

“Oh, Awful Power”: Energy and Modernity in African American Literature

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ABSTRACT

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“‘Oh, Awful Power’: Energy and Modernity in African American Literature” analyzes the social and cultural meaning of energy through an examination of African American literature from the first half of the twentieth century—the era of both King Coal and Jim Crow. Situating African Americans as both makers and subjects of the history of modern energy, I argue that black writers from this period understood energy as a material substrate which moves continually across boundaries of body, space, machine, and state. Reconsidering the surface of metaphor which has masked the significant material presence of energy in African American literature—the ubiquity of the racialized descriptor of “coal-black” skin, to take one example—I show how black writers have theorized energy as a simultaneously material, social, and cultural web, at once a medium of control and a conduit for emancipation. African American literature emphasizes how intensely energy impacts not only those who come into contact with its material instantiation as fuel—convict miners, building superintendents—but also those at something of a physical remove, through the more ambient experiences of heat, landscape, and light. By attending to a variety of experiences of energy and the nuances of their literary depiction, “‘Oh, Awful Power’” shows how twentieth-century African American literature not only anticipates some of the later insights of the field now referred to as the Energy Humanities but also illustrates some ways of rethinking the limits of that discourse on interactions between energy, labor, and modernity, especially as they relate to problems of race.

These insights are made especially visible, I argue, by way of experiments with literary form, particularly through play with the expectations, limitations, and affordances of genre. I identify three particular generic formations which prove vital to the African American theorization of modern energy: the picturesque, tragedy, and naturalism. In my first chapter, I examine a 1986 novel by West Virginia-born novelist and politician J. McHenry Jones, entitled *Hearts of Gold*, which features the rare portrayal of black life in a convict coal mine at its narrative core. The feverish episode in the mine stands out against the otherwise genteel narrative of light-skinned striving and respectability, which aligns closely with Washingtonian ideologies of progress *and* the aesthetic sensibilities of the picturesque. In this depiction of the convict mine, Jones both poses a challenge to the social and political ideologies which subtend the picturesque, and draws a novel link between the rise of coal and the persistence of slavery in the form of the convict lease system. Chapter two extends Jones' critique of the racial politics of coal mining through an examination of Shirley Graham's *Dust to Earth*, a play briefly produced in 1941 which depicts the interracial conflicts that arise after a deadly collapse at a coal mine in Illinois. I argue that the play represents the fulfillment of Graham's earlier project of rewriting Eugene O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape* for an all-black cast—a project that O'Neill himself swiftly vetoed. Examining *Dust to Earth's* intertwined plots of descent and sabotage, I show how the play exploits the generic conventions of tragedy in order to reconfigure familiar narratives of racial domination to fit the distinctly modern space of the coal mine. My third chapter reads the presence of two relatively “minor” forms of energy—hydroelectricity and solar power—in two novels by George Schuyler and W.E.B. Du Bois, *Dark Princess* (1928) and *Black Empire* (1936-38). In each of these texts, energy is written into the narrative as a powerful force, capable of affecting social and political life on a global scale. I argue that Du Bois' romance is better

understood as an experiment in naturalism, and that through conceiving of the body as a “human motor” Du Bois is able to form a critique of progressive era hydroelectric projects as aspects of an international war for colonial control. For Schuyler, on the other hand, solar power is figured as a potentially revolutionary form of energy that, despite its roots in a recent history of imperial expansion, nonetheless carries some promise once wrested from the control of the nation-state. In my final chapter, I interpret Ann Petry’s 1946 naturalist novel *The Street* as a drama of thermal management—a narrative in which the cultural politics of energy are refracted primarily through various characters’ bodily experiences of temperature. I argue that the protagonist’s struggle to maintain homeostasis represents an embodied critique of the often-elided racial politics of domestic heat. Finally, with the literary history of the furnace room as a backdrop, I argue that Petry’s depiction of the space foregrounds its paradoxical status as both a crucible of atavistic degeneration and a fount of humanist inspiration.

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