

# **Fossil Capital & Culture**

(Postcolonial Literatures)  
ENGL 76200-01  
Friday 11:45am – 1:45pm

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## **Course Description:**

Fossil capital has definitively shaped the modern world. In the dynamics of its original accumulation, fossil capital created abstract space and time, maximized its control over global labor power to facilitate a high degree of capital accumulation, and engendered sweeping and intensifying environmental destruction. Today we are in an impasse: we must shut down fossil capitalism or the planet will burn up, and yet a significant and growing portion of humanity is subordinated to the mute compulsion of fossil capital.



In this class we will examine the historical, material, and cultural constituents of the fossil capitalist impasse, thinking through the implications for hegemonic and subaltern ideas of agriculture, development, transportation, and urbanization. The seminar will explore the history of revolts against fossil capital by workers, women, Indigenous people, youths, and others.

To what extent are ideas of empowerment and futurity linked to fossil capital, and how can we delink them? How has the idea of popular power changed during the epoch of fossil capital, and how can contemporary movements for energy democracy and energy justice reshape these conceptions? What does it mean to talk about fossil abolition today?

Given the topic of the seminar, the class will be explicitly interdisciplinary. It will also be oriented towards militant co-research, and students will be encouraged to develop research projects that contribute to the work of movements fighting for people's power and fossil abolition.

### **Course Learning Goals:**

- Familiarize students with contemporary theories of fossil capital, energy democracy, and extractivism;
- Familiarize students with contemporary theories of Energy Humanities and Environmental Humanities more broadly;
- Explore the ways in which the realm of aesthetics in general, and, more specifically, particular domains such as literature and visual culture, respond to specific energy regimes;
- Discuss various research methodologies, with a focus on histories and examples of co-research and militant research;
- Analyze the ethics of public-facing scholarship, and help facilitate student work in this domain.

### **Course Requirements:**

The focus of this course is interdisciplinary, or even post-disciplinary. It is not just that we will study texts written within a variety of disciplinary fields. In addition, the methodologies that we will study and experiment with cross silos and borders. Many of the collaborative practices we will examine challenge narrow academic disciplines and propose other ways of doing things: we will see artists working together with community organizations, scientists working with artists and indigenous leaders and activists, and writers working with communities, among other examples.

Course requirements are oriented by this impetus. I want to give space to alternative forms of research, including collaborative/collective work, militant research, and methodologies that combine analysis and imagination. I invite you to produce discursive forms aimed at diverse audiences, and to think about the most efficacious ways to mobilize and disseminate knowledge around climate change, the current energy crisis, the effects of the Capitalocene, etc.

At the same time, I recognize that students need to hone their writing skills, develop or expand ongoing research projects, and get feedback on this work. To that end, I propose the following projects as requirements for the class:

- Conference paper proposal: a 3- to 4-page conference draft, including an abstract, on a subject that engages any of the concepts, readings, topics studied in class, due before spring break + a brief presentation at the end of the semester;
- Militant co-research: we will be forming teams to do militant co-research. Using the *Militant Research Handbook* as a guide, students (working individually or in groups of up to 3 people) will develop knowledge useful to different NYC-based campaigns for fossil abolition.
- Seminar paper/project: an article-length research paper, series of papers, or equivalent creative project (e.g. mapping work, podcast, performance, digital analysis, etc.), due at the end of the semester.

These requirements are intended as guidelines. Of the three projects, the only one that is relatively immutable is the militant co-research work, since components of this collective work will be conducted during class. I am happy to meet with you to discuss the evolving nature of your own work, and to collaboratively develop a series of projects that seem most productive for you.

# CLASS SCHEDULE

- Week One (Jan 26): Introduction: Environmental Humanities + Energy Humanities
- Pablo Neruda, “Standard Oil Co.”
  - Amitav Ghosh, “Petrofiction”
  - Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee, “Being Fossil”
  - *Militant Co-Research Manual*

- Week Two (Feb 2): **No class**

## 1: Capital in the Petrocene

- Week Three (Feb 9):
- Forensic Architecture, [\*Environmental Racism in Death Alley, Louisiana\*](#)
  - Andreas Malm, from *Fossil Capital*
  - Malm, “Long Waves of Fossil Development”

- Week Four (Feb 16):
- World of Matter, [\*Black Sea Files\*](#)
  - Timothy Mitchell, from *Carbon Democracy*
  - Kyle Powys-Whyte “Settler-Colonialism, Ecology, and Environmental Justice”
  - Sheena Wilson, “Gendering Oil”

- Week Five (Feb 23):
- Alejandra Prieto, *Estratos*
  - Verónica Gago & Sandro Mezzadra, “A Critique of the Extractive Operations of Capital”
  - Thea Riofrancos, “Extractivism and Extractivismo”

## 2: Petrocene Aesthetics

- Week Six (Mar 1):
- Henri-Georges Clouzot, *The Wages of Fear*
  - Sarah Brouillette, “The Rise and Fall of the English-language Literary Novel since WWII”
  - Patricia Yaeger, “Literature in the Ages of Wood...”

- Week Seven (Mar 8):
- Abdel Rahman Munif, excerpt from *Cities of Salt*
  - Rob Nixon, “Fast-Forward Fossil” from *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*

- Week Eight (Mar 15):
- Reza Negarestani, excerpt from *Cyclonopedia*
  - WReC, excerpt from *Combined and Uneven Development*

- Week Nine (Mar 22):
- Imbolo Mbue, excerpt from *How Beautiful We Were*
  - Rob Nixon, “Pipedream” from *Slow Violence*

### 3. Fossil-Free Culture?

- Week Ten (Apr 5):
- T.J. Cuthand, [Reclamation](#)
  - Ashley Dawson, “The Energy Commons,” from *People’s Power*
  - T.J. Demos, “Radical Futurisms”
  - Imre Szeman, “System Failure: Oil, Futurity, and the Anticipation of Disaster”
- Week Eleven (Apr 12):
- Excerpts from collection *Solar Punk*
  - Shelley Streeby, “Speculative Writing, Art, and Worldmaking”
- Week Twelve (Apr 19):
- **No class**
- Week Thirteen (May 3):
- [The Public Power Observatory](#)
  - Sarah Knuth, “Rentiers of the Low-Carbon Economy”
  - Myles Lennon, “Black Lives Matter and Technoscientific Expertise Amid Solar Transitions”
  - Dana Powell & Dáilan Long, “Renewable Energy Activism in Diné Bikéyah”
- Week Fourteen (May 10):
- Student Presentations