



Introduction to the Energy Humanities
Preliminary Course Framework
Rice University

*Honor a going thing,
goldfinch, corporation, tree, morality:
any working order, animate or inanimate.*

For the past academic year, the Cultures of Energy Initiative at Rice University has set out to understand energy and environmental issues through the lens of the humanities and interpretive social sciences. Energy is an inescapable part of everyday life, and yet students who are not trained in the intricacies of climate science or energy policy can feel left on the sidelines of energy debates, unqualified to weigh in or, worse, forced to rely on the second-order pronouncements of others. The Cultures of Energy Initiative affirms that the humanities, informed and enriched by dialogue with other fields of study, have a distinctive perspective to bring to bear on the historical patterns, cultural practices, and moral dilemmas around energy production and use. Far from being sidelined, humanists at Rice are positioning themselves front and center to weigh in on one of the defining issues of the 21st century with both rigor and imagination.

Among these humanists are a group of twenty-one undergraduate research fellows at the Humanities Research Center, who were invited to engage with a yearlong series of energy-themed lectures by scholars including Naomi Oreskes, Kristin Shrader-Frechette, Kairn Klieman, Dale Jamieson, Paul Edwards, Gabrielle Hecht, and Timothy Mitchell. In group discussions led by anthropology graduate student Marcel LaFlamme, and in intimate exchanges with the visiting scholars, these Rice undergraduates worked to draw connections between the lectures and to establish the (not always apparent) connections between energy and their own research interests. Then, they divided into three working groups to develop a framework for an energy humanities course, to be taught by a postdoctoral fellow during the 2012-13 academic year.

Each working group developed a list of major research questions, methodological approaches, and canonical texts, before merging them into a single document organized around interdisciplinary keywords. Involving undergraduates in course design meant drawing on their firsthand knowledge of how Rice students study and learn. At the same time, the students encountered their fair share of skepticism as to whether they were equal to the task. “No single source agreed with our methodology,” one student acknowledged. “We heard from experts whose opinions contradicted both our own work and the work of other scholars in the field. But that doesn’t mean that the energy humanities are a hopeless mess. Rather, it just means that we, as a rising generation of humanists, have had a rare opportunity to offer our own intervention.” The distinctive blend of intellectual modesty and confidence in this statement exemplifies the value of the course framework as both a teaching tool and a template for further undergraduate involvement in the Cultures of Energy Initiative.

Jay Becton, Kay Fukui, and Eli Spector
Lead Undergraduate Fellows

Marcel LaFlamme
Predoctoral Fellow

Introduction

“Mechanism,” A.R. Ammons

Selections from “Literature in the Ages of Wood, Tallow, Coal,” ed. Patricia Yaeger

What do the humanities have to say about energy and the environment? Why this course, and why now?

Energetics

Selections from *Metaphysics*, Book IX, Aristotle

Selections from *The Science of Energy*, Crosbie Smith

“Energy and the Evolution of Culture,” Leslie White

Selections from *Libidinal Economy*, Jean-Francois Lyotard

What do we mean when we talk about energy? How has its meaning changed over time? Is energy a force of biology, physics, sociality, or subjectivity? Why has it been understood in each of these ways?

Energy City

Selections from *The Big Rich*, Bryan Burrough

Selections from *Energy Metropolis*, ed. Martin Melosi and Joseph Pratt

Field trips: Petroleum Club of Houston, Baytown Refinery

How has Houston’s relationship to petrochemical production shaped its development? How is the city grappling with the prospect of energy transition? How has Rice University both shaped and been shaped by these processes?

Environment

Selections from *The Spirit of the Laws*, Book XIV, Montesquieu

Selections from *Weather, Climate, Culture*, ed. Sarah Strauss and Benjamin Orlove

Selections from *A Vast Machine*, Paul Edwards

Selections from *Telemorphosis*, ed. Tom Cohen

What do we mean when we talk about the environment, and what is its relationship to energy? How has climate become available as an object of our regard, and how can the humanities help us to understand climate change?

Knowledge

Selections from *Merchants of Doubt*, Naomi Oreskes

Selections from *Science in Action*, Bruno Latour

Selections from *Objectivity*, Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison

How does knowledge about energy and the environment get produced, stabilized, and made authoritative?

Infrastructure

Selections from *Networks of Power*, Thomas Hughes

Selections from *The Transmission of Affect*, Teresa Brennan

Selections from *Carbon Democracy*, Timothy Mitchell

How do the channels through which energy is distributed constrain where it goes and what it does?

Politics

“Oil in Santa Barbara and Power in America,” Harvey Molotch

“Seeing Like an Oil Company,” James Ferguson

Selections from *Carbon Democracy*, Timothy Mitchell

How does energy production and distribution give rise to or put pressure on particular political arrangements?

Case Study: The Middle East

Selections from *The Prize*, Daniel Yergin

Selections from *Desert Kingdom*, Toby Jones
Cyclonopedia, Reza Negarestani

How has energy production in the Middle East produced particular ecologies of power, wealth, and cultural production?

Temporality

“The Climate of History,” Dipesh Chakrabarty
Selections from *In the Time of Oil*, Mandana Limbert
Selections from work in progress, Gökçe Günel

What are some of the ways in which energy and the environment organize the lived experience of time?

Ethics and Responsibility

Selections from *Ethics and the Environment*, Dale Jamieson
Selections from *Solar*, Ian McEwan
Selections from *The Ecological Thought*, Tim Morton

What would it mean to formulate an ethics of energy? Who should be held responsible for the environmental effects of energy production and consumption? What paradigms of responsibility are adequate to the task?

Ideas for Course Assignments

Analyze an excerpt from an actual Environmental Impact Statement or other legal/scientific document, in order to develop critical reading strategies and identify unexamined assumptions.

In a small group, develop a scenario in which a new source of energy is discovered. How would it be produced, distributed, and priced? What effects would this have on social, political, and cultural imaginaries?

Design and carry out a research project that takes an explicitly interdisciplinary approach to an energy issue of your choosing. Include some reflections on the project’s interdisciplinarity in the final product.