

Petrocultures Reading Course

7,5 ECTS Reading Course

For MA and PhD students

Spring and fall 2021, Chalmers University of Technology

Online forum (Zoom)

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Course description

This course gives an introduction to the growing field of petrocultures literature. The past years have seen the emergence of new fields within the humanities prompted by the need for cross-disciplinary research in order to understand and tackle the challenges our societies are facing. One such field is energy humanities (Szeman et al. 2017). One central area of research that has emerged as part of this field focuses on oil and ‘petroculture.’ Central aspects of this research concern for example the effectiveness of oil, which makes it particularly addictive oil as an intrinsic part of the political and economic system, the cultural and material omnipresence of oil, and the historical roots of our oil “addiction”. This research aims to reveal the role of oil as an underpinning force in global society, both culturally (i.e. as a hidden assumption in our popular culture narratives), materially (i.e. in plastic, medicine, cars, as a material basis of our consumer and media culture) and economically (i.e. as a major economic sector which, in turn, funds other sectors). In order to understand why our current system is so difficult to change, we

need to acknowledge that oil is pervasive to our global society: We live in a petroculture. This reading course will examine the state-of-the-art of this strand of energy research.

Examination

The examination consists of the following components:

- Active participation in all course sessions.
- Submission of a short seminar document (1 page about the literature and a few questions) before each seminar, providing brief reflections on, or posing questions for, the seminar in question. It must be submitted by e-mail to other course participants and the seminar leaders no later than the day before the seminar.

Literature: Getting it. Reading it.

We provide links to articles in the reading list below. The books on the list should be available in libraries. If you have problems finding a certain book, let us know and we may be able to help. Texts that are not readily available online or through libraries will be made available by us.

All texts are listed in suggested reading order.

Preparations before each seminar will include reading approximately 200 pages of text intensively, and some additional texts extensively. Intensive means reading the text carefully enough to understand and being able to critically discuss the information and arguments made. Extensive means acquiring a general idea of the content, without required attention to details.

We welcome a discussion about the course literature as the course unfolds, and are happy to receive comments and suggestions for alternative or additional readings from the students.

Session 1. Introduction to Petrocultures and the History of Oil.

Intensive reading:

Imre Szeman and Dominic Boyer (eds.) *Energy Humanities: An Anthology*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017. Introduction + Ch. 1 (Dipesh Chakrabarty's 'The Climate of History'). (31p)

Sheena Wilson, Adam Carlson, and Imre Szeman (eds.) *Petrocultures: Oil, Politics, Culture*, Montréal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017. Introduction + Ch. 16 (Tim Kaposy's 'Petroleum's *Longue Durée*: Writing Oil's Temporalities into History'). (32p)

Daniel Yergin, *The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money, and Power*, New York: Free Trade Press, 2009 [1991]. Prologue + Epilogue + Individually chosen chapter(s), depending on your research interest. (15p plus individually chosen chapter(s))

Brian C. Black, *Crude Reality: Petroleum in World History*. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2014. Introduction + Ch. 2: 'Crossing Borders to Increase Supply' (32p)

Lynn Badia et al., *After Oil*, Edmonton: Petrocultures Research Group, 2016. Available through: http://afteroil.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/AfterOil_fulldocument.pdf (68p)

Extensive reading:

Vaclav Smil, *Oil: A Beginner's Guide*, London: Oneworld Publications (2nd ed), 2017 (224p)

Session 2. The Materiality of Oil.

Intensive reading:

Margarita Balmaceda et al. "Energy materiality: A conceptual review of multi-disciplinary approaches," *Energy Research & Social Science*, 56, Oct 2019, pp. 1-14, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.erss.2019.101220> (14p)

Bob Johnson, *Mineral Rites: An Archaeology of the Fossil Economy*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019. Introduction + Ch. 1: 'Mineral Rites: The Embodiment of Fossil Fuels' (31p)

Thom Davies, "Toxic Space and Time: Slow Violence, Necropolitics, and Petrochemical Pollution," *Annals of the American Association of Geographers*, 108:6, 2019, pp. 1537-1553. DOI: [10.1177/2399654419841063](https://doi.org/10.1177/2399654419841063) (19 p)

Douglas Rogers "The materiality of the corporation: Oil, gas, and corporate social technologies in the remaking of a Russian region," *American Ethnologist*, 39:2, May 2012, pp. 284-296, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-1425.2012.01364.x> (12p)

Amanda Boetzkes, "Plastic Vision and the Sight of Petroculture," in Wilson, Carlson, and Szeman (eds.) *Petrocultures: Oil, Politics, Culture*, Montréal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017, pp. 222-241. (19p)

Kirsty Robinson, "Oil futures/Petrotextiles," in Wilson, Carlson, and Szeman (eds.) *Petrocultures: Oil, Politics, Culture*, Montréal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017, pp. 242-263 (22 p)

Extensive reading:

Graeme MacDonald, "Containing Oil: The Pipeline in Petroculture," in Wilson, Carlson, and Szeman (eds.) *Petrocultures: Oil, Politics, Culture*, Montréal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017, pp. 36-77. (41p)

Gisa Weszkalnys, "Oil's magic: materiality and contestation," in: Strauss, Rupp, and Love (eds.) *Cultures of Energy: Power, Practices, Technologies*, Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press Inc., pp. 267-283. Available through: https://www.academia.edu/5589357/Oils_Magic_Contestation_and_Materiality (16p)

Session 3. The Oil-Culture Relation.

Intensive reading:

Frederick Buell, "A Short History of Oil Cultures: Or, the Marriage of Catastrophe and Exuberance," *Journal of American Studies*, 46 (2), 2012, pp. 273-293, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875812000102> (20p)

Stephanie LeMenager, *Living Oil: Petroleum Culture in the American Century*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. Introduction + Ch. 2: 'The Aesthetics of Oil' (53p)

Imre Szeman, "How to Know about Oil: Energy Epistemologies and Political Futures," in *Journal of Canadian Studies/Revue d'études canadiennes*, 47: 3, Fall 2013, pp. 145-168. <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/542312> (23p)

Cara Daggett, "Petro-masculinity: Fossil Fuels and Authoritarian Desire," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 47:1, 2018: pp. 25-44, DOI: [10.1177/0305829818775817](https://doi.org/10.1177/0305829818775817) (19p)

Sheena Wilson, "Gendering Oil: Tracing Western Petrosexual Relations," in Szeman & Boyer (eds.) *Energy Humanities: An Anthology*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017, pp. 269-283. (14p)

Lindsey B. Green-Simms, *Postcolonial Automobility. Car Culture in West Africa*, Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2017. "Introduction: Cars, Cultural Production, and Global Modernity," pp 1-29 (29 p)

Extensive reading:

Cecily Devereaux, "'Made for Mankind": Cars, Cosmetics, and the Petrocultural Feminine,' in Wilson, Carlson, and Szeman (eds.) *Petrocultures: Oil, Politics, Culture*, Montréal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017, pp. 162-186. (24p)

Imre Szeman, "Conjectures on world energy literature: Or, what is petroculture?," *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 53:3, 2017, pp. 277-288, DOI: [10.1080/17449855.2017.1337672](https://doi.org/10.1080/17449855.2017.1337672) (11p)

Raechel Lutz, "Petroleum's Park: How Oil Shaped the Palisades Interstate Park, 1900–1960," *Technology and Culture*, 61:3, July 2020, pp. 713-738, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/tech.2020.0071> (25p)

Session 4. Extractive Petrocultures.

Intensive reading

Nelida Fuccaro, "Introduction: Histories of Oil and Urban Modernity in the Middle East," in *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 33 (1), 2013, pp. 1–6, <https://doi.org/10.1215/1089201x-2020327> (6p)

Reem Alissa, "The Oil Town of Ahmadi since 1946: From Colonial Town to Nostalgic City," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 33 (1), 2013, pp. 41-58. <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/506690/pdf> (17p)

Chantal Zabus, "Ken Saro-Wiwa: Oil Boom, Oil Doom," *Matatu: Journal for African Culture and Society*, 23-24, 2001, pp. 1-12. <https://doi.org/10.1163/18757421-90000350> (12p)

Miguel Tinker Salas, *The Enduring Legacy: Oil, Culture, and Society in Venezuela*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2009. "Introduction: Oil, Culture, and Society" (pp. 1–14) and "La Ruta Petrolera: Learning to Live with Oil" (chapter 3, pp 73–106). (46p)

Extensive reading:

Farah Al-Nakib, *Kuwait Transformed: A History of Oil and Urban Life*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016. (296p)

Session 5. Power, Capital, and Infrastructure.

Intensive reading:

Timothy Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil*, London: Verso, 2013.

Introduction + Ch. 1: 'Machines of Democracy' (42p)

Matthew T. Huber, *Lifeblood: Oil, Freedom, and the Forces of Capital*, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2013. Introduction + Ch. 1: 'The Power of Oil? Energy, Machines, and the Forces of Capital.' (41p)

Dominic Boyer, "Energopower: An Introduction," in *Anthropological Quarterly*, 87: 2, Spring 2014, pp. 309-333, URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43652700> (25p)

Carola Hein & Mohamad Sedighi, "Iran's Global Petroleumscape: The Role of Oil in Shaping Khuzestan and Tehran," *Architectural Theory Review*, 21:3, 2016, pp. 349-374, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13264826.2018.1379110> (25p)

Kenneth Omeje, "Oil conflict in Nigeria: Contending issues and perspectives of the local Niger Delta people," *New Political Economy*, 10:3, 2005, pp. 321-334, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13563460500204183> (13p)

Extensive reading:

Christopher F. Jones, *Routes of Power: Energy and Modern America*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014. Introduction + Ch. 4: 'Pipelines and Power' (57p)

Carola Hein, "Oil Spaces: The Global Petroleumscape in the Rotterdam/The Hague Area," *Journal of Urban History*, 44 (5), 2018, pp. 887-929, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0096144217752460> (42p)

Session 6. Petrofiction and Ecocriticism.

Choose one or more of these examples of petrofiction (extensive reading):

Upton Sinclair, *Oil!* Penguin Books, 2007 [1927]

Abdelrahman Munif, *Cities of Salt*, Vintage, 1984

Ken Saro-Wiva, *A Month and a Day*, Penguin Books, 1995

Intensive reading:

Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017. Part 1: Stories. (79p)

Rob Nixon, "The Hidden Lives of Oil," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, April 2002.

Available through: <https://www.chronicle.com/article/the-hidden-lives-of-oil/> (8p)

Axel Goodbody and Bradon Smith, "Stories of Energy: Narrative in the Energy Humanities," *Resilience: A Journal of the Environmental Humanities*, 6(2–3), 2019, pp. 1–25.

<https://doi.org/10.5250/resilience.6.2-3.0001> (25p)

Ilana Xinos, "Petro-Capitalism, Petrofiction, and Islamic Discourse: The Formation of an Imagined Community in *Cities of Salt*," *Arab Studies Quarterly* 28(1), 2006, pp. 1–12.

URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41858517> (12p)

Jennifer Wenzel, "Petro-Magic-Realism: Toward a Political Ecology of Nigerian Literature," in Szeman & Boyer (eds.) *Energy Humanities: An Anthology*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017, pp. 486–503. (17p)

Maximilian Feldner, "Representing the neocolonial destruction of the Niger Delta: Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* (2011)," *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 54:4, 2018, pp. 515–527.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/17449855.2018.1451358> (13p)

Philip Onoriode Aghoghovwia, "Versifying the Environment and the 'Oil Encounter': Tanure Ojaide's *Delta Blues & Home Songs*," *Alternation Special Edition* 6, 2013, pp. 175–196.

<http://alternation.ukzn.ac.za/Files/docs/20.3/09%20Agh.pdf> (21p)

Ilya Kalinin, "Petropoetics: The Oil text in Post-Soviet Russia" in Dobrenko & Lipovetzky (eds.) *Russian Literature since 1991*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015, pp. 120-144)

Heather I. Sullivan, “Material Ecocriticism and the Petro-Text,” in Heise, Christensen, & Niemann (eds.) *The Routledge Companion to the Environmental Humanities*, London: Routledge, 2017, pp. 414–423. (9p)

Tip! The blog *Petrofictionary* (<https://petrofictionary.wordpress.com/>) and Amitav Ghosh’s blog (<https://amitavghosh.com/blog/?p=6441>) compile lists of petrofiction and petroculture research.