a future-depleting industrial system infected other areas of production too, including food, in ways that scholars like Otter demonstrate. Beyond the variety of earthly resources one might look to in a study of this type, Otter's review also discusses domains of knowledge beyond literature, such as thermodynamics or political economy, that figure into my study yet could easily form the basis of a more detailed account on their own terms. Otter's review thus gestures toward the scalability – the distressing scalability – of my book's concerns across multiple domains and fields, but I am grateful for his assessment that the "key intervention" of *Extraction Ecologies* is to provide "the definitive account of this literary landscape" within a broader cultural climate of extractivism (pg#).

Dana Luciano's review concludes instead that my book's "most significant contribution is its illumination of the textures of time lived under [extractive culture], the underside of confident fantasies of modern progress" (pg#). Given Luciano's own vital

and influential work on nineteenth-century timescapes, I am gratified by this reading. In a powerfully phrased summary of my project, she proposes, too, that "exhaustion anxiety" is the "affective debris of extractive regimes, the sense of damaged time that accompanies large-scale disturbances of the ground" (pg#). This idea of "affective debris" neatly captures the interrelation of material and immaterial – commodity, culture, discourse – that I sought to engage in my book, and I appreciate this elegant formulation. Luciano's criticisms of my book, meanwhile, fall mainly into two categories. First, while she is generally sympathetic with my methodology of "heterotemporal historicism," as I term it in the book, she believes it does not go far enough, and wonders why the book remains tethered to traditional nation/period divides. Second, she suggests that I might have provided a more "sustained consideration" (pg#) of nineteenth-century race science and how it underwrote extractivist capitalism. Let me briefly respond to each of these points.

I see the timeline of my book, as explained in my introduction, as determined by energy regimes rather than traditional nation-period designations: it begins with the decisive shift to coal-powered steam in 1830s industry and ends with the dawn of the nuclear era in the late 1930s. Patricia Yaeger asked in an influential 2011 *PMLA* editor's column, "what

happens if we sort texts according to the energy sources that made them possible?" (305). My work is not alone in taking inspiration from Yaeger's question in establishing its scope. Luciano calls this scope a "Victorian-plus historical framework justified through the concept of the long [exhaustion]," and though she generously acknowledges that the book "is already a substantial project, and it would probably have been difficult to stretch its frameworks further" (pg#), she also expresses a wish that *Extraction Ecologies* had established "a more active dialogue with [the] present" by considering, for example, contemporary speculative writing or the anticolonial social movements discussed by critics such as Macarena Gómez-Barris in her book *The Extractive Zone* (pg#). Despite its historical focus, I see my book as very much in dialogue with the present, through its frequent citation of and engagement with scholars like Gómez-Barris who have demonstrated the significance of anti-extractive movements in Latin America and elsewhere in reorienting social and environmental politics. The texts I analyze in detail, however, were all published in the first century of industrial extractivism, the 1830s to the 1930s, by writers in Britain and its empire; such a focus allows me to examine an epistemology and representational mode that emerged under particular historical

circumstances and shaped literary genre and cultural discourse in ways that would persist.

A study that exhibited a broader chronological range than this, extending to the present even in its primary texts, would offer benefits beyond what my book accomplishes, but losses too. From the vantage of the energy humanities, for example, it is my sense that there is already a good deal of work on petrofiction, the Great Acceleration, and contemporary literature; scholars with training and expertise in the nineteenth-century can perhaps contribute more to the energy humanities by providing a deeper historical perspective than the field currently has, rather than by turning their attentions to contemporary literature. Still, to think with Luciano's response for a moment, I can imagine a version of my conclusion where I might have looked closely at a contemporary literary text rather than or in addition to delving into contemporary politics around extraction, as I currently do. I sympathize, too, with Luciano's concerns about "period based scholarship" at a moment when the academic job market seems to be asking more junior scholars to be generalists, and when shrinking humanities faculties at many universities mean that we are all covering more parts of the curriculum. At such a moment, one finds it difficult – I find it difficult – to sort the real intellectual limitations of period-based scholarship from practical concerns

related to the conditions of the discipline, the dearth of tenure-track jobs, and the kind of teaching we are increasingly called on to do. I agree with Luciano, however, that work in the environmental humanities has a special mandate to think broadly across time and to resist anthropocentric timescales. How else to grapple with the shifting baseline, for example – that ever-adapting sense of environmental "normal" that tracks with anthropogenic impacts?[2] In my book, I chose to engage with the present through my research, citation, terms, and ideas rather than through my archive of texts, and I hope this decision allowed for a focused and connected set of readings that still acknowledges all the ways the past has made the present.

Returning to Luciano's point about scientific racism, I would say finally in response to her review that my primary way of conceptualizing racial politics in *Extraction Ecologies* was through the frameworks offered by theories of racial capitalism rather than race science. Of course the two go together in all kinds of ways, but I focused my second chapter, in particular, on how adventure narrative and its fundamental trope of the treasure hunt is at heart a genre about Latin American and African resource frontiers, from the Mexican mining boom at the beginning of the nineteenth century to the South African Mineral Resolution at the end. Just as my book is less concerned with the science of

geology than with the way geological discourse was thoroughly bound up with extractive industry and the profit motive, so too I am more concerned with racial capitalism than racial science as a feature of extractive imperialism, one that we can see in various aspects of adventure narrative as a genre and in important historical contexts delineated in my book, such as the Chamber of Mines, a commercial institution that wielded power in the South African mining industry and established rates of pay by race, with the self-professed goal of "the reduction of native wages and the increase of the supply of native labour" (Hatch and Chalmers, 256). In both instances, I suppose my emphasis on economic over scientific modes of analysis was an attempt to redress what I saw as an underemphasis on the economic in critical accounts of geology and race in long-nineteenth-century literature, although by no means was it meant to contest other kinds of approaches. It seemed to me, when writing, that the analytic of racial capitalism fit best with the dominant critical methods of my project, but this is not to say that more could not have been done with scientific racism here.

Elizabeth Chang's response also emphasizes that racial categories in the period of my study are inseparable from the politics of resources and profit, although in pointing us to the valuable commodity of opium, she also takes us to another part of

the world: Hong Kong, "a prize possession of the British empire" and the birthplace of Chang's father (pg#). Chang recounts her father's story as "a personal history of [her] own response to [my] central term" (pg#), one intended to illustrate the recurrence and resonance of the book's arguments and tropes across multiple contexts and geographies, and even across multiple associations and meanings of the word "extraction" itself. Chang's story, and Chang's father's story, are reminders of the inseparability of colonialism and natural resources, and the fact that she calls our attention to a renewable resource like opium – "a botanical and organic extraction" (pg#) – intimates that the story of exhaustion that I tell in my book, as Chris Otter also suggests, is far from the only story to be told about literature, empire, and resource politics in this era. Max Liboiron has defined the term "resources" in their recent book *Pollution Is Colonialism* as "unidirectional relations where aspects of land are useful to particular (here, settler and colonial) ends. In this unidirectional relation, value flows in one direction, from the Resource to the user, rather than being reciprocal" (62). This suggests a relation of earthly depletion that extends to all resources, whether mineral or organic, renewable or nonrenewable. Chang's essay gestures toward the many different directions and parts of the world one could go in

telling this story, and also conveys how circuitous a resource's journey from land to user could be in the nineteenth century: opium was from "poppy plants grown in plantations in British India, dried into a paste, and subsequently transported in cakes and other portable forms for sale and consumption … throughout southern China and beyond" (pg#).

Chang's essay explores methods of autoethnography or personal criticism, and in this way makes an implied case for more experimental methodologies in ecocriticism, perhaps especially where it meets and blends with histories and criticisms of race and racialization. Indeed, an experimental and creative vision for criticism has long been espoused by journals and edited collections in this field. (The website for the journal *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, for example, calls for "scholarly articles *and creative writing* that interpret the environment in complex, imaginative, and generative ways.")[3] Despite the more or less established place of autobiographical and narrative approaches within this field, it is not a mode of writing in which I have much practice. But I will conclude with a personal reflection.

During the years I was working on *Extraction Ecologies*, I sometimes asked myself whether the process of reckoning with the environmental past was merely an exercise in rationalizing

through argument and evidence what should never be so neatly sorted and arranged. Rational argument works to cool its subject, to tamp down the fires of feeling. And even as I wrote, California's "fire season" was only intensifying. Looking back to the years of writing this book, I see how quickly our environment is changing, and how out of sync with that speed of change our slow, deliberate processes of scholarship can seem. I drafted the earliest-written section of the book in 2014, but the eight biggest wildfires in California history have all happened since December 2017. The incommensurate timelines between scholarly work and present-day environmental change are one expression of the various temporal contortions required by ecocritical thought, which must think beyond conventional humanistic timelines to account in some measure for environmental timescales, and yet must also declare its urgency, while still engaging in the slow and measured processes of scholarly research, publication, exchange.

But in the classroom, these disparate temporalities can come together in a moment of productive and meaningful exchange – an acknowledgement of the burdensome future our students are facing and the long process of cultural assimilation that got them there, or a flash of recognition prompted by a moment of environmental grief in a 150-year-old text. In such moments

literary and aesthetic engagement can provide not just solace but inspiration. “Reason, indeed, may oft complain / For Nature’s sad reality,” as Emily Brontë put it, but imagination “art ever there to bring / The hovering visions back and breathe / New glories o’er the blighted spring.” In my class on the Brontës this term, one of my students asked whether *Wuthering Heights*’s fixation on burial and bodily decomposition into the soil might be its way of imagining an anti-extractive practice at odds with the coal mining of the novel’s neighborhood: is the novel, the student wondered, trying to imagine a reciprocal human engagement with the Earth to counter industrialism’s ethic of depletion? Despite the irony that this reciprocal relation would come via an account of human death, I was struck by the student’s observation, especially after reading Robin Wall Kimmerer’s account in *Braiding Sweetgrass* of asking the 200 students in her General Ecology class to “rate their knowledge of positive interactions between people and land” and receiving a median response of “none.” Kimmerer was shocked to realize “that they could not even imagine what beneficial relations between their species and others might look like” (6). My own small classroom example seems a minor note to end on, but to me it suggests how hungry our students are for concepts, ideas, and frameworks that will help them understand and reimagine our quickly changing-world, and

their capacity to draw on the knowledge of nineteenth-century literature, written in the context of the Industrial Revolution's most immediate impacts, in doing so. Scholarship is slow, but its reverberations in the classroom and beyond can assist in the work of repair.

[1] I also want to thank my colleague Margaret Ronda for reading a draft of this response and talking it over with me. Margaret was the first reader of the first piece I wrote for *Extraction Ecologies*, and has been a generous and engaged interlocutor all the way through.

[2] "Shifting baseline," an important term and concept in ecological science and the environmental humanities, was coined by Daniel Pauley in a 1995 discussion of fisheries science.

[3] See the *ISLE* website here: https://academic.oup.com/isle/pages/About (my emphasis).

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