

## Book Reviews

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Imre Szeman and Dominic Boyer, editors. *Energy Humanities: An Anthology*. Johns Hopkins UP, 2017. Pp. viii, 595. US\$49.95.

Against today's backdrop of eco-catastrophe and sustainability issues, recent concerns in the field of environmental humanities include the thematic and aesthetic examinations of pollution and waste, toxic/nuclear landscapes, eco-phobia, the imperilled human/non-human cohabitation, climate change fiction, and petrofiction. Often abridged as "cli-fi," climate change fiction refers to a recent (popular) literary genre whose fictional narratives foreground current environmental issues through a variety of techniques and modes (e.g., realist, speculative, utopian, dystopic). Petrofiction deals more specifically with the multi-faceted relationship between oil and human affairs. Both cli-fi and petrofiction as well as the representational challenges they investigate are usually studied within the context of the Anthropocene. In the face of posthumanism, new materialisms, and twenty-first-century climate and technological crises, many scholars and artists are, more than ever before, calling for collaborative work between the natural sciences and the arts. This mutual enrichment potentially helps us better understand, represent, and address the complex reality we live in. Informed by a similar interdisciplinary imperative, *Energy Humanities: An Anthology* contributes to these debates by focusing on the interface between culture and energy sources such as fossil fuels and nuclear energy.

In their introduction to this substantial volume, editors Imre Szeman and Dominic Boyer observe that engaging critically with our (ab)use of non-renewable energy resources leads to environmental questions as well as "social, cultural, and political challenges" (1). Work in the field of energy humanities, which is concomitant with that undertaken in environmental humanities, thus compels us to reconfigure old notions. The concept of modernity, for example, is reconceived as intimately linked to energy use: "We are citizens and subjects of fossil fuels through and through, whether we know it or not. And so any meaningful response to climate change will have to tarry with the world and the people that have been made from oil" (Szeman and Boyer 1). This point is articulated convincingly throughout the anthology. Equating modernity and energy, the editors argue, helps us achieve a more encompassing account of "the forces and processes shaping historical development" (2). The contributors to the volume contend that past critiques of modernity have too often overlooked this connection, while in fact the "economic growth,"

“access to goods and services,” and “capacities and freedoms” associated with modernity are “direct consequence[s] of the massive expansion of energy use” (2). The very well documented essays in the volume illuminate these inter-related issues.

Szeman and Boyer propose that in addition to modern geopolitics, energy use has also intervened in “our relationships to our bodies, . . . human social relations, and . . . the imperatives of . . . ‘culture’” (2). The pivotal thesis of *Energy Humanities* goes against the grain by suggesting that “the challenge of addressing global warming isn’t fundamentally a scientific or technological one” (3). Such a proposition reacts not only to discourses that idealize technology as the sole solution to the crisis but also to those promoting energy transition plans that eventually prove complicit with an unrelenting exploitation of resources and thus with global capitalism (3).<sup>1</sup> Rather, Szeman and Boyer write, the social sciences must complement technical research to apprehend our multi-faceted enmeshment with energy systems and “map out other ways of being, behaving, and belonging in relation to both old and new forms of energy” (3). The contributors to this volume, who for the most part hail from the humanities, adopt precisely such a transdisciplinary perspective. Some of the many issues addressed in this massive reimagining of modernity relate to environmental politics, “energy epistemologies” (6), linear and progress-based conceptions of history, and humankind’s “energy unconscious” (8). Underlying these questions is a plea for “a sociopolitical revolution” that could reposition energy needs as a central criterion for “an equality of opportunities and capacities” (7). To explore the manifold implications of this ecological endeavour, the scholarly and literary contributions to this volume are divided into four interconnected chapters: “Energy and Modernity: Histories and Futures”; “Energy, Power, and Politics”; “Energy in Philosophy: Ethics, Politics, and Being”; and “The Aesthetics of Petrocultures.” Most of the scholarly pieces collected here were originally published within the last eighteen years. Some were penned by names well known in ecocritical circles, such as Dipesh Chakrabarty, Timothy Morton, and Stephanie LeMenager. A few refreshing surprises, however, punctuate the anthology, including an excerpt from Pope Francis’ *Encyclical on Climate Change & Inequality* and a passage from *The Solar Economy* by German politician Hermann Scheer, who founded and presided over the European Association for Renewable Energy (1988–2010) and the World Council for Renewable Energy (2001–2010).

This anthology will be of interest to scholars in (post)colonial and/or ecocritical studies. Energy humanities is the logical next step for anyone concerned with social and environmental justice issues, neo-colonialism or -imperialism, local/global tensions, and geopolitical relations between North

and South. With its material focus on energy production, needs, and distribution, energy humanities helps reinforce the cultural and literary discussions around these matters, similar to earlier studies in postcolonial ecocriticism or social and environmental justice. My postcolonial interests led me to particularly appreciate Chapter Two, which is devoted to “Energy, Power, Politics,” as well as Gabrielle Hecht’s “Nuclear Ontologies” and Jean-François Mouhot’s “Past Connections and Present Similarities in Slave Ownership and Fossil Fuel Usage.” Moreover, Szeman and Boyer express their strong interest with environmental humanities and materialist feminist thinkers in particular (9). Indeed, like these fields of enquiry, energy humanities also ties in with object-oriented theories and studies of the post- or non-human. Critics researching the epistemological implications of the Anthropocene will be drawn to Chapter Three, which discusses our energy-impacted systems of thought.

Chapter Four turns to aesthetic representation and compiles many compelling pieces written from materialist and literary perspectives. In an effort to foster dialogue between theorists and artists, the preceding sections are also interspersed with literary and visual arts contributions. Szeman and Boyer disclose their interest in work with a “speculative impulse” that allows space for “surreal vision and wild imagination” (9). They do not seem to favour one particular literary genre or aesthetic as best capable of engaging with “the influence of shifts and changes in energy systems” on cultural expressions and formal experiments (427). Chapter Four contains prose and poetry that ranges from highly experimental forms to more realist writing modes, including magic realism, debates on petrofiction, and the apocalyptic genre. Yet despite the relevance of these texts and the editors’ laudable effort to transcend generic categories, the selection of a literary corpus dealing specifically with fossil fuels may lead to questions about the position of energy humanities vis-à-vis other critical fields. For Szeman and Boyer, it constitutes neither “a specialist field of study—a subset of environmental studies” (4) nor a “new explanatory causal monopoly” encompassing other “analytics” (9). Instead, they write, the field aims “to turn phenomena such as global warming, species extinction, and environmental degradation inside out, so as to reveal how the use and abuse of energy have contributed” to damaging the Earth (9). Ironically enough, this project is conducted so convincingly that it risks achieving the “causal monopoly” the editors seek to avoid. Because its transdisciplinary and transgeneric potential is so well demonstrated in the assembled essays, readers might get the impression that energy stands at the root of (post)colonial, neo-imperialist, ecological, social, and cultural questions. In this sense, energy humanities can be seen as subsuming its neighbouring disciplines.

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Additionally, there is a slightly unequal balance between the geo-cultural fields covered by the various contributions. The huge continents of Asia, South America, and Africa are represented only by the canonical Amitav Gosh, Pablo Neruda, and Ken Saro-Wiwa, while the text contains no critical or artistic contributions from Australasia or the Pacific region. The volume's content tackles issues related to these regions only in passing. Consequently, energy humanities risks appearing as a predominantly northern-hemisphere, perhaps even North American endeavour, which defeats any transnational perspective.

*Energy Humanities* will certainly become an invaluable companion for critics involved in interdisciplinary and environmental debates, such as postcolonial ecocriticism and material ecocriticism. For the literary-minded, the book illustrates the mutually enriching dialogue between the sciences and cultural studies. Although energy humanities is still a burgeoning field of enquiry, this anthology reveals how a thorough (re)examination of our enmeshment with energy sources is both useful and necessary at a time when we are already experiencing an environmental catastrophe.

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### Notes

1 Szeman's article "System Failure," anthologized in this volume, demonstrates this.