

Editors' Introduction: Envisioning the Energy Humanities

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The pieces in this special issue were originally presented at the 2015 Modern Languages Association's annual convention in Vancouver. They were very much occasioned by what an increasingly large and diverse group of scholars around the globe, at least as early as the inaugural Petrocultures conference in 2012, have been calling Energy Humanities.¹ Yet anyone who has stood on the west side of Vancouver and looked out onto the waterways that flow into the Pacific will know that Canada's west coast, like most urban, continental edges, occasions urgent and radically new visions for the relationship between energy and the way humanity operates globally. For, at the cusp of the continent, standing beside Douglas Coupland's enormous "Digital Orca," coal barges and oil tankers pass by the Vancouver Convention Centre everyday on their way to the Salish Sea carbon corridor. As they float on they pass by a sea plane refueling station that bobs in Coal Harbour. It has often been remarked that energy, especially in the form of fossil fuels, pervades modern life. Here, in Vancouver, on the traditional, unceded lands of the Coast Salish peoples, this truism of our petroculture—that hydrocarbons saturate our social and ecological relations to their very roots—has several layers of mediation and processing stripped away. The "greenest city on the continent" coincides with an energy infrastructure that wraps the planet in a warming blanket of carbon fuel emissions. Both the yuppie

¹ For the first use of the term "Energy Humanities," see Szeman and Boyer "The Rise of Energy Humanities."

West Enders and those crowding East Hastings Street, knowingly or not, live in near-immediate proximity to vital routes that ship coal and oil resources extracted from Western Canada to global markets. This feels like a weighty revelation, but it is the type of conundrum that this growing field takes as its entry point. At the close of this collection, Jennifer Wenzel asks, “how can we understand the discrepancy between the everyday tedium of filling the gas tank and the sublimely discrepant timescales at work in fossil fuels, the ways in which geologic past, technological present, and environmental future overlap and collide?” If this small excerpt from the larger field is any testament, Wenzel’s call to “understand the discrepancy” leaves open many paths to developing this knowledge.²

Few today will challenge the fact of environmental crisis, even if the facticity of that crisis continues to thwart, rather than accelerate, political resolution. And even fewer would challenge the broad consensus that puts fossil fuels at the heart of that crisis, since agreement in principle has little to no effect on our energy habits. As a critical term for Humanities and Social Sciences research, *energy* names not one but at least two things. The first—energy as idea—is easy to generate thinking around, because energy circulates most freely today in conversations about how to live a life, where to source one’s food, and where to invest one’s capital. Ideas about energy, however, run through the literal circuitry of a world saturated in fossil fuels and their infrastructures. Like most infrastructures, our planet’s networks of carbon power both make possible, and impossible, the kinds of alternatives we might collectively imagine. Thus, energy’s second form is as substance. Energy’s two sides—idea and substance, lifestyle and form of life, base and superstructure—contour what many in the energy humanities have been calling *the impasse*.

The impasse that we have here been painting in broad strokes—the epistemological, aesthetic, political, and economic reasons it remains easier to “settle for recycling,” as Peter Hitchcock will put it, than it is to “break the cycle”—is, in essence, the problem that the energy humanities attempts to address.³ To put it polemically, the critical ambition of mediating complex systems that make up the world of experience has always been at the heart of social scientific and humanities research. In the wake of industrialization, the energy system—the common denominator of the social, economic, and environmental systems—now threatens prolonged and uneven disaster. Thus the project of mapping, managing, and overcoming the impasse of fossil fueled modernity is not at all other to the capacities and concepts of the social science and humanities. Moreover, that same project is utterly unachievable without qualitative social research. To overcome the cultures, infrastructures, and habits of our high oc-

² See Wenzel “Taking Stock of Energy Humanities” in this issue.

³ See Hitchcock “Energy Bars” in this issue.

tane lifestyle must mean something different than simply abandoning them, as if that were an easy proposition. We might say that the initial task for energy humanities is to elaborate the impasse either in epistemology, as in Imre Szeman's provocative query "How to Know about Oil?", or in phenomenology, as Stephanie LeMenager proposes in *Living Oil* (2014). What the following contributions to the growing field of the Energy Humanities make clear is that next steps are already visible, and that our methods for thinking about energy, its pasts and its futures, are getting rewritten as we speak. The six short essays that follow each establish unique standpoints from which to envisage the shape and function of Energy Humanities research. We do not claim that these pieces name each possible trajectory—certainly the gesture of an Energy Humanities is not to narrowly define the critical projects it generates. Indeed the term is only one possible name for this emerging field. We say one name because the study of energy has only recently emerged from its nascent status, and it seems too early to decide finally what to name the kind of work being produced under various other banners.

Each of the following short contributions to the growing field of the Energy Humanities offer a vista onto what the field is already doing, suggest what it might do better, and argue why the humanities is an indispensable standpoint from which to understand energetic, environmental, and economic crisis. Here is a rundown of what follows: Clint Burnham grounds the collection both in the land, which we occupied to be at the convention, and in the struggles that have been unfolding in the Vancouver area over energy transport; Brent Ryan Bellamy offers an overview of ways we might use existing literary methodologies in concert with the study of energy; Jeff Diamanti offers three theses on the political economy of energy; Adam Dickinson delves into the pataphysical and cellular level of oil's substantive impacts; Peter Hitchcock dials into the way Energy Humanities operates at both local and global scales and institutional and theoretical registers at once; Stephanie LeMenager writes oil culture from the standpoint of living in and with oil infrastructure; and, Jennifer Wenzel pushes Energy Humanities to think beyond its opening gesture, "oil is everywhere," to ask what we should all be doing about it. These pieces offer trajectories for the Energy Humanities that aim to develop as much as they aim to convert thinking and to imagine as much as they hope to generate alternatives.

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Works Cited

Boyer, Dominic and Imre Szeman. "The Rise of Energy Humanities." *University Affairs* (March 2014): 40. Print.