University College Maastricht Hum 2047

The Future of Literature?

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Introduction

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Course theme

The main topic of this course is the future of literature. The two ingredients of this title literature and its future - may be puzzling at first sight. What is *literature*, and what is the future? Many of the questions facing readers and writers at the start of the twentyfirst century, after all, deal with the very fabric of literature. In a world of screens and ereaders, does literature still coincide with print or has it become a more expansive notion that overlaps and intersects with other media? Does our conception of literature include or exclude the 'quality tv' associated with HBO, for instance? In light of recent developments like the memoir boom and the 'reality hunger' present across a range of genres, moreover, it might appear as though another traditional component of literature, its made-up quality, can no longer be taken for granted. Does literature have to be fictional, or has creative nonfiction now become a more prototypical example of the literary text? If 'literature' turns out to be an ambiguous notion, the other component of this course is no less puzzling. Obviously, the **future** remains by definition unknown. In that sense, it might be more accurate to say that this course deals with the present condition of literary fiction and the future directions implied by its most striking forms at the start of the new century. But there is an even more radical problem. To some, talking about the future of literature may appear strange or misguided, given the oftrepeated claim that the novel, literature, reading, or even the humanities as a whole are dead or dying. In light of such claims, one might wonder whether there will be such a thing as the future of literature. Can we talk about literature without turning to the past and celebrating a supposedly less ambiguous situation?

Yes we can. The central claim of this course is that the literature of the early twenty-first century reveals certain characteristic features, which show that it remains a vital form of public debate, and which set out a clear direction for the future of reading and writing. The idea that literature and associated practices are dying is an old and not particularly convincing hypothesis, for instance. At the start of the twenty-first century, it is an empirical fact that there have never been more books, more novels, more writers, and more readers. As Matthew Wilkens has shown, the number of new novels published in the US increased exponentially at the start of the new century, current estimates placing the total number at fifty thousand new fiction titles per year (!). On a more conceptual level, it could be argued that literature remains at the forefront of cultural developments, just consider the idea of the 'creative economy' (as studied by Sarah Brouillette) or the fact that literary scholars are playing a pivotal role in using and

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adapting Big Data for the particular purposes of the humanities. Instead of reading a small set of books in detail ('close reading'), they argue, we should now use cutting-edge software to identify patterns across large sets of texts ('distant reading'). Silicon Valley has not only led to the rise of GAFA (Google, Amazon, Facebook, Apple), in short, but also to the idea of the 'literary lab'. If literature is far from dead, that does not mean it is always a good thing. A complex phenomenon in a complex world, literary fiction occasionally resists injustices but it can also affirm the status quo, perpetuate certain stereotypes, and fail to enlighten its readers. That is why this course, rather than celebrate literature uncritically, examines how 'literature serves as an "antenna" ... for a range of opinions, attitudes, and intuitions that have not yet fully congealed in public discourse', as Caren Irr puts it (*Toward the Geopolitical Novel*, 15).

If literature turns out to be less dead than some say, it is also true that we can identify specific features of contemporary literature that map a path - or several paths - to the future. After situating recent fiction in time and space, this course will highlight various **characteristic features** of literature now, and their ties to particular forms and genres. More specifically, the course addresses 1) the spatial boundaries of contemporary literature, 2) its ties to literary history and cultural history more generally, 3) the intense interaction between literature and other media, especially in the context of online culture and quality television, 4) the fictional reflection on all-too-real clashes between individuals and communities, as in acts of war and terror, and 5) literature's systematic reflection on how the human past appears to be leading us to a planet without animals and humans, most explicitly in works dealing with petroculture and climate change. These are the coordinates of the present, but it seems safe to say that they hint at future directions too. In fact, you might argue that they all deal with the future or different imagined futures, be that the future of English, the future of the past, the future of writing, the future of human communities, or the future of the environment. Differently put, they all deal with different, residual as well as emergent, 'ways of being we', to use a phrase from Beckett mentioned in Peter Boxall's introduction to contemporary literature (177). These different topics are also connected to various forms and genres, as I mentioned, through traces of other languages, intermedial connections, the rise of non-fiction and the turn towards epic, large-scale thinking. These themes and forms are the subject of this course.

Course objectives

This course is geared towards the following objectives:

- to trace the contours of the contemporary literary field by providing students with an overview of the salient themes and forms of contemporary (Anglophone) literature;
- to introduce students to related **academic debates** about the interplay between world and nation, past and present, print and post-print media ecologies, old as well as new geopolitical tensions, and environmental problems including species extinction and climate change;
- to introduce students to relevant **methodological insights** that will enable them to process and respond to current debates in literary studies and contemporary society at large.

Practical organization

The course consists of nine group assignments and class discussions, an individual presentation, and a final exam paper. For the **class assignments**, you will be asked to come up with two questions beforehand, based on your reading, and to hand them in **beforehand** (via email). If you are unable to attend class, you are still expected to read the materials and come up with two questions. Try to make these questions specific rather than vague and general. Turning to the **presentation**, this will be a ten-minute overview of what you plan to do for the exam paper. One of your colleagues will be asked to provide constructive peer feedback, and the others should listen closely and ask questions too. The **exam paper** should be a 3500-word paper on a contemporary novel, short story collection or poetry collection. In terms of assessment, your grade for this course will be based on your final paper (70%, see below for more details) as well as your questions, class participation, individual presentation and peer feedback (30%).

We will be using a **handbook** for this course, Peter Boxall's *Twenty-First-Century Fiction*. A *Critical Introduction* (2013). This is a good overview of recent literature and provides you with the necessary background to contextualize the different components of this course as well as the argument you will be developing yourself in the final paper. We will not discuss every chapter of the book in class, nor does this work mention every aspect of twenty-first century fiction that is relevant for this course - neither the ties between literature and other media nor the effects of environmental degradation are explored in detail. Nevertheless, Boxall's overview enables us to situate ourselves on the complex map of contemporary fiction. So make sure you get your hands on this book.

Course overview

Introduction

Assignment 1. Literature and translation

- Rebecca Walkowitz, "Comparison Literature", *New Literary History* 40 (2009), pp. 567-82.
- Also see: Peter Boxall, "Introduction. Twenty-First Century Fiction".

Assignment 2. Literature and history 1: postmodernism

- Adam Kelly, "Beginning with Postmodernism", *Twentieth-Century Literature* 57.3 & 57.4 (2011), pp. 391-422.
- Ben De Bruyn, "Period", *Literature Now. Key Terms and Methods for Literary History* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2016), pp. 191-202.
- Also see: Peter Boxall, "Introduction. Twenty-First Century Fiction".

Assignment 3. Literature and history 2: memory

- Peter Boxall, "Inheriting the Past: Literature and Historical Memory in the Twenty-First Century" (chapter two).
- James F. English, "Now, Not Now: Counting Time in Contemporary Fiction Studies", *MLQ* 77.3 (2016), pp. 395-418.
- Also see: David James and Urmila Seshagiri, "Metamodernism: Narratives of Continuity and Revolution", *PMLA* 129.1 (2014), pp. 87-100.

Assignment 4. Literature and media 1: Amazon

- Jim Collins, "Introduction: Digital Books, Beach Chairs, and Popular Literary Culture", *Bring on the Books for Everybody* (Durham: Duke UP, 2010), pp. 1-36.
- Mark McGurl, "Everything and Less: Fiction in the Age of Amazon", *MLQ* 77.3 (2016), pp. 447-471.
- Also see: Julian Murphet, "Medium", *Literature Now. Key Terms and Methods for Literary History* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2016), pp. 46-58.

Assignment 5. Literature and media 2: HBO

- Jim Collins, "The Use Values of Narrativity in Digital Cultures", *New Literary History* 44.3 (2013), pp. 639-660.
- Irina Rajewsky, "Intermediality, Intertextuality, and Remediation", *Intermédialités* 6 (2006), pp. 43-64.
- Also see: Julian Murphet, "Medium", *Literature Now. Key Terms and Methods for Literary History* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2016), pp. 46-58.

Assignment 6. Literature and geopolitics

 Peter Boxall, "A Curious Knot: Terrorism, Radicalism, and the Avant-Garde" (chapter four).

- John Marx, "Failed-State Fiction", *Contemporary Literature* 49.4 (2008), pp. 597-633.
- Also see: David Ayers, "Politics", *Literature Now. Key Terms and Methods for Literary History* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2016), pp. 121-134.

Assignment 7. Literature and the Anthropocene

- Kate Marshall, "What Are the Novels of the Anthropocene: American Fiction in Geological Time", *American Literary History* (2015), pp. 1-16.
- Ben De Bruyn, "Learning to Be a Species in the Anthropocene: On Annie Proulx's *Barkskins*", *Frame* (2016), pp. 71-90.
- Also see: Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History: Four Theses", *Critical Inquiry* 35.2 (2009), pp. 197-222.

Assignment 8. Paper presentations 1

Assignment 9. Paper presentations 2

Assignment 10. Literature and the environment 1: extinction

- Peter Boxall, "The Limits of the Human" (chapter three).
- Ursula Heise, "Lost Dogs, Last Birds, and Listed Species: Cultures of Extinction", *Configurations* 18.1-2 (2010), pp. 49-72.
- Also see: Ursula Heise, "The Posthuman Turn: Rewriting Species in Recent American Literature", *A Companion to American Literary Studies*, ed. by Caroline Levander and Robert Levine, pp. 454-68.

Assignment 11. Literature and the environment 2: petroculture

- Stephanie LeMenager, "The Aesthetics of Petroleum, after *Oil*!", *American Literary History* 24.1 (2012), pp. 59-86.
- Also see: Ben De Bruyn, "Realism 4. Objects, Weather and Infrastructure in Ben Lerner's 10:04", Textual Practice (2017), pp. 951-71.

Exam

Attendance and participation

Students who have not met the 100% attendance requirement for the tutorial meetings, but who have not missed more than 30% of them, will be given a provisional overall grade, but will not receive credits for the course until they have successfully completed an **additional assignment**. The additional assignment consists of a 1,000 word position paper. The details will be agreed upon with the tutor.

This class depends on your attendance and sustained, active participation in discussions. Active participation means:

- close reading of reading materials the tutor may ask to see your written notes, so bring a copy of the texts as well as your notes;
- scouting for supplementary literature, reflecting on the assignments by coming up with your own (counter)examples, insights and questions;
- contributing to class discussions by constructively engaging in dialogue with your fellow students;
- creating sufficient room for other students to participate in the discussions;
- presenting your plan for the final paper in an engaging manner;
- providing constructive feedback on the presentations of your fellow students;
- reflecting on the course and the assignments;
- checking email regularly for updates/materials from your tutor
- while lectures are not compulsory, it is strongly recommended that you attend
 them, seeing that they will help you with the paper, the assignments and the
 readings some of which are not easy.

The reading materials for every assignment will be made available by your tutor. Together with the handbook, they should help you to grasp the available options in the contemporary literary field. Nevertheless, you are strongly encouraged to look for **additional secondary literature** related to your exam paper.

Presentation and exam paper

For assignments 8 and 9 you will have to present your ongoing research for the exam paper as well as to respond to the presentations of your fellow students. To ensure that you have sufficient time to prepare this presentation, there will be no assignment for the immediately preceding time slot (check your schedule).

The **presentation** should contain at least the following elements (though not necessarily in that order):

• A problem statement or research question;

- A corpus: what is the material you are working on? How did you select it? Why is it this work the best choice for your argument?;
- A method: how are you going to tackle the problem at hand? What concepts will you be using?;
- A structure: how do you plan to organize the material? What will be the order of your argument?;
- A provisional bibliography: which articles and books have you found? Do you have sufficient material for every component of your argument?

You will also be asked to **respond** to the presentations of others. The point here is not to attack your colleagues, obviously, but to help them make the best paper they can. In fact, the students *responding to* the presentation will be evaluated during this part of the course as well, not just the students *doing* the presentation.

The last part of the course is devoted to the writing of your **paper**. This paper should be an individually written, 3,500 word paper on a recent literary work of your choosing. This paper should demonstrate your ability 1) to write a coherent paper, 2) to analyze the form and content of recent literary works, 3) to situate these works in the broader literary and cultural landscape, drawing on the material provided in the course as well as the extra readings you identified on your own. This paper should have 1.5 linespacing, a 12-point font, 2.54cm (1 inch) margins, a title page, page numbers and a complete and accurate reference list. You can use MLA, Chicago or APA style but whatever you choose, follow that system consistently. This paper will account for 70% of your grade.

Criteria for assessing your paper include the following:

style and format

- construct grammatically correct sentences;
- avoid repetition of the same words and expressions;
- avoid spelling mistakes and bad punctuation;
- do not use only long sentences or only short ones;
- your title has to be both appealing and informative: it has to make the reader curious and set her on the right track;
- use informative subheadings;
- use a professional, academic tone in your writing;
- be consistent in citation and referencing style.

argumentation

the introduction needs to be informative and appealing, i.e., it should encourage
the audience to read on and should also give them a good idea of what will follow.
The introduction therefore needs to contain a problem statement, a lucid and
logical build-up towards this problem statement and an indication of the various
steps you will take to address the research question;

- there has to be a logical and persuasive chain of argumentation which leads the reader from the introduction to the conclusion;
- substantiate your claims with sound arguments and make your claims as precise as possible, i.e., do not claim more than you can actually be held accountable for, do not overreach yourself, be aware of your limitations;
- take the other actors in your field of research into account by quoting them, supporting them, identifying them, criticizing them, etc. Demonstrate that you are aware of the fact that you are neither the only one nor the first to address the issue at hand:
- make sure theory and analysis are well-integrated (do not use your case study merely to illustrate theoretical concepts but to engage in a dialogue between theory and praxis);
- quote wisely: only incorporate quotations or paraphrases that support your argument;
- make choices: it is better to focus on a certain scene in a novel, a line from a specific poem, two very relevant short stories, a particular concept etc. that you analyze in-depth rather than discussing a lot of material superficially;
- analyze the material: do not just paraphrase the text in question but demonstrate that you are able to identify its important features in terms of content and rhetoric:
- the conclusion has to return to and address the questions or issues raised in the introduction.

Students are strongly encouraged to speak with their tutor about their project.

Paper topics

You may write your paper on any topic related to the present and future state of literature, though I would encourage you to focus on a **specific work** of literature as well as a theme related to the **main strands** of this course, namely the impact of translation, the lasting effects of historical trauma, the interaction between literature and other media, contemporary geopolitical tensions, and growing environmental degradation. To find a good topic and case study, consult **reviews**, lists of recent prize winners, and academic journals on contemporary literature. These are good places to start:

Literary prizes

Booker Prize James Tait Black Goldsmiths Prize Costa Book Award Pulitzer Prize National Book Award National Book Critics Circle Award Lannan Literary Award IMPAC Dublin Literary Award European Union Prize for Literature

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Academic journals

Contemporary Literature
Textual Practice
Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction
Twentieth-Century Literature
NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction
Studies in the Novel
Modern Fiction Studies
American Literary History
New Literary History
Narrative
Poetics Today
Critical Inquiry

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Reviews

Public Books LA Review of Books London Review of Books

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Course development team

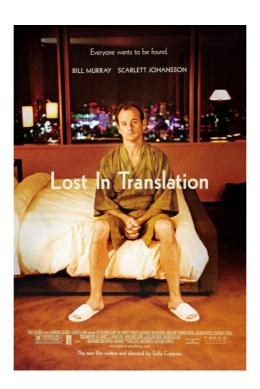
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Assignments

Assignment 1: LITERATURE AND TRANSLATION

Before turning to several important strands of contemporary fiction, we will reflect on the spatial coordinates of twenty-first-century literature. Many of us, after all, are not native speakers of English. What does it mean to read literature in another language, and to write literature for an audience that includes non-native speakers? What would a truly inclusive form of 'world literature' look like? To aid us in our reflection, we will read a paper by Rebecca Walkowitz. As part of this assignment, you should reflect on your own reading history, paying special attention to issues of translation.

- Rebecca Walkowitz, "Comparison Literature", *New Literary History* 40 (2009), pp. 567-82.
- Also see: Peter Boxall, "Introduction. Twenty-First Century Fiction".



Assignment 2: LITERATURE AND HISTORY 1: POSTMODERNISM

After reflecting on the spatial boundaries of contemporary fiction, this assignment examines its temporal borders. In recent years, the dominant label of 'postmodernism' seems to have lost its appeal for readers, writers and critics. Why, and what comes after postmodernism? Before answering that question, moreover, we may need to think about postmodernism itself, a notoriously elusive category. In more general terms, why do we need such period labels? What do they do and *not* do?

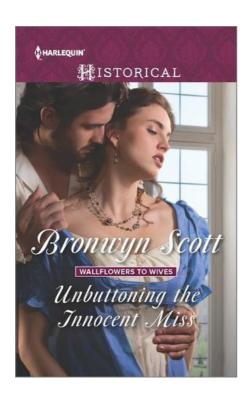
- Adam Kelly, "Beginning with Postmodernism", *Twentieth-Century Literature* 57.3 & 57.4 (2011), pp. 391-422.
- Ben De Bruyn, "Period", *Literature Now. Key Terms and Methods for Literary History* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2016), pp. 191-202.
- Also see: Peter Boxall, "Introduction. Twenty-First Century Fiction".

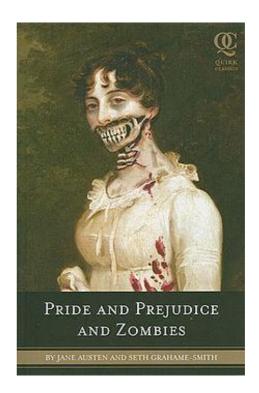


Assignment 3: LITERATURE AND HISTORY 2: MEMORY

As we have already seen, contemporary literature often highlights history. Which periods receive most attention in literature's work of memorialization? And how are we to understand this embrace of the past, both in its nostalgic and its more critical versions? Does this mean that every novel is now a historical novel? As our discussion will involve the distinction between so-called literary fiction and genre fiction, you are also asked to take a look at the website of a famous publisher of popular literature, Harlequin, in preparation of this assignment. Can you identify particular patterns in the titles available? Via the paper by James English, our debate will also discuss 'distant reading'. What are the advantages and disadvantages of this new method?

- Peter Boxall, "Inheriting the Past: Literature and Historical Memory in the Twenty-First Century" (chapter two).
- James F. English, "Now, Not Now: Counting Time in Contemporary Fiction Studies", *MLQ* 77.3 (2016), pp. 395-418.
- Also see: David James and Urmila Seshagiri, "Metamodernism: Narratives of Continuity and Revolution", *PMLA* 129.1 (2014), pp. 87-100.

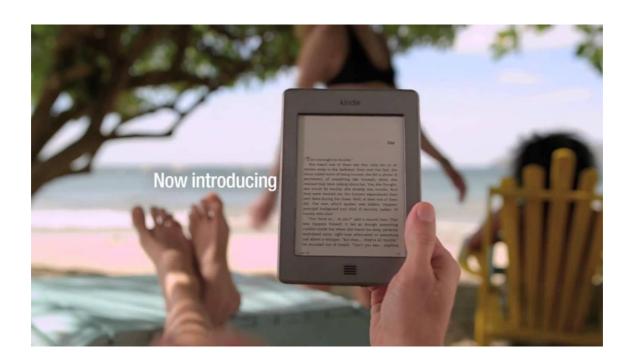




Assignment 4: LITERATURE AND MEDIA 1: AMAZON

It cannot be denied that the advent of digital culture in general and online bookstore Amazon in particular have had and are having an enormous impact on the way we read and write literature now. Some have argued that the computer and the Internet are killing or replacing literature, for instance by shrinking our attention spans, but others argue for a more interactive model, in which these phenomena not only diverge but *converge* as well. What does it mean to read on an e-reader? How does literature change in the age of Amazon, and how do these changes manifest themselves in specific literary texts? Can literature still be defined in terms of its resistance to received opinions?

- Jim Collins, "Introduction: Digital Books, Beach Chairs, and Popular Literary Culture", *Bring on the Books for Everybody* (Durham: Duke UP, 2010), pp. 1-36.
- Mark McGurl, "Everything and Less: Fiction in the Age of Amazon", *MLQ* 77.3 (2016), pp. 447-471.
- Also see: Julian Murphet, "Medium", *Literature Now. Key Terms and Methods for Literary History* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2016), pp. 46-58.



Assignment 5: LITERATURE AND MEDIA 2: HBO

If Amazon and e-readers are changing our ways of reading and writing, so is 'quality' TV, a phenomenon associated with brands like HBO. In this assignment, we will take a closer look at the impact of shows like *Mad Men*, *Breaking Bad*, and *Game of Thrones*. These new cultural artefacts are not only having an impact on how stories are told and sold, they are also prime examples of remediation, transmedia storytelling and intermediality.

- Jim Collins, "The Use Values of Narrativity in Digital Cultures", *New Literary History* 44.3 (2013), pp. 639-660.
- Irina Rajewsky, "Intermediality, Intertextuality, and Remediation", *Intermédialités* 6 (2006), pp. 43-64.
- Also see: Julian Murphet, "Medium", *Literature Now. Key Terms and Methods for Literary History* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2016), pp. 46-58.



Assignment 6: LITERATURE AND GEOPOLITICS

Although writers, readers and critics have been highly critical of 'political' literature in the past, the situation seems to have changed at the start of the twenty-first century. Since 9/11 we have been living in a time of prolonged if largely displaced war, an important geopolitical shift that has left its mark on literature, making American fiction, for instance, newly transnational, as scholars like Michael Rothberg and Caren Irr have argued. What does the literature of 9/11 and the War on Terror look like? And what does literary fiction tell us about our changing understanding of war and peace, nation and world?

- Peter Boxall, "A Curious Knot: Terrorism, Radicalism, and the Avant-Garde" (chapter four).
- John Marx, "Failed-State Fiction", *Contemporary Literature* (2008), pp. 597-633.
- Also see: Nathan Hensley, "Drone Form: Word and Image at the End of Empire", *e-flux* (2016), available online at www.e-flux.com (#72).



Assignment 8: LITERATURE AND THE ANTHROPOCENE

Another crucial component of recent literature and fiction is the turn toward climate change and planetary environmental problems – the turn to the so-called Anthropocene. Although most critics agree that this turn is necessary and important, many have also claimed that it cannot fully succeed, given the large-scale processes involved in processes like global warming, deforestation, and ocean acidification. What strategies are available for responding to climate change?

- Kate Marshall, "What Are the Novels of the Anthropocene: American Fiction in Geological Time", *American Literary History* (2015), pp. 1-16.
- Ben De Bruyn, "Learning to Be a Species in the Anthropocene: On Annie Proulx's *Barkskins*", *Frame* (2016), pp. 71-90.
- Also see: Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History: Four Theses", *Critical Inquiry* 35.2 (2009), pp. 197-222.



Assignments 8 & 9: PAPER PRESENTATIONS

Assignment 10: LITERATURE AND THE ENVIRONMENT 1: EXTINCTION

Many commentators have pointed out that another defining feature of recent literature is its interest in how traditional conceptions of the human are undermined and/or enriched by seemingly less-than-human forms of life like the clone or the animal. What does it mean to be human at the start of the twenty-first century, and what is the place of nonhuman animals in our all-too-human societies, seeing that we are currently living through the sixth mass extinction event in the history of our planet? What is the meaning and function of categories like 'posthuman' and 'more-than-human'? How does literature respond to the threat of *human* extinction?

- Peter Boxall, "The Limits of the Human" (chapter three).
- Ursula Heise, "Lost Dogs, Last Birds, and Listed Species: Cultures of Extinction", *Configurations* 18.1-2 (2010), pp. 49-72.
- Also see: Ursula Heise, "The Posthuman Turn: Rewriting Species in Recent American Literature", *A Companion to American Literary Studies*, ed. by Caroline Levander and Robert Levine, pp. 454-68.



Assignment 11: LITERATURE AND THE ENVIRONMENT 2: PETROCULTURE

As we have seen, literary critics and writers alike are currently investigating the destructive effects of human activities on the planet. In examining the material effects and cultural causes of this destruction, many scholars are paying special attention to the issue of energy in general and the use of nonrenewable fuels like petroleum in particular. What does it mean to perform research in the 'energy humanities', for instance on 'petroculture'? How has oil shaped our culture and literature, and what would a post-oil culture look like?

- Stephanie LeMenager, "The Aesthetics of Petroleum, after *Oil*!", *American Literary History* (2012), pp. 59-86.
- Also see: Ben De Bruyn, "Realism 4. Objects, Weather and Infrastructure in Ben Lerner's 10:04", Textual Practice (2017), pp. 951-71.

