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# LIT 522.02: Comparative Literature: Petromodernity

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# Petromodernity and Culture: Art in the Age of Big Oil

"Oil is our God...we all worship Petroleum, *A Crude Awakening*

"We live in a petrol world." Stephanie LeManager

LIT #522: 02  
T: 3:00-5:50  
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Spring 2018  
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O. Hours: T: 2:00-3:30  
R 2:00-3:30  
& By appointment

## Seminar

This seminar explores the relationship between world literature and energy and natural resources. We will read a range of literary, cultural, and theoretical works about that most combustible of planetary resources: oil.

Oil is the signal resource of the post-war capitalist world system, and our world is soaked in oil – in its many diverse forms. Indeed our age can be defined as Stephanie LeManager does, by the term Petro-Modernity. Petroleum and its associated “products” are everywhere, particularly in those case where it seems to be scarce, as yet undiscovered, and even invisible or absent. Petromodernity determines the entirety of our global lives: how, where, and when we live, move, work and play; what we eat, wear, consume. Oil is the key shaping element in our political and physical landscapes – not simply visible at the pumps, in times of scarcity, and in the spectacular booms and busts of places like the Bakken Oil Patch or in the epic disasters of spills. Oil flows through and undergirds the phones, the paper, the computers we use. The ubiquity of Oil – a situation that is particularly true for the American West – means not only that modern culture is a Hydrocarbon culture. Necessarily then, recent scholarship has begun to engage with Petromodernity, discovering the ways in which oil and other fossil fuels represent the deep well structure in contemporary culture, art and literature.

On the basis of this understanding of Petromodernity, the seminar will engage with local and global genres of fiction and poetry, cinema and documentary – texts that contain deep structures of petroculture and that unveil deeply connected international patterns in literary form and theme as well as petro-economics and power. We will

attempt to track the ways in which world literature can, following Graeme McDonald and Franco Moretti, provide both a method and an archive to cognitively and materially map and critique global inequity in the arena of unevenly produced resources. In mapping the emergence of both cultural and political responses to Petromodernity in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the seminar will also try to track the ways in which the documents of culture contain new and important ways to think about new, speculative forms of energy futures in a "post oil" epoch.

### **Required Texts**

**(there will be a number of PDFs disseminated on Moodle and via email.)**

China Miéville, "Covehithe" (short story)

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/apr/22/china-mieville-covehithe-short-story>

Barrett, Ross and Daniel Worden, eds, *Oil Culture*

Habila, Helon, *Oil on Water*.

Gautreaux, Tim, "Gone to Water,"

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/apr/20/gone-water-tim-gautreaux-story>

LeManager, Stephanie, *Living Oil: Petroleum Culture in the American Century*.

Mathews, John Joseph, *Sundown*.

Melville, Herman, *Moby Dick*.

Miller, George, *Mad Max: Fury Road*.

Nixon, Rob, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*.

Nabokov, Vladimir, *Lolita*.

Oil stories commissioned by *The Guardian*: China Miéville, "Covehithe" (short story), etc.

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/series/oil-stories>

### **★★★NOTA BENE★★★:**

This is a rigorous course; much will be expected of you in the way of reading, preparation, writing, and participation.

### **The English Literature Seminar:**

The word *seminar* is derived from the Latin word *seminarium*, meaning "seed plot."

A classic English Literature/Cultural Studies seminar functions to bring together small groups to focus on a particular subject in which all involved are asked to actively participate in the form of engaged dialogue. Primarily, then, the course is community, rather than individually driven. I will offer up opening remarks to begin class: these remarks may take the form of a small contextual lecture or they may involve the consideration of an outside source (video, filmic, textual). I might also call for a focus on sections of a text, or I might ask you what you want to focus on. We may, if people feel

it productive, work in groups on individual texts or sections of texts. The bottom line is that the focus of the class is the responsibility of all concerned: this is not a lecture course. It is a seminar in the classical sense in which dialogue – inquiry and discussion between individuals – predicated on posing, probing and addressing questions in done in order to respond to the critical imperative and to illuminate what is unfamiliar. The seminar is a relatively informal space when compared with the lecture method of academic instruction. There is not a hierarchy but a fluidity of the most intense rigor. You will discover that there is not enough time in any class day to cover the material that is on the schedule. The seminar is meant to provide a venue for all participants to familiarize themselves more extensively with the methodology and focal areas of the field and also to allow for engagement with practical problems. The seminar is a place of discussion and debate. Assigned readings always exceed the capacity of the class to directly discuss, but they must all be read since they form the important context of an issue/text/idea/politic/aesthetic. All readings are inherently and necessarily selective. The focus of the class will be determined by the participants themselves and this may mean that not all the work assigned and read for the day will be directly discussed.

I deliberately ask you to work without a net in reading (that is to begin to engage with the text without “things to look out for” or “questions to answer”). This kind of work can be daunting and sometimes can feel as though you are working in the dark, but in my experience, such structures, if given in advance, foreclose creative and new responses to the text. The great Cultural Studies theorist Stuart Hall would tell you that doing theoretical work is often like “wrestling with angels,” and it is so. You will wrestle for a while by yourself and then we will undertake collective battle with the text, with some guidance in the shape of lectures, context, discussion directions provided by one or more of us, often me. I will, then, be giving you lectures on the topic, but they will not be the only work of the class, they will not often be the first work we do in class, and they may be of differing length and form. This classroom discussion schemata is constructed to allow us to avoid the Socratic dialectic, which is inappropriate to the course material itself. That being said, please feel free to ask questions during my “lectures” about anything: concepts, history, terminology, and etc. Simply raise your hand and ask.

One note about **General Discussion**: it is hard, even in a smaller class, to accommodate all ideas, questions, comments, etc. Often participants will get stacked up in a discussion line like airplanes. I do my best to fulfill the role of dialogic air-traffic controller, but you should feel free to break in if, in the excitement of discussion, you get passed over.

### The Seminar Paper

A seminar paper has two primary aspects. First, the seminar paper demonstrates the author’s development in the course itself. Moreover, a good seminar paper fits into the author’s scholarly trajectory. However closely tied to the specific subject matter of the course, the seminar paper ideally generates ideas, skills, research, and questions that contribute to the individual’s own larger scholarly project. These two aspects of the seminar paper may, at first glance, seem contradictory, but since the Literature seminar (be it in Education, Creative Writing, or Literature and Cultural Studies) constitutes the groundwork for all future academic work the dichotomy is somewhat of a false one.

Seminar papers can and should motivate and structure thesis inquiry and labor and yet remain their own individual intellectual exercise.

Other than the days on which individuals will be asked to submit a written guide to the work we will read, and the rigorous and engaged participation in debate, the seminar paper is the ONLY assignment of the semester. It is an assignment that you will begin working on the first day of class.

Ways to conceptualize the use-value of seminar papers (and why seminar papers must be thought of as the work of an entire semester):

Y a text written with an eye toward future publication, complete with thorough knowledge of secondary criticism, footnotes, and bibliography;

Y a highly informed and detailed exploration of a single primary text or set of primary texts using the theories of the course or reading one of the texts of the course; an intensified close reading;

Y an application of the skills and knowledge the seminar is intended to transmit, referring to the texts, theories, or approaches covered during the semester;

Y a very specific type of paper with a pre-defined structure or purpose (e.g., an application of a particular theory to a particular text);

Y an opportunity to pursue individual inquiries as long as those inquiries relate to the materials, issues, questions of the course.

Each of these various conceptions entails necessary practical steps.

**Coursework:** Final grades will be determined by your performance in three separate categories of coursework:

1. Participation	10%
2. Abstract Presentation	10%
3. Final Essay	<u>80%</u>
	100%

**Final Research Essay Abstracts and Drafts:** You will turn in an abstract and draft of your essay before submitting the final version.

**Production Schedule:**

1. Starting in week 8, the 15<sup>th</sup> of March through week 13, the 19<sup>th</sup> of April, students will turn in a two page, double spaced abstract (precis, plan, blueprint, conceptual map) of your final paper to the community during class. You will also be asked to provide your fellow students with a brief (five to eight minute) verbal overview of your

- planned project and a copy of your abstract and sources. You will need to include a working **annotated** bibliography of the sources and texts you will be working with: sources should be no less than eight in number – these from outside the course texts. Abstracts without an annotated bibliography will not be accepted. Please indicate to me as soon as possible when you would like to present. Due to time constraints, no more than two abstracts can be presented during any one day.
2. You may meet with me at any time between to discuss the essay.
  3. The Final Draft of the essay is due on Monday, May 9th by 5:00 in my office.

**Attendance:** Attendance is required and will be recorded: two unexcused absences are grounds for failure of the course itself. Late arrivals and early departures will, if they occur frequently, count as absences. If you do arrive late you will be responsible for letting me know after class that you were present for the day. Absences due to medical and family emergencies will be excused, provided you come and discuss the situation (**ASAP**) with me. Lengthy crises that require multiple absences may require your reconsideration of enrollment in school this semester.

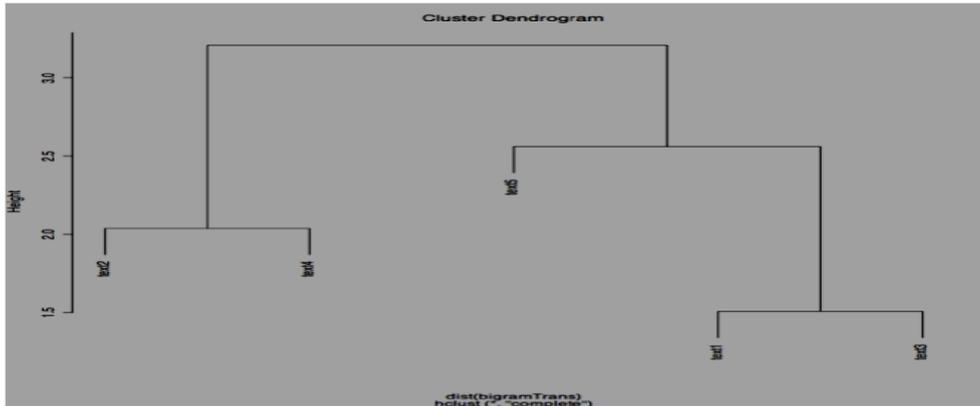
### Disabilities Accommodation

Students with disabilities will receive reasonable accommodations for coursework. To request accommodations, please contact me as soon as possible in the semester. I will work with you and with Disability Services in the accommodation process. For more information, visit the Disability Services website at <http://www.umt.edu/dss/>, or call 406.243.2243 (Voice/Text)."

**Scholastic Dishonesty:** Plagiarism and other forms of academic dishonesty – in as much as they keep the individual student as well as the collective community from learning – will result in an automatic F and may entail a variety of other sanctions up to and including expulsion from the University. FOR A DEFINITION OF PLAGIARISM SEE <http://www.lib.umt.edu/services/plagiarism/index.htm>. The Provost's Office has asked all faculty at the University of Montana to attach the following statement on plagiarism to their syllabi: "All students must practice academic honesty. Academic misconduct is subject to an academic penalty by the course instructor and/or a disciplinary sanction by the University. All students need to be familiar with the Student Conduct Code. The Code is available for review online at <http://life.umt.edu/vpsa/student.conduct.php>

### THE PURCHASED PAPER

"The Internet and email are now the tools of choice for plagiarism. Advertisements in college papers and in the regular press as well as on the Internet announce the availability of student and professional services, sometimes couched in such euphemistic terms as 'editorial assistance,' but often blatantly offering commercially prepared essays, academic papers, and even theses for sale. The easy availability of such assistance from various web sites has increased student 'cut and paste' activity to the degree that it is now expected and regarded as a common practice (*Chronicle of Higher Education*, 2000 a)" (31, Source).



“Lack of integrity and unethical behavior within the educational sector is inconsistent with one of the main purposes of education; that is to produce ‘good [critical] citizens, respectful of the law [and willing to challenge it when necessary], of human rights and fairness (it is also incompatible with any strategy that considers education as one of the principle means of fighting corruption)” (10, “Combating Academic Fraud: Towards a Culture of Integrity” <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0013/001330/133038e.pdf>)

## Course Calendar

### January

#### Week One: Beginnings:

- T 24: Introductions. “Bang a Gong,” T. Rex/Marc Bolan (1971); “Warm Leatherette,” The Normal (1978); “Atlantic Oil,” Cesare Pavese (circa 1930?); Petrosublimity, slide show; *Awake*

## Week Two: Petrofiction.

- T 31: Ghosh, Amitav, "Petrofiction: The Oil Encounter and the Novel," *New Republic*, (#206, March 2, 1992), 29-33, PDF; "Editor's Column: Literature in the Ages of Wood, Tallow, Coal, Whale Oil, Gasoline, Atomic Power, and Other Energy Sources," Shannon, et al., 305-326, PDF; Barrett, Ross and Daniel "Oil Culture: Guest Editors' Introduction, Worden, *Journal of American Studies*, (2012), 2, 269-272, PDF. Miéville, China, "Covehithe,"

## February

### Week Three: LeManager

- T 7: LeManager, Stephanie, from *Living Oil*, Introduction - Ultradeep, Petroleum Culture in the American Century; Chapter 1 - Origins, Spills; Chapter 2 - The Aesthetics of Petroleum, 1-102.

### Week Four:

- T 16: LeManager, Stephanie, from *Living Oil*, Chapter 3 – Petromelancholia; Chapter 4 - The Petroleum Archive; Epilogue, 102-197.

### Week Five: Moby Dick

- T 23: Melville, Herman, *Moby Dick*, 7-234; Scott, Heidi, "Whale Oil Culture, Consumerism, and Modern Conservation," *Oil Culture*, 3-18.

## March

### Week Six: Moby Dick

- T 1: Melville, Herman, *Moby Dick*, 234-427.

### Week Seven: America on the Road: Route Two

- T 8: Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita*. Chapter X from Roper, Robert, *Nabokov in America*, Introduction, 1-10, Chapter 1 11-22, Chapter 2 23-32, Chapter 5 55-68, Chapter 9 118-131 PDF; Frohardt-Lane, Sarah, "Essential Driving and Vital Cars: American Automobile Culture in World War II," from *Oil Cultures*.

### Week Eight: America on the Road: Route Three

- T 15: J.G. Ballard *Crash*. Youngquist, Paul, "Ballard's Crash-Body," *Postmodern Culture: An Electronic Journal of Interdisciplinary Criticism*, 2000 Sept; 11 [http://muse.jhu.edu.weblib.lib.umt.edu:8080/journals/postmodern\\_culture/v0](http://muse.jhu.edu.weblib.lib.umt.edu:8080/journals/postmodern_culture/v0)

[11/11.1youngquist.html](#) (Access this title through Project Muse via the Mansfield Library).

Week Nine: World Perspectives: Nigeria

- T 22: Saro-Wiwa, Ken, Selections from stories and essays, *A Forest of Flowers* (TBA); Nixon, Rob, excerpts from *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Preface, ix-xiii, Introduction, 1-44, and Chapter 3, 103-128; Watts, Michael, "Oil Frontiers: The Niger Delta and the Gulf of Mexico," *Oil Culture*, 189-210.

Week Ten: World Perspectives: The Arab World

- T 29: Munif, Abdelrahman, *Cities of Salt*; Xinos, Llana, "Petro-Capitalism, Petrofiction, and Islamic Discourse: The Formation of an Imagined Community in *Cities of Salt*, *Arab Studies Quarterly*, 2006 (Winter); 28.1, 1-12, PDF.

April

Week Eleven: Spring Break

- T 5: **No Classes: Spring Break.**

Week Twelve: All My Friends Are Lowriders

- T 12: Chappell, Ben, excerpts from *Lowrider Space*, 1-136; "Everything Comes From the Streets," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9RAavisatXA>; José Montoya "El Louie," <http://thinkmexican.tumblr.com/post/62392849712/el-louie-jose-montoya-in-formation-20-years-of-joda>; José Montoya reads "El Louie," <https://vimeo.com/20187019>; Jesse Ramierez, "Lowrider Culture, or, Hacking a la Mexicana," <http://jesseramirez.com/2015/11/22/lowrider-culture-or-hacking-a-la-mexicana/>.

Week Thirteen: Oil in Indian Country

- T 19: Matthews, John Joseph, *Sundown*. Musiol, Hanna "Liquid Modernity," *Oil Culture*, 129-144.

Week Fourteen: North Dakota Bakken Boom! Busted

- T 26: O'Neal, Erin, "North Dakota," short story, PDF. Spahr, Juliana, "Dynamic

Respositioning," poem:

<http://www.3quarksdaily.com/3quarksdaily/2016/01/tuesday-poem.html>;

Running on Fumes in North Dakota.

<http://www.nytimes.com/video/opinion/100000002648361/running-on-fumes-in-north-dakota.html> By Jonah Sargent, James Christenson, Eliot

Popko and Lewis Wilcox | Jan. 14, 2014 | 6:22 Native American Boomtown:

<http://www.pbs.org/video/2365351962/>. John Isaiah Pepion, "Indian Girl in the

Man Camp," Ledger Art, PDF; [https://www.revealnews.org/article/in-north-](https://www.revealnews.org/article/in-north-dakotas-bakken-oil-boom-there-will-be-blood/)

[dakotas-bakken-oil-boom-there-will-be-blood/](http://www.vice.com/read/the-oil-boom-is-ravaging-an-indian-reservation-in-north-dakota-1124); [http://www.vice.com/read/the-](http://www.vice.com/read/the-oil-boom-is-ravaging-an-indian-reservation-in-north-dakota-1124)

[oil-boom-is-ravaging-an-indian-reservation-in-north-dakota-1124](http://www.nytimes.com/slideshow/2015/08/09/travel/boom-bust-and-oil/s/NORTH-DAKOTA-OIL-slide-H6JM.html);

[http://www.nytimes.com/slideshow/2015/08/09/travel/boom-bust-and-](http://www.nytimes.com/slideshow/2015/08/09/travel/boom-bust-and-oil/s/NORTH-DAKOTA-OIL-slide-H6JM.html)

[oil/s/NORTH-DAKOTA-OIL-slide-H6JM.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/09/travel/north-dakota-oil-boom.html?action=click&contentCollection=Travel&pgtype=imageslideshow&module=RelatedArticleList&region=CaptionArea&version=SlideCard-1);

[http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/09/travel/north-dakota-oil-](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/09/travel/north-dakota-oil-boom.html?action=click&contentCollection=Travel&pgtype=imageslideshow&module=RelatedArticleList&region=CaptionArea&version=SlideCard-1)

[boom.html?action=click&contentCollection=Travel&pgtype=imageslideshow&](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/09/travel/north-dakota-oil-boom.html?action=click&contentCollection=Travel&pgtype=imageslideshow&module=RelatedArticleList&region=CaptionArea&version=SlideCard-1)

[module=RelatedArticleList&region=CaptionArea&version=SlideCard-1](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/09/travel/north-dakota-oil-boom.html?action=click&contentCollection=Travel&pgtype=imageslideshow&module=RelatedArticleList&region=CaptionArea&version=SlideCard-1); and

possibly TBA.

May

Week Fifteen: Mad Max: Fury Road

T 3: Miller, George, Eve Ensler et al., *Mad Max: Fury Road*; Canavan, Gerry, "Retrofutures and Petrofutures," *Oil Culture*, 331-349.

Week Sixteen: Finals Week

M 9: Final Draft of Essay Due by 5:00 my office.

Ballard, J. G., *Crash*

Highsmith, Patricia, *The Price of Salt*.

Munif, Abdelrahman, *Cities of Salt*

Patricia Highsmith, *The Price of Salt*; Hesford, Victoria J, "A Love Flung Out of Space": Lesbians in the City in Patricia Highsmith's *The Price of Salt*,"

*Paradoxa: Studies in World Literary Genres* 2003; 18: 118-135, PDF. Siler,

Cotton, "Introduction" from *A Republic of Drivers*, 1-16, PDF.