English 7087
Petrofictions

Classes: Wednesdays 10.00-1.00
in A3033

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Course Description:
Informed by the rapidly emerging field of the Energy Humanities, this course examines literary figurations of the most important energy source of the twentieth and (so far) twenty-first centuries: petroleum. Students will consider texts from around the world in which oil and its industries are an explicit concern. However, thinking about oil also necessitates looking beyond just the more visible (often intensely contested and violent) aspects of its production. As Imre Szeman notes, “petrocarbons structure contemporary social life...oil is ontology, the structuring ‘Real’ or our contemporary sociopolitical imaginary.” Thus, we will also read work that addresses the ways in which petroleum is entrenched within our everyday lives. In addition, we will think about texts which, taking seriously the imperative of climate change, speculate about new modes of human existence after oil.
**Required texts**
Tony Birch, *Blood*
Eric Conway and Naomi Oreskes, *The Collapse of Western Civilization: A View from the Future*
Barbara Kingsolver, *Flight Behavior*
Helon Habila, *Oil on Water*
John McGrath, *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil*
Abdelrahman Munif, *Cities of Salt*
Upton Sinclair, *Oil!*
Sina Queyras, *Expressway*

**Assessment**
At the graduate level it is taken for granted you will attend every class, always have the required reading completed on time, and participate fully in class discussions. Not meeting these basic expectations will make it exceedingly difficult to pass the course. The formal components of your assessment are as follows:

1. Two seminar presentations = 40%
   (first paper = 15%, second = 25%)

2. Major paper (4000 words) = 50% **Due 7 April**

3. Collaborative project = 10% **Due 5 April**

1. Seminar presentations
   Students will present two oral presentations, each of around 30 minutes, on a pre-assigned text. Whenever two people are scheduled to speak on the same book, the presenters should meet well in advance to determine that their respective approaches will be unique. Please inform me by email at least three days before your seminar about the direction you have chosen to take.

   Your seminar should be geared at critically interrogating and engaging with your reading. **Do not** simply provide a summary of it. Good presentations are well researched, clearly focused and original. Seminar talks will be followed by class discussion, which you should be prepared to spark.
You must submit a written version of your presentation on the same day you give your seminar. It should contain a works cited list, conform to MLA style (8th edition), and be copy-edited.

2. Long paper (4000 words)
Due Friday, 7 April, your long paper must be extensively researched, cogently structured and compelling in its originality. You need to construct a research question to address in your major essay, and confirm it with me before 1 March. The topic you wish to pursue is open, providing it addresses one or more of our primary texts and is in keeping with the thematic interests of the course.

3. Collaborative project
Academic work in the Humanities is increasingly undertaken collaboratively. This exercise involves working with your fellow students to jointly construct a presentation of a minimum of 30 minutes in length for the last day on which our class meets. The presentation should reflect on the key findings of the course, and point to possible future directions for the study of Petrofiction, and/or research in Energy Humanities more broadly. The exact form and structure of this presentation is up to your group – feel free to be creative. Please keep, and then submit, a log of your individual efforts and time spent on the project; it is important that the work is shared evenly among group members. Please also submit a jointly authored write-up of your presentation on the last day of classes.
Schedule

11 January  Introduction to the course

18 January  Petroleum and literature

   Reading:
   Italo Calvino, “The Petrol Pump”
   Amitav Ghosh, “Petrofiction”
   Stephanie LeMenager, “Introduction,” Living Oil
   Graeme MacDonald, “Fiction,” in Fueling Culture: 101 Words for Energy and Environment
   Patricia Yaeger et al, “Editor’s Column”

25 January  Oil!

1 February  Cities of Salt

8 February  The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil

15 February  Oil on Water

22 February  Winter semester break

1 March  Expressway

   Additional Reading:
   Featherstone and Sheller essays (and anything else you have time to read) in the Theory Culture Society volume on Automobilities.

   Deadline for confirming long essay topic

8 March  Blood
15 March

After Oil?

Reading:
Dipesh Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History”
Amitav Ghosh, The Great Derangement
China Mieville, “Covehithe”
Petrocultures Research Group, After Oil

22 March

Flight Behavior

29 March

The Collapse of Western Civilization

5 April

Conclusions:
Group presentation

7 April

Major paper due
Some Suggestions for Further Reading (and Listening) in Energy and Environmental Humanities Research

Books


Klein, Naomi. This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate. Simon and Schuster, 2014.


**Special Issues of Journals**


Theory Culture and Society, vol. 21, no. 4-5, 2004.

Additional Articles


**Podcasts**

The Center for Energy and Environmental Research in the Human Sciences at Rice University in Texas runs a fabulous podcast series that you can find links to here: [http://culturesofenergy.com/](http://culturesofenergy.com/)