

# Fieldwork in the Energy Humanities

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## Module 1: The Oil Encounter

Now that you have had some practice thinking about how oil encounters might be strange, it is time for you to investigate an oil object of your own.

### In the Field

1. Select one actual object from real life that does or does not seem to be connected to fossil fuel use.

### On Your Own

1. Conduct scientific, sociological, or technological research on the object. You might ask when it was developed, who did so, where it was first put to use—by whom, to what end, and has its use changed over time?
2. Determine one detail or feature of the object to focus on that specifically ties it to energy use. This might relate to how it is produced or transported or even to where it is from.
3. Explain the strangeness of the object and its fossil-fuel origins in a 250–400 word paragraph.

### With the Group

1. Post your paragraph to **Module 1 Fieldwork** forum
2. Take a moment to read one or two other reports on oil objects and respond to and/or exchange ideas with classmates whose posts resonate with you.

For example, one could choose driverless cars from the real world and discuss how they are made and distributed today and then speculate on how these may be produced and used in the future and by whom. One detail to draw on might be the way that Tesla's cameras capture and upload petabytes and petabytes of data: our cars are keeping tabs on us.

## Module 2: The Built World of Energy

Now that you have a better sense of how commodity chains can be described, it is your turn to create your own commodity chain for an energy-related object.

## In The Field

- Select a commodity you have purchased or used in the last week.

## On Your Own

- Conduct research on the object. Where was it produced? What process is involved? What components are required and who handles it along the way? Is the process energy intensive? How about complex or straightforward?
- Create a flow chart that tracks where the process starts, each time the commodity must be transported, and how long it spends in each location. Use a pencil and paper or Google drawing, so that you can share a pic or screencap with the group.
- Explain the intensity or uniqueness of the commodity chain in a 250–400 word paragraph.

## With The Group

- Post your paragraph to the Module 2 Fieldwork board
- Take a moment to read one or two other reports on oil objects. Feel free to respond to and/or exchange ideas with classmates whose posts resonate with you.  
For example, one could choose an electric toothbrush and discuss where they are manufactured, how they are transported, and where they are sold.

# Module 3: Living Oil

Your fieldwork for this module starts from the assumption that we cannot simply use one commodity a day, that instead we use multiple commodities each with their own commodity chain and energy draw.

*Oil Inventory adapted from “Literature and Oil” by Prof. Jennifer Wenzel Licensed under the Creative Commons CC BY-NC-SA License. To view a copy of the license, visit [Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International](#) (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0). In the introduction to his book *Orientalism* (1978), Edward Said writes: "In the Prison Notebooks Gramsci says: 'The starting point of critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is, and is 'knowing thyself' as a product of the historical process to date, which has deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory.' The only available English translation inexplicably leaves Gramsci's comment at that, whereas in fact Gramsci's Italian text concludes by adding, 'therefore it is imperative at the outset to compile such an inventory'" (25). Said quotes Gramsci in order to suggest the necessity of examining one's own personal relationship to the subject matter being studied. For Said (and Gramsci), creating an inventory of the "infinity of traces" that history has left in you is a first, necessary step in intellectual investigation. (The language of sedimentation is fortuitous!) This assignment asks you to create such an inventory in terms of oil. What kinds of traces have history and contemporary society, with regard to oil, left in you? How do you "know yourself" in relation to oil? Or, how have you been*

coming to know yourself in relation to oil since this course began? There are numerous ways that you might construe this assignment. You might use one (or more) of the essays we've read as a point of departure, and reflect on your response to them in terms of your own relationship to oil, anxieties of resource depletion, and fictions of surplus. You might also take a more creative approach. An "inventory" is quite literally an organized list (e.g. retail stores take inventory of their stock), and you might use the form/genre of a list of oil's "traces" in you. You might write something like a "diary" that traces the presence of oil in an ordinary day. You might do something like Calvino's "map" of the narrator standing at the pump while emirs fold hands and Exxon accountants tally profits. You might create a graphic representation along the lines of Russell's Oil, an Endangered Species. You might write a brief (not-so?) fictional story that joins "running out of gas" to "running out of oil." You might do something else that does this work of examining the traces of oil in you, in a form that I haven't described. n.b. Prof. Wenzel's assignment has been edited to omit any technical requirements.

### **In the Field**

- Decide on the manner in which you will track your fossil fuel encounters. How might you best keep track of your interactions? What kind of inventory will you create?
- Take note of the commodities you interact with, use, and consume over the course of a self-determined period of time

### **On Your Own**

- Review your inventory. What's missing conceptually or practically? How might you best relay your experience to your classmates.
- Using one of the strategies identified by Wenzel, or one of your own strategies, write and/or illustrate a 500+ word post that explains your inventory (feel free to link to your inventory itself).

### **With the Group**

- Post your reflection to Module 3 Fieldwork board
- Take a moment to read one or two other reports on oil inventories. Feel free to respond to and/or exchange ideas with classmates whose posts resonate with you.

## **Module 4: The Energy Unconscious**

For this module's fieldwork, we'll be making use of an open source, online, collaborative annotation platform called Hypothes.is.

## Using Hypothes.is

We're using Hypothes.is again, just like in the introduction module. See the [Hypothes.is Student Guide](#) if you need a refresher.

### Story Selection

For this fieldwork, you'll need to read at least two of the following stories. Here are some brief descriptions of these stories from *The Guardian*. You can also check the short introductory framing piece, if you are interested see [Can fiction change our view of oil?](#) by Richard Lea.

The options are as follows:

"Barthelme" by Joanna Kavenna: *It's about time someone sorted this oil business out. Here, Joanna Kavenna brings us the exclusive story of the world's first truly ethical oil company.*

"Captive" by Rose Tremain: *\*Owen spends what remains of his inheritance on building a set of boarding kennels. But can the pit-bulls to which his neighbours object bring him anything but trouble?*

Content Warning: Animal Cruelty

"Chez Janette" by Alain Mabanckou, translated by Helen Stevenson: *\*Sitting on the terrace in a Louzingou cafe, the talk turns soon enough to the civil war and oil*

Content Warning: sexual objectification

"Covehithe" by China Miéville: *A trip to the Suffolk coast takes on a new urgency when Dughan decides the time is right for a night-time adventure*

"Gone to Water" by Tim Gautreaux: *A year on from the Deepwater Horizon disaster, Pa Claude and Jackie are going out fishing on the Louisiana bayou*

"Oil Field" by Mohammed Hasan Alwan, translated by Peter Clark: *A young boy finds his village transformed by the oil wells he can glimpse from the roof of his house*

"On Business" by Robin Yassin-Kassab: *A desert trip to a meeting in Damascus reveals a significant find*

Content Warning: Sex Work

### On Your Own

1. Now, select a completely different story from the one you marked up.
2. Using the annotations there, write a 250–500 word analysis of that short story.  
**Note:** Be sure to indicate whose annotations you have drawn on when writing your analysis. Give credit where credit is due

### **With the Group**

1. Post your short story analysis to Module 4 Discussion board
2. Take a moment to read one or two other analyses. Feel free to respond to and/or exchange ideas with classmates whose posts resonate with you.

## **Module 5: Global Impacts of Energy Regimes**

I don't want to lead anyone astray in arguing that there are (un)intended consequences to fossil fuels. This lesson also applies to renewable energy systems.

*\*New Addition:* You may consult this list of open sustainable technologies in the research portion of this assignment: <https://github.com/protonypes/open-sustainable-technology>.

### **In the Field**

You may work in small discussion groups for the first part of this exercise. If so, share notes as you work.

1. Locate a nearby or distant renewable energy installation. This might be hydropower, wind power, solar power, or something else altogether.
2. How does your selected form of energy capture work?
3. How does this installation represent itself? Is there a website? Try to find out who built the dams, windmills, or solar panels and how they were manufactured.
4. Is there any general literature on this form of energy capture? If so, how does it represent this method?

### **On Your Own**

1. Determine which mode of writing best suits the information you have gathered on your selected energy source: film script, object lesson, essay style report, and so on.
2. Write a brief 250–500 entry that makes vivid and clear the potential benefits and consequences of relying on this energy source. Your entry can be set in the present or the future, it can be written from a neutral point of view or from the vantage of a fictional character.

### **With the Group**

1. Post your entry to Module 5 Discussion board
2. Take a moment to read one or two other reports on (un)intended consequences. Feel free to respond to and/or exchange ideas with classmates whose posts resonate with you.

# Module 6: Energy Struggles

What kind of energy future can we imagine? What kind of changes do we need to get there? The fieldwork for this module is speculative, yet remains grounded in reality.

## In the Field

1. Take a look at some energy struggles surrounding either fossil fuels or renewable energy sources.
2. What intellectual and political barriers stand in the way?
3. What infrastructural barriers stand in the way?

## On Your Own

1. Note the pressure points that make energy transitions such a challenge.
2. Imagine creative ways that people might begin to address such points.
3. Write a brief description of one such pressure point and offer a proposal as to how we might begin to address it.

## With the Group

1. Post your paragraph to Module 6 Discussion board
2. Take a moment to read one or two other reports on oil objects. Feel free to respond to and/or exchange ideas with classmates whose posts resonate with you.