

Aeolian politics and the duograph

Boyer, Dominic. 2019. *Energopolitics: Wind and Power in the Anthropocene*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, pp. 280, ISBN 978-1-4780-0377-9

Howe, Cymene. 2019. *Ecologics: Wind and Power in the Anthropocene*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, pp. 272, ISBN 978-1-4780-0385-4

Keywords: capitalism, energy, environment, infrastructure, power

Cymene Howe and Dominic Boyer have crafted two eloquent accounts of the turbulent, aeolian politics that unfolded during their 16-month-long field research in Mexico's Isthmus of Tehuantepec, between 2009 and 2013. A gap in the Sierra Madre mountain range forms an extraordinary wind tunnel in the isthmus, making the region a convenient site for renewable energy production. Yet, local expectations have been overlooked. At the same time, the model of wind development that dominates the isthmus has failed "to disrupt the toxic kinds of relatedness that made it necessary to build wind parks in the first place" (194). These contradictions become pivotal in the stories that unfold throughout Howe's and Boyer's duograph *Wind and Power in the Anthropocene*.

In their joint preface, the authors posit the duograph form as an attempt to better account for the complexities they encountered in the isthmus. Howe's *Ecologics* focuses on "the salience of human-nonhuman relations" (vii). By contrast, Boyer's *Energopolitics* attends mainly to "the political complexity of wind power" (viii). Considered together, they share a common objective: to find ways whereby energy transition can go hand in hand with political, social, and economic transformations. While critical of the political configurations that characterized their field, the authors approach these with a genuine concern about the way our current infrastructures have impacted upon the planet to the point of no return. As they declare in their

joint conclusion, “We went to the Isthmus of Tehuantepec as ardent supporters of renewable energy transition, and we left with that conviction intact” (191).

I am thus tempted to situate this duograph alongside studies that hint at not yet actualized potentialities in the present, regardless of the scale or speculative nature of the examples in question (e.g. Tsing et al. 2017; Watts 2018). As Howe writes in her introductory chapter, “Wind that blew [ships] toward the New World led to certain kinds of futures. Captured within it, then and now, are other, potentially more equitable, possibilities” (19). The challenge is to stay with the turbulence, inhabit the paradox, and seek a transition that asks what exactly is being maintained.

Ecologics takes on these challenges in what is perhaps the most evocative half of the duograph. By bringing into relief the myriad more-than-human relations that constitute wind power in the isthmus, the book enacts a form of anthropological inquiry that acknowledges the role of the very beings and material processes that extractivist frameworks deliberately omit. Howe further seeks to critically address the centrality of “Man” in the notion of the Anthropocene by adopting a citational practice that prioritizes feminist scholars. Not only in content but also in form, the book gestures toward ways in which the more-than-human relations that the author so productively foregrounds may become differently assembled.

Whereas the duograph as a whole follows several cases that all unfold in the isthmus, *Ecologics* focuses exclusively on the *Mareña Renovables* wind park, obstructed by Oaxacan protesters to the point of finally being suspended. Chapter 2, Chapter 4, and Chapter 6 detail this story vividly. Chapter 2 introduces the *Mareña Renovables* project, its objectives, and conditions of emergence. It provides insight into expectations about corporate-sponsored development benefits that failed to materialize, including the missteps and misrecognitions behind the project’s eventual demise. Chapter 4 in turn dwells deeper into the ambivalences around the park, with voices from opponents and activists occupying several pages. For them, the park “epitomized foreign domination” (104), but rather than oppose wind power as such, much of the resentment around the megaproject is stirred by the way indigenous and agricultural lands and seashores become occupied by transnational capital and corporate stewardship. The story comes to an end in Chapter 6, which recounts how investors in midst of fashioning new financial proposals would finally be challenged by national and international human rights

organizations. Upon inquiries into the project's practices, the Inter-American Development Bank withdrew its funding and *Mareña Renovables* was finally suspended.

Inspired by feminist studies, multispecies studies, and recent new materialisms, Chapter 1, Chapter 3, and Chapter 5 of Howe's *Ecologics* approach the wind park from a somewhat different angle. Echoing recent turns to the atmospheric (Choy and Zee 2015; Stewart 2011), the first chapter suggests that necessary reconfigurations of material, human, and nonhuman worlds might be better conceptualized if we avoid the material determinisms of terrestrial ontologies and instead "deterrestrialize" thought. What follows is a beautiful account of wind's relationality and material traits, as well as Zapotec understandings of wind as an animating force intrinsic to life. We read accounts both about those who have benefited financially from wind power and people for whom the potential environmental impacts of wind turbines raise deep anxieties. In the isthmus, wind is enacted as something that can be possessed and stolen, and a "public property." Wind becomes "swept up in grander environmental discourses as well as local struggles for recognition" (42).

Chapter 3 shifts attention to machines. The ecology of energy transition depends not only on the presence of wind but also enfoldes the affective capacities of trucks. Perhaps the most emblematic symbol of petromodernity, trucks are nonetheless essential for bringing wind parks and renewable energy into existence. As such, the work trucks do exceeds their status as metaphors for the carbon age, positing them as "transitional objects" (76) positioned as a passage between two stages. They are carbon fuelled yet channel the politics of wind power. Men are attacked through attacks on their trucks, some even taken prisoner. Trucks can intimidate and arouse speculation. Some even kill.

Echoing recent prominent voices (e.g. Haraway 2016), Chapter 5 asks us to imagine a way of affirming "the coincident formation of human lives with other-than-human lives and the material worlds through which we are all mutually composed" (140). Howe speculates whether this mode of thinking, together with shared fears of extinction, might be able to "allow for nonhuman others to differently direct human life" (140) and thus move us beyond human exceptionalism. Drawing on Isabelle Stengers (2011), the chapter productively adopts the concept of "animal testing" to discuss classification practices and notions of the "greater good." Opponents to the megaproject are expected to forward their claims within predetermined value

scales. As a result, certain more-than-human relations—including those between people and various amphibious critters—remain in obscurity.

Boyer's book seeks ways around human-centered notions of politics. Rather than drawing on recent nonhuman turns, *Energopolitics* begins with an exposition of three analytics: capital, biopower, and energopower. These should be understood as "conceptual minima." The anthropocentrism of the former two concepts is challenged by the Anthropocene. Conversely, Boyer's neologism, energopower, steers attention also to the "impacts of fuel and electricity upon the domain of the anthropolitical" (14). More important than his theoretical discussion is his contention that in order to understand aeolian politics in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, one must attend to situated, historical processes with which transitions to renewable energy become intimately entangled.

In line with the duograph's overall objective to seek ways of doing wind power differently, Chapter 1 starts with the story of a community-owned wind park in Ixtepec. While imperfect and ultimately unsuccessful, this initiative is framed as a potential alternative to models promoted by transnational green capitalism. We follow the work of Sergio, who, through Boyer's accessible prose, comes across as a sympathetic representative of a community wind production proponent, Yansa Group. Together with local residents, Sergio nevertheless encounters a set of obstacles, not least a policy regime that favors foreign capital before community-driven development models. The subsequent chapter takes us to La Ventosa, considered by developers as an optimal location for wind parks. However, Boyer's account reveals division among locals. It turns out that wind has brought prosperity predominantly to families that own land, and dissatisfaction runs deep in parts of the community where land ownership is non-existent. Still, the latter group tended to be not "critical of the wind parks themselves but rather of how the income from the parks is not being redistributed more widely" (89). In Boyer's assessment, the problem is located primarily in the development models and how they converge with the politics of land tenure and other deep-seated asymmetries.

Chapter 3 begins in an empty office in the Oaxacan Ministry of Tourism and Economic Development. As he explores the network of relations that make up aeolian politics in the isthmus, Boyer discovers that he had previously overestimated the role of state government. Detailed accounts of speeches given by various authorities at a renewable energy forum instead give a sense of the central role of party politics. The chapter likewise provides insight into the

infrastructures that afford indigenous *municipios* and activist organizations with the capacity to challenge political elites. Chapter 4 moves farther afield to Mexico City. Interviews and conversations take us between a wide array of influential actors, including Ministry of Environment officials and company representatives. What comes through is an image of infrastructure, energy, finance, and state governance characterized by “internal contradictions and dense, turbulent entanglements” (156). Whereas the federal government promotes private-public partnership to attract foreign capital, the electricity parastatal in charge of the grid struggles desperately against its own dissolution.

The book’s fifth and final chapter returns to the isthmus. We learn that contemporary divisions over wind should be understood against the background of more long-running histories of resistance against colonial conquest and imposition. Local residents fear that capitulation to megaprojects will entail losing things that have been central to a long tradition of resistance, above all land and livelihood. Conveniently, the chapter ends by suggesting that alternatives to the Anthropocene trajectory demand attention to “what is meaningful and valuable in the localities where the wind blows” (193).

In their joint conclusion, Howe and Boyer encourage collaborative anthropology as a means to address the complexity of our shared, contemporary problems. Their duograph is one such attempt. The two volumes can be read separately or in any order of choice, but the chosen order will inevitably influence the reader’s impression of the duograph as a whole. My personal research interests steered me to *Ecologics* first, after which *Energopolitics* fleshed out my understanding of the broader processes at play. Even so, I am left wondering what would be lost and/or gained had the authors opted for a longer, joint volume. Something that the duograph accomplishes well is to raise paramount questions about ethnographic description. Surely, Howe and Boyer have had the opportunity to control their accounts against one another, yet overlaps between their various stories serve as a welcome reminder of the persistence of questions around representation in ethnographic writing more generally.

References

Choy, Timothy and Jerry Zee. 2015. “Condition-Suspension.” *Cultural Anthropology* 30 (2): 210-223. DOI: 10.14506/ca30.2.04.

Haraway, Donna. 2016. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Stengers, Isabelle. 2011. *Cosmopolitics I and II*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Stewart, Kathleen. 2011. "Atmospheric Attunements." *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 29 (3): 445-453. DOI: 10.1068/d9109.

Tsing, Anna, Heather Swanson, Elaine Gan and Nils Bubandt (eds.). 2017. *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Ghosts and Monsters of the Anthropocene*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Watts, Laura. 2018. *Energy at the End of the World: An Orkney Islands Saga*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Chakad Ojani is a PhD Candidate in Social Anthropology at the University of Manchester. His doctoral research is on fog capture and atmospheric attunements in coastal Peru.



© 2021 Chakad Ojani