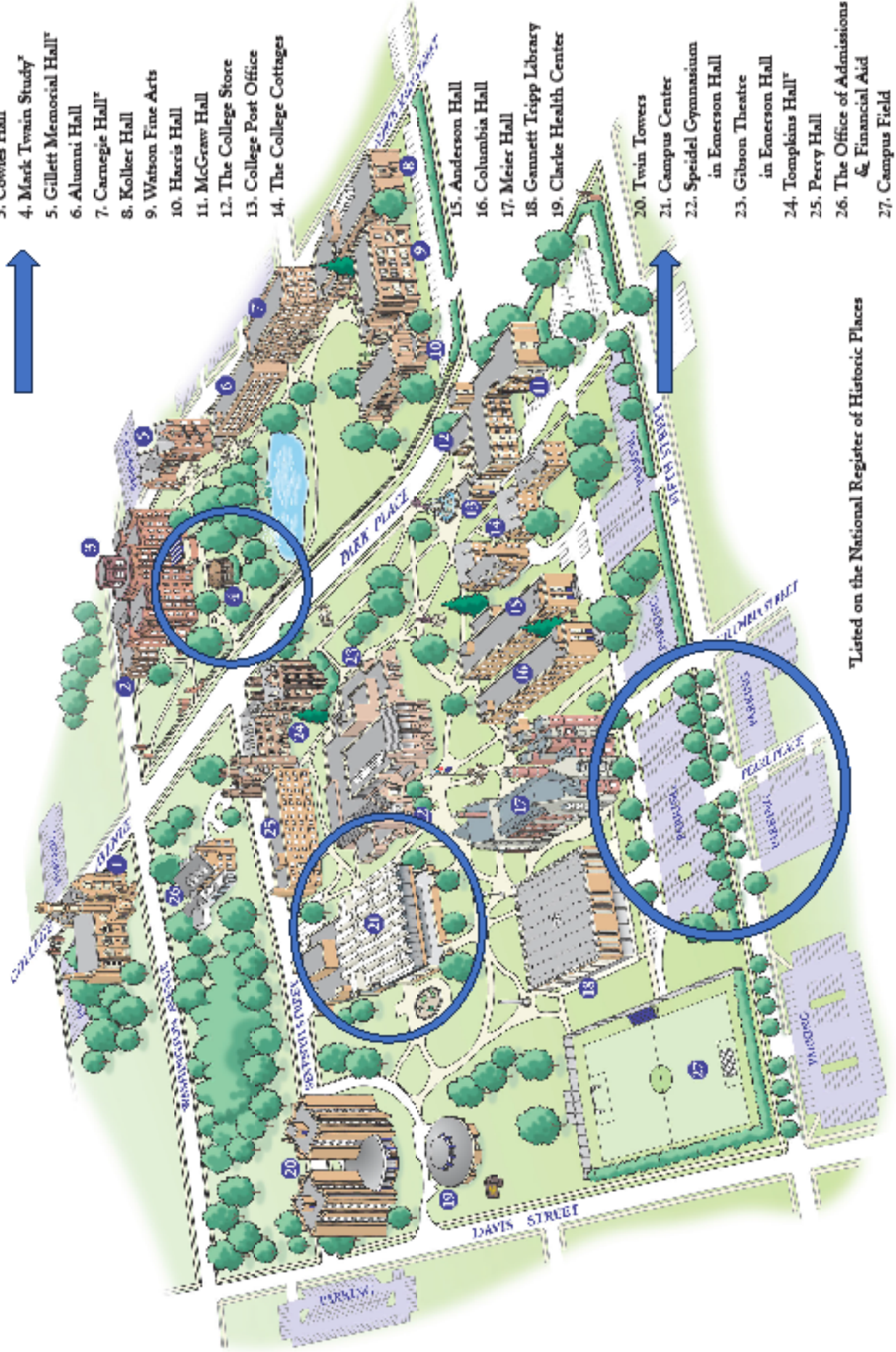


12th Quarry Farm Symposium
October 10 & 11, 2025

***ENERGY
STUDIES***



1. Hamilton Hall[†]
2. Fessenden Commons[†]
3. Cowles Hall[†]
4. Mack Twain Study[†]
5. Gillett Memorial Hall[†]
6. Alumni Hall
7. Carnegie Hall[†]
8. Koller Hall
9. Watson Fine Arts
10. Harris Hall
11. McGraw Hall
12. The College Store
13. College Post Office
14. The College Cottages
15. Anderson Hall
16. Columbia Hall
17. Meier Hall
18. Gannett Tripp Library
19. Clarke Health Center
20. Twin Towers
21. Campus Center
22. Speidel Gymnasium in Emerson Hall
23. Gibson Theatre in Emerson Hall
24. Tompkins Hall[†]
25. Perry Hall
26. The Office of Admissions & Financial Aid
27. Campus Field



[†]Listed on the National Register of Historic Places



The Center for Mark Twain Studies Presents:

Energy Studies

The Twelfth Quarry Farm Symposium
October 10 & 11, 2025

Symposium Organizers:

Jeffrey Insko, *Oakland University*

Matt Seybold, *Elmira College*

Presenters:

April Anson, *University of Connecticut*

Rachel Banner, *West Chester University of Pennsylvania*

John Levi Barnard, *University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign*

Elizabeth Barrios, *Albion College*

Brent Bellamy, *Trent University and Ontario Tech University*

Thomas S. Davis, *Ohio State University*

Kathryn Dolan, *Missouri University of Science and Technology*

Stephanie Foote, *University of Vermont*

John Kendall, *Pennsylvania State University*

Caroline Levine, *Cornell University*

Alexander Menrisky, *University of Connecticut*

Alexis Schmidt, *University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign*

Caleb Wellum, *University of Toronto, Scarborough*

Nathan Wolff, *Tufts University*



The Center for Mark Twain Studies Presents:

Energy Studies

The Twelfth Quarry Farm Symposium
October 10 & 11, 2025

Schedule of Events

Friday, October 10 - Tifft Lounge, Campus Center, Elmira College Campus

5:00PM Opening Reception

6:00PM Dinner

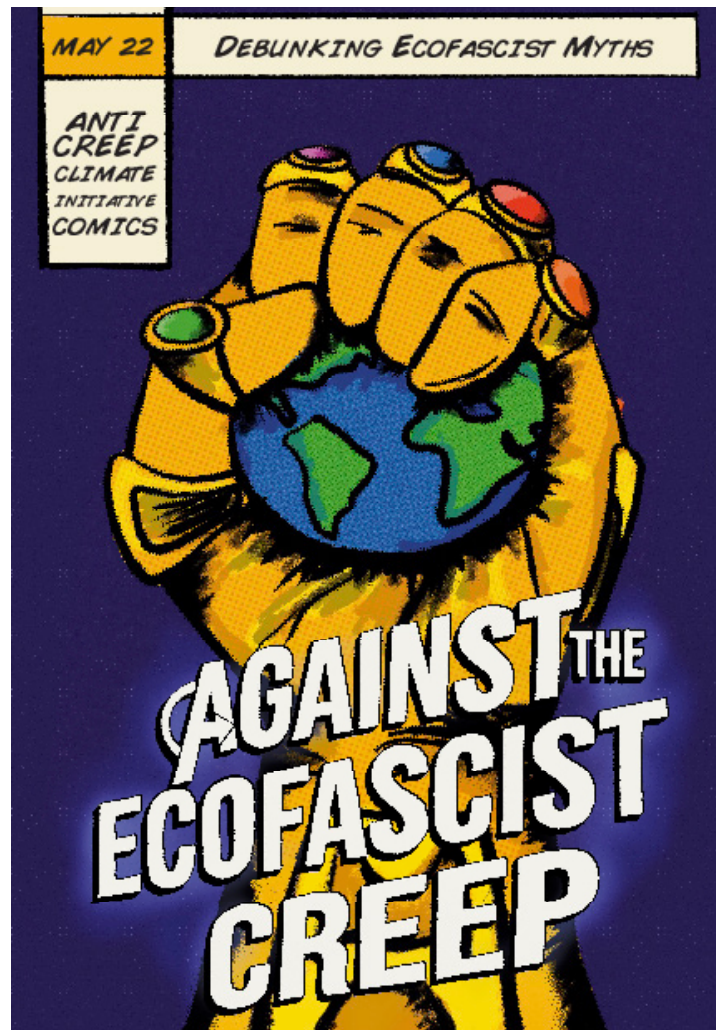
7:00PM Organizer Welcome from Jeffrey Insko

7:15PM Vandal Live: Everyday Ecofascism
A Conversation with April Anson, Alexander Menrisky, and Matt Seybold

This live recording of *The American Vandal Podcast* will feature two scholars from the Anti-Creep Climate Initiative who are both researching ecofascism and challenging its dominant myths via public humanities work. Central to our discussion will be the critical category of “everyday ecofascism” which encompasses both the crisis narratives that incite political violence and moreover the often mundane and/or middlebrow representations of geopolitics, energy production, population growth, resource allocation, and climate science which serve, intentionally or unintentionally, to validate eschatology and extremism.

April Anson is Assistant Professor of English and Social and Critical Inquiry at the University of Connecticut where she serves on the executive committees for American Studies and Native American and Indigenous Studies. She is the 2025-26 Justice, Equity and Repair Fellow at the University of Connecticut's Humanities Institute, completing her manuscript *Unfenceable: Ecofascism, Literary Genre, and Native American Environmental Justice*. *Unfenceable* uses literary analysis to trace the historical and ongoing relationship between climate change, white supremacy, and American environmental thought as well as the Indigenous American environmental justice traditions that eclipse those relations. Prior to joining UConn, Dr. Anson was Assistant Professor of Public Humanities at San Diego State University and a Mellon Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of Pennsylvania. Dr. Anson's public-facing work includes cofounding the Anti-Creep Climate Collective, which coauthored *Against the Ecofascist Creep*. Her research has appeared in *boundary 2*, *Resilience*, *American Quarterly*, *Environmental History*, *Western American Literature*, and more.

Alexander Menrisky is Associate Professor of English and affiliate faculty in American Studies at the University of Connecticut. He is the author of the forthcoming *Routledge Introduction to American Environmental Literature*, *Everyday Ecofascism: Crisis and Consumption in American Literature* (University of Minnesota Press, 2025), *Wild Abandon: American Literature and the Identity Politics of Ecology* (Cambridge University Press, 2021), and, as part of the Anti-Creep Climate Initiative, the web zine and teaching resource *Against the Ecofascist Creep*. His work also appears in *Criticism*, *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, *Mosaic*, *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, *Resilience*, *Edge Effects* magazine, and elsewhere. He is currently the Vice President of the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE), and in the past created and curated the organization's Teaching Resources Database.



Cover of *Against the Ecofascist Creep: Debunking Ecofascist Myths* by the Anti-Creep Climate Initiative (2022).

Cover design by Melody Keenan.

Taken from <https://www.asle.org/wp-content/uploads/Against-the-Ecofascist-Creep.pdf>

Saturday, October 11 - Quarry Farm

8:30 - 9:00AM Breakfast in Maid's Cottage

9:00 - 10:30AM

Session #1: Energic and Extractive Histories
Joseph Lemak, Moderator

Rachel Banner, "Marital Entropy: Domestic Science & Domestic Violence at the Dawn of Thermodynamics"

Kathryn Dolan, "Mining Gilt: Interrogating the Search for Coal in *The Gilded Age*"

Nathan Wolff, "'Mark Twain and the Political Economy of Energy'"

1:00 - 2:15PM

Session #2: Petrocriticism
Jeffrey Insko, Moderator

Brent Bellamy, "The Aesthetic Textuality of Oil"

Alexis Schmidt, "'American Exhaustion: Reading Turn-of-the-Century Literature through Energy Studies'"

Caleb Wellum, "The 'Energy Gap' and the Practice of History"

12:00 - 1:00PM Lunch on the Quarry Farm Porch

1:00 - 2:15PM

Session #3: Infrastructuralism
Matt Seybold, Moderator

Elizabeth Barrios, "Boom, Bust, and Infrastructure Failure: Latin American Energy Humanities"

Thomas S. Davis, "Forming Attachments"

John Kendall, "Abstracting the Earth: Seismic Prospecting, Fossil Capital, and the Political Economy of Geoscience"

2:30 - 3:45PM

Session #4: Activist Humanities
Matt Seybold, Moderator

John Levi Barnard, "Environmental Humanities and the Question of Freedom"

Jeffrey Insko, "How to Shut Down a Pipeline"

Caroline Levine, "Collective Forms"

3:00 - 4:00PM Roundtable Conversation led by Jeffrey Insko and Matt Seybold

6:00 - 9:00PM Closing Reception on the Quarry Farm Porch
Dinner in the Barn

Titles and Abstracts

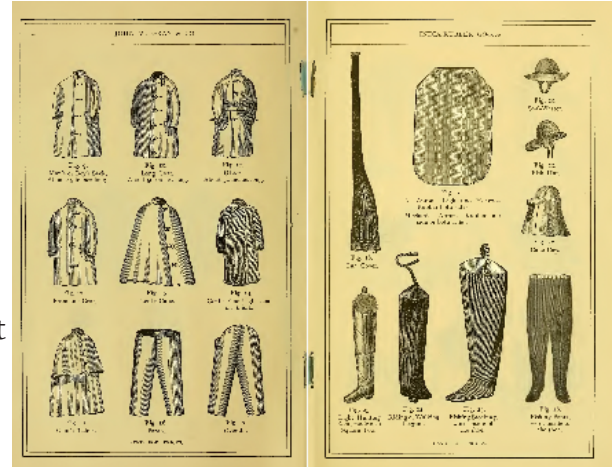
Rachel Banner

West Chester University of Pennsylvania

rbanner@wcupa.edu

“Marital Entropy: Domestic Science & Domestic Violence at the Dawn of Thermodynamics”

In the 1860s, developing theories of thermodynamic energy and the developing genre of women’s housekeeping manuals that taught “domestic science” reinforced one another’s cultural anxieties about entropy, or energetic waste. As Barri J. Gold and Cara New Daggett have shown, the invention of the technocapitalist science of thermodynamics further facilitates a global north transition into energy modernity in the latter decades of the nineteenth century. This paper draws attention to the fact that the invention and popularization of thermodynamic energy science correlates in US legal marital history with the liberalization of marriage for women – via things like married women’s property and earnings acts – that nevertheless preserve the so-called “marital rape exemption,” which I read as a form of sexual-extractive violence. While not arguing for a causative relation between thermodynamic and marital discourses, their coincidence gestures towards an overlap within the desires of marital and energetic modernity. Both aspire to maximize productivity and minimize entropic waste within economic and cultural systems dependent on extractive violence for fuel. The figure of a wife is a teeming cultural site for both of these energetic projects.



Advertisement from John W. Gray & Co.'s
Illustrated Catalogue of India Rubber Goods
(Hartford, CT. 1880)

In this presentation I analyze Catharine Beecher’s post-Civil War housekeeping manual *The American Woman’s Home* (1869) alongside a popular broadsheet song from the same period called “The India Rubber Man,” about a husband who violently abducts and attacks his errant wife while disguised in an India Rubber gum suit. While these texts are very different from one another, they each respond to an emergent conception of the modernizing US wife as both an energy worker and herself a type of domestic fuel. The “India Rubber Man” articulates a patriarchal view that understands extractive resource violence and a husband’s right to enact proprietary sexual violence as the key means of minimizing economic and marital waste. In Beecher’s differently conservative view, US housewives need to be respected and husbanded properly in order to do the energy work of maintaining the home’s private domestic economy. Both texts manifest a patriarchal unease about the prospect of unavoidable entropy. Both share the conviction that a wife is a necessary thing and a terrible thing to waste.

Rachel Banner is Associate Professor of English at West Chester University of Pennsylvania, where she teaches courses in American literature and first-year writing/composition. She is also a department union representative for the faculty union APSCUF-AFT Local 1421. Her work has appeared in the *Oxford Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Oxford University Press, 2024), as well as *Callaloo*, *ESQ: A Journal of the American Renaissance*, and most recently *J19*. She has essays forthcoming in *American Gothic Studies*, the edited collection *William Wells Brown: Man of Letters* (University of Georgia Press), and the edited collection *Reconstruction in Word and Image* (University of Georgia Press). She is currently working on a book project called *The Figure of a Wife* about wives, energy studies, sexual and extractive violence in nineteenth-century US literature.

John Levi Barnard

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“Environmental Humanities and the Question of Freedom”

Inspired by Matt Seybold’s idea of a “recuperative sentimentality,” this talk offers a “recuperative straightforwardness” by advancing what may seem like a pretty obvious thesis: that the ecological crises of the present constitute a more general crisis for our understanding and practice of freedom. I’ll suggest that the environmental humanities might address this problem in two ways: through cultivating an understanding of shared, cross-class implication in the structures and infrastructures of capitalist modernity that drive the crises; and by offering models and methods of refusal of the worst ideas and practices that “too-late capitalism,” as Anna Kornbluh calls it, ever more insistently presses upon us.



Looking out the windshield of a pickup driving down the highway with oncoming trucks. *Deepwater Horizon*, dir. Peter Berg (2016).

John Levi Barnard is Associate Professor of English and Comparative & World Literature at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. His work in literary and cultural studies and the environmental humanities has appeared in *American Literature*, *American Quarterly*, *Resilience*, *Post45*, *The Dial*, the *Oxford Handbook of Twentieth-Century American Literature*, and elsewhere. His next book, *The Edible and the Endangered: Animals, Empire, Extinction*, is (hopefully) forthcoming from a reputable press.

Elizabeth Barrios

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“Boom, Bust, and Infrastructure Failure: Latin American Energy Humanities”

Fossil-fueled infrastructure shapes societies while remaining largely invisible, creating the illusion of stability, self-sufficiency, and mastery over nature. The Venezuelan context—from its rapid mid-20th-century urbanization to 21st-century infrastructural collapse and humanitarian crisis—captures the promises and failures of a world shaped by fossil fuels. The country’s extreme boom-and-bust cycles over the last century have yielded a rich corpus exploring the ways in which fossil fuel infrastructure and its collapse shape social life, temporality, and the collective imagination. Far from an aberration, Venezuela can be seen as a logical outcome of a society holding on to an unbridled faith in fossil fuel’s transformative power. This presentation examines how the Venezuelan context (explored through literature, journalism, and current hemispheric events) exposes patterns in our energy system that are harder to see in the so-called Global North. It also underscores the challenges and necessity of integrating under-examined case studies into energy studies, a field that has struggled to account for Latin America. By attending to Hemispheric connections, the talk broadens the field’s geographic and historical horizons and highlights the social and cultural dimensions of fossil-fueled modernity.

Elizabeth Barrios is Associate Professor in the Department of Modern Languages and Cultures and Chair of Ethnic Studies at Albion College. Her research explores ecology, energy humanities, and Latin American and Latina/o literature and media. She is the author of *Failures of the Imagination: Reckoning with Oil in Venezuelan Cultural Production* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2026) and is currently writing *Plastic Environmentalisms: Petrocultures and Climate Denial in the Americas*. This book includes a public humanities component: the ongoing oral history project, “Climate Stories of the Venezuelan Andes.” She has been selected as a Fellow at the Society for the Humanities at Cornell University to complete this project during the 2025–2026 academic year.

Less wear on the Rainmaker

IN this case, the "rainmaker" is a diesel engine driving an irrigation pump—lifting water to the higher levels, where gravity takes over and distributes it to thirsty soil.

Diesels were in trouble—fouled up, and showing a ruinous rate of wear—when Shell Research scientists were called in. For the irrigation farmer can't afford to have his diesel out of service, undergoing an expensive overhaul, during the growing season.

Shell scientists found conditions the reverse of those which often cause trouble: the diesels were operating under low load, at comparatively low temperature—but keeping overlongly at it. This set up an "acid condition" in their system. Result: excessive wear, even to the point of "eating" the metal. And an accumulation of "gunk" on pistons and in ring channels...

Fortunately Shell Research had a head start—was already far advanced in the development of a new "anti-acid" oil to meet another problem. This new product—Shell Rimula Oil—was put to work in the irrigation diesels. The results were astonishing even to the Shell scientists.

With all other conditions the same, engines came through a complete pumping season "clean as a whistle." The rate of wear—less than 1/50 the former rate—was so low that engines gave the promise of two pumping seasons without overhaul, instead of a midseason "lay-up."

Development of Shell Rimula Oil is only one achievement by which Shell Research demonstrates leadership in the petroleum industry, and in petroleum products. Wherever you see the Shell name and trade mark, Shell Research is your guarantee of quality.



Horizons widen through Shell Research

© 1948, SHELL OIL COMPANY (INCORPORATED)

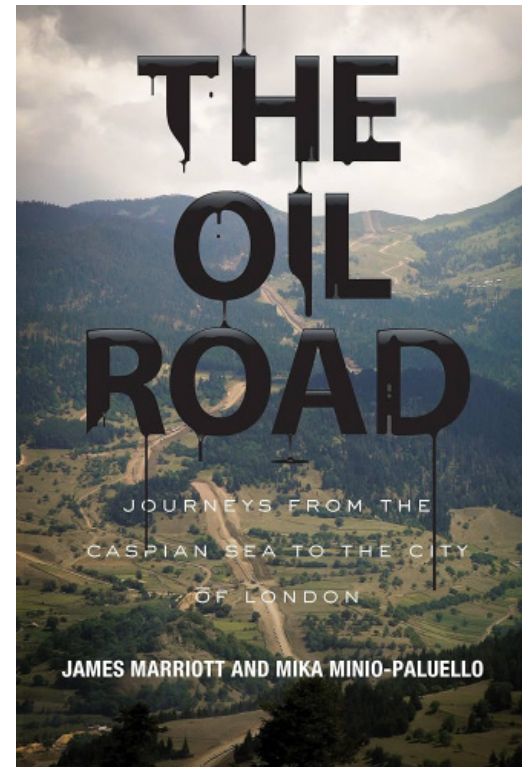
1948 Shell Oil Company Advertisement "Less Wear on the Rainmaker"

Brent Bellamy

Trent University and Ontario Tech University
brent.ryan.bellamy@gmail.com

“The Aesthetic Textuality of Oil”

The aesthetic textuality of oil names both oil’s impact on cultural production and the development of particularly oil-bound social formations and habits. A form of petrocriticism, it seeks to demonstrate the total, unbreakable hold of fossil fuels on media at every level: production, distribution, consumption, and waste. The talk will begin with an overview of literary and filmic approaches to making the world of oil apparent. Yet, such texts tend to offer only a partial sense of oil relations. They do not quite achieve the leap from text to matter one might hope for given climatic deterioration and the intensification of fossil fuel extraction. In its back half, this talk turns to James Marriot and Mika Minio-Paluello’s 2013 travelogue *The Oil Road*, which offers a compelling way of mapping the relation of oil to literature, infrastructure, and simply being in the world. *The Oil Road* struggles with the limits to representing oil’s grip on cultural, economic, and social systems. By tracking fossil fuel infrastructure, *The Oil Road* is able to consider both history and geography; it describes produced landscapes and their origins. In this way, *The Oil Road* offers an entry point for activists, artists, and researchers to map the spatial, historical, and social and economic relations created by oil.



Brent Ryan Bellamy teaches in English and in Cultural Studies departments at Trent University and in Communications at Ontario Tech University. His ongoing research is focused on mediating the real world through cultural objects, specifically related to fossil capital and the myriad forms of oppression and dysregulation it amplifies. As such, his latest work is on storyworlds and worldbuilding. Bellamy is editing an issue of *Storyworlds* journal on collaborative worldbuilding and writing a small book for MIT press on Worldbuilding. His published work includes *Materialism and the Critique of Energy*, *An Ecotopian Lexicon*, and *Remainders of the American Century*.

Thomas S. Davis

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“Forming Attachments”

This talk makes the case for attachment as a specific relational form that mediates between the affective and political economic dimensions of life under fossil capital. I first draw distinctions between other forms of relationality that circulate widely in the Energy and Environmental Humanities—extractive, kinship, reciprocity, entanglement—and attachment. I then turn to specific instances where fossil fuel regimes marshal art and cultural production to cultivate and nourish attachments to the forms of life oil and gas make possible. The paper closes by thinking through alternative types of aesthetic education for forms of attachment not bound to fossil modernity, its regimes of capital accumulation, and its homicidal models of growth.

Thomas S. Davis is Associate Professor of English and Affiliated Faculty at the Sustainability Institute at The Ohio State University. His essays have appeared in *Resilience: An Environmental Humanities Journal*, *Energy Humanities*, *Modern Fiction Studies*, *Twentieth Century Literature*, *English Language Notes*, *Modernism/Modernity*, *Cultural Dynamics*, *Textual Practices*, and several edited volumes. He has essays forthcoming in *Modern Fiction Studies*, *The Cambridge Handbook to Caribbean Modernism*, and *The Cambridge Companion to Late Modernism*. His first book is *The Extinct Scene: Late Modernism and Everyday Life* (Columbia UP, 2016). He is completing a second book, *Forming Attachments: Aesthetic Education and Ecological Crisis*, and working on a third one called *Irrelevance: Literature and Art in the 21st Century*.



Abandoned trucks in a field.
Photo credit: thomassdavis.net

Kathryn Dolan

Missouri University of Science and Technology
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“Mining Gilt: Interrogating the Search for Coal in *The Gilded Age*”

In “Mining Gilt,” I argue that in *The Gilded Age* (1873), Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner critique the historical forces and ecological violence involved in the extractive industries involving the belief in a dispensable beyond-human world through their depictions of coal mining. The novel shows various forms of mistreatment of the more-than-human world. Together, Twain and Warner ironically describe the misuse of land witnessed during their time, predicting the significance of coal, a significance that has lasted into modern times, in much the same way that they predicted the era now referred to as the Gilded Age.

Kathryn Dolan is Professor of American Literature and Chair of the Department of English and Technical Communication at the Missouri University of Science and Technology.

She researches U.S. literature, food studies, global studies, and environmental criticism. Prior to joining Missouri S&T, Dr. Dolan was a postdoctoral scholar in the English department at University of South Florida. Dr. Dolan’s book publications include *Beyond the Fruited Plain* (Nebraska, 2014), *Cattle Country* (Nebraska, 2021), *Breakfast Cereal: A Global History* (Reaktion/Chicago, 2023), and most recently *Henry David Thoreau and the Nick of Time* (Mercer, 2025), co-edited with John Kucich and Henrik Otterberg.



“The mine at Ilium.” Illustration from *The Gilded Age* by Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner (1873), chpt. XLIX.



A home is smashed off its foundation near the Atlantic Ocean in Brick Township, New Jersey on February 22, 2013. It was one of many homes destroyed by Superstorm Sandy. Photo Credit: Mel Evans, AP.

Stephanie Foote

University of Vermont

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“Garbage Infrastructures: Household Economy as Extractive Economy”

This paper examines garbage as the visible sign of how extractive economies coordinate and intensify the social inequalities are central to their existence. Focusing on the garbage generated in and around homes – from the daily detritus produced as a matter of course to the rubble produced by catastrophic storms – I look at the subjects and bodies proximity to garbage makes visible and those it makes invisible.

Stephanie Foote is Professor of English at the University of Vermont, where she researches and teaches American literature and culture from the nineteenth century to the present with a particular focus on environmental issues. Foote is the author of two single-author books and co-edited (with Elizabeth Mazzolini) *Histories of the Dustheap: Waste, Material Cultures, Social Justice* (2012). In 2022 she and Jeffrey Jerome Cohen edited *The Cambridge Companion to the Environmental Humanities*. Most recently, she is the co-founder and co-editor of *Regeneration: Environment, Art, Culture*. She has published more than 20 articles and book chapters in journals such as *PMLA*, *Signs*, *American Literary History*, and *American Literature*, and her work has been funded by the Carnegie Foundation, the Mellon Foundation, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the National Humanities Center.

Jeffrey Insko
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“How to Shut Down a Pipeline”

A decade ago, a coalition of groups and citizens in Michigan embarked on a plan to permanently decommission Line 5, a crude oil pipeline, constructed in 1953, that crosses the state to deliver a half million barrels of oil per day to refineries in Ontario. This paper asks: how can the modes and methods of the humanities contribute to such an endeavor? To pursue this question, I contrast the movement to shut down Line 5 not just with movements to block new pipelines, but with the call, whether rhetorical or actual, to blow them up. The latter has its appeal, given the recalcitrance of capitalist structures to address the climate crisis in any serious way, offering instead outright denialism, greenwashing schemes, techno-utopian fantasies, or the latest, “climate realism.” But the kind of dismantling the Line 5 movement has in mind is more than just a call to blow it all up or burn it all down. Rather, it sees unmaking, disassembly, as a necessary first step toward remaking and rebuilding.



McGulpin Point at the Straits of Mackinac in Michigan, site of the Line 5 pipeline crossing. Photo credit: Jeffrey Insko

Jeffrey Insko is Professor of English and Coordinator of American Studies at Oakland University in Rochester, Michigan, where he teaches courses on nineteenth-century American literature and culture and the Environmental and Energy Humanities. He is the author of *History, Abolition, and the Ever-Present Now in Antebellum American Writing* (Oxford, 2018) and the editor of the *Norton Library Edition of Moby-Dick* (2024). His recent work on energy, environment, and infrastructure has appeared in such venues as the *Cambridge Companion to the Environmental Humanities*, the *Oxford Handbook of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, *Post45*, and *The Dial*. He is currently completing a book about energy infrastructure, the Great Lakes, and industrial modernity titled *The North 30: An Environmental History of America's Most Dangerous Pipeline*.

John Kendall
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“Abstracting the Earth: Seismic Prospecting, Fossil Capital, and the Political Economy of Geoscience”

The American oil industry played a central role in shaping the epistemological foundations of 20th-century geoscience. One famous example of this is the ‘plate tectonics revolution’: empirical observations of seafloor spreading made use of prospecting techniques pioneered in the oil patch. Yet, the political stakes of these entanglements are often understated, and histories of oil prospecting avoid what seems an obvious conclusion: the epistemological structure of 20th-century geoscience is, at least partially, implicated within the reproduction of fossil capital and, hence, the climate crisis. Indeed, many STS scholars argue the opposite—that landmark contributions of (academic) geophysics, particularly in the fields of complexity and systems theory, offer conceptual resources that can help social theorists deconstruct the static, rigid, reified categories of capitalist modernity. This paper suggests, instead, that the logic of capital is quite at home in the ‘chaotic’ earth known to geophysics. Drawing on a resurgent strain of STS scholarship attentive to the political economy of science, I

examine how the development of geophysical prospecting methods has conjoined earth science with extractive capitalism. I take as my central object of inquiry the prospector's seismograph, which, during its introduction in the 1920s, proved most effective at deterritorializing geoscience, namely, by displacing it beyond the surface-bound limits of field geology. At the same time, seismic prospecting reterritorialized geoscience by fixing the epistemological form of the subsurface to the iterative and quantitative methods of observation that had been optimized for finding oil and, hence, accumulating fossil capital. This combined process of de- and reterritorialization reconstituted the material basis of both oil extraction and geoscience and, in turn, can help us understand how the scientific form of the subsurface came to be enmeshed with the form of value.

John Kendall is a Postdoctoral Researcher in Energy Geographies at The Pennsylvania State University. His recently completed dissertation, entitled "Oil Is Where You Find It: Mediations of Technology, Labor, and Value in the Oilfield," explores how historical epistemologies of the subsurface shaped and were shaped by social, political, and economic changes at the surface. He has published in the *Routledge Handbook of the Digital Environmental Humanities*, *Geoforum*, and *Cultural Critique Online*, and is a contributing author to a forthcoming special issue on 'depth' in *Environmental Humanities*. With his postdoctoral supervisor Jennifer Baka, he is currently involved in several research projects investigating the political-industrial ecology of the Appalachian gas industry.

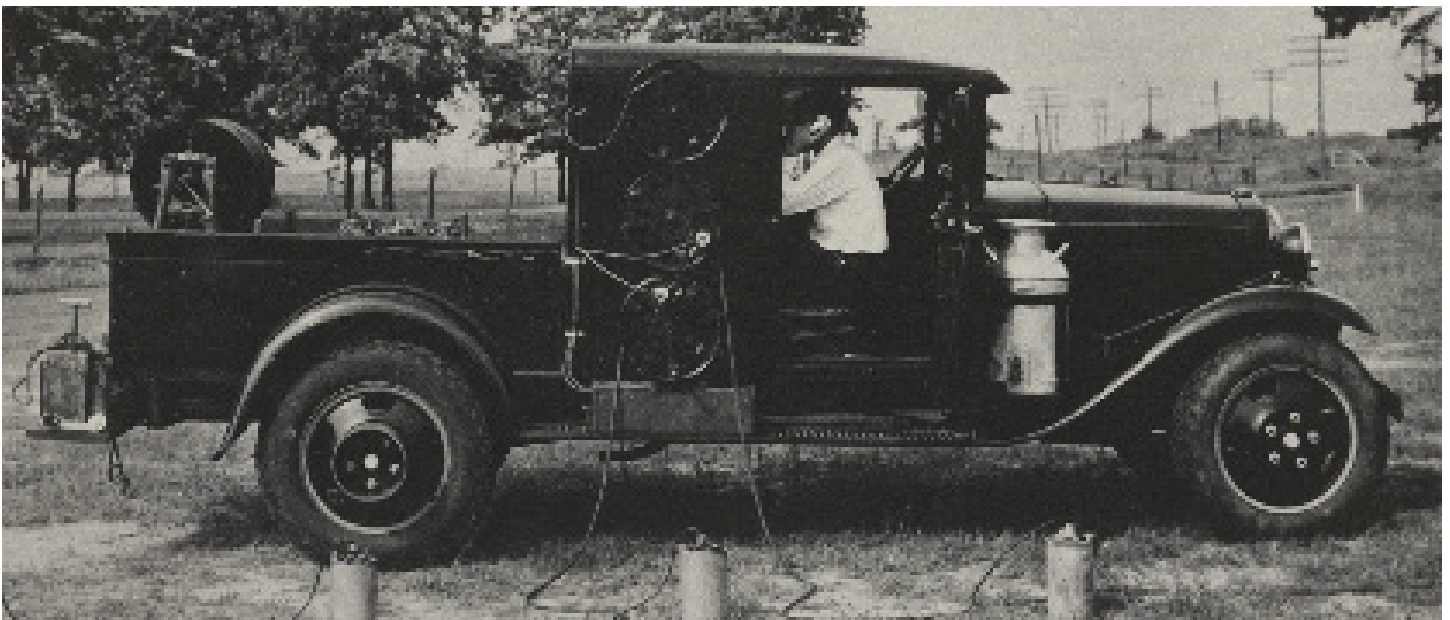


Photo of early seismic exploration work at Geophysical Service Inc., featuring an array of geophones placed in front of a recording truck (ca. early 1930s).

Caroline Levine
Cornell University
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“Collective Forms”

In *Action without Hope* (2025), Nathan Hensley has argued that we’re so deep in the fossil energy regime that there’s no way out except in tiny gestures of solidarity that break with the grammars of the present. This line of argument is common across literary studies, but I argue here that it repeats and re-entrenches the disempowering focus on the small scale that runs deep in the Anglophone literary tradition. While there are certainly exceptions, the two dominant literary forms of modernity—the novel and the lyric poem—are organized around a small number of humans embedded in material circumstances. I argue that collective action could in fact break the fossil regimes of the present, but for that we need other aesthetic and non-aesthetic forms, including group song, aerial photography, the public square, and labor organizing.

Caroline Levine is David and Kathleen Ryan Professor of the Humanities at Cornell University. She is the author of four books: *The Serious Pleasures of Suspense* (2003), *Provoking Democracy: Why We Need the Arts* (2007), *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (2015), and *The Activist Humanist: Form and Method in the Climate Crisis* (2023). She is also a climate activist who was part of the team that persuaded the Cornell Trustees to divest the university endowment of fossil fuels in 2020.



Demonstrators rally outside the Minnesota State Capitol building in St. Paul, Minnesota. Photo credit: Stephen Maturen /Getty Images

Alexis Schmidt

University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign

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“American Exhaustion: Reading Turn-of-the-Century Literature through Energy Studies”

Inspired by energy studies, my research tracks how the language, logic, and aesthetics of exhaustion structure literature of the Progressive Era. My conceptualization of exhaustion reflects the emergence of new ideas about energy and work amidst shifting forms of industry and technology in the nineteenth century. The prevalence of fossil fuel consumption, industrialization, and the emerging field of thermodynamics, a science of energy conversion and decay, all led to, as Cara New Daggett explains in *The Birth of Energy* (2019), the “universalization of energy as the unit that underlies all activity” (84). Work, engines and machines, and humans all came to be understood through the quantifiable rubric of energy.

Reading for energy reveals how thermodynamics-inspired energy metaphors and expressions proliferate turn-of-the-century literature—of all kinds—to make sense of labor—of all kinds. The exertions of keeping house and looking after children, for example, can be evaluated on the same plane as the exertions of factory or farm work, allowing for a better understanding and valuing of such forms of domestic and reproductive labor, then and now. When thinking about the future of work, industry, and more, my research enables us to better identify and appreciate the nature of unwaged domestic and reproductive labor, an important understanding to move forward as we imagine futures of work that are more equitable and less exhausting.

After an overview of my research on exhaustion, my talk will feature an illustrative case study on lesser-known, naturalist woman writer Edith Summers Kelley’s 1923 novel, *Weeds*. I investigate how Kelley’s charts female protagonist Judith’s trajectory from a promising, relatively energetic state, capable of great activity and work, to desolation and exhaustion by the end of the novel. In approaching naturalist fiction through the lens of energy, I ultimately resituate the conventional plot of decline within the new age of energy by renaming and redefining the familiar plot to what I call the *plot of depletion*. I seek to provide is a revitalized way of reading naturalist texts that allows us to better attend to the dynamics and politics of work and the representational strategies used by writers. My shift in terms—the transition from “decline” to “depletion”—is meant to signal this reorientation to texts and emphasize the relevance of the context of the emergence of energy for turn-of-the-century fiction. Ultimately, through this literary analysis of energy and work, my research seeks to contribute to energy studies’ ongoing efforts to understand fossil fuels’ material transformation of all aspects of our world.

Alexis Schmidt is a PhD Candidate of English at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. Her dissertation is tentatively titled “American Exhaustion: Energy, Bodies, and Literature in the Progressive Era.” She studies turn-of-the-century US literature through the concepts of work, energy, and exhaustion. Her scholarship appears in *Studies in American Naturalism*, *Edith Wharton Review*, *Commonplace: the Journal of Early American Life*, and *Edge Effects*.



One artist’s representation of women’s work at the turn of the century. Mary Cassatt, *Young Mother Sewing* (1900).

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This paper explores the use of energy in history through the case study of US oil company efforts to articulate an energy crisis in the early 1970s. The energy crisis is often recalled as the outcome of an oil embargo enacted to punish US military aid to Israel. But archival research demonstrates that in the years and months before the OPEC oil embargo, US oil companies promoted the idea of an “energy gap” between US oil demand and supplies, a gap which they claimed constituted a crisis that could only be addressed by loosening recent environmental laws. I argue that understanding the role of oil companies in the discursive construction of the energy crisis sheds light on the history of oil company efforts to shape public opinion and perceptions of environmental matters, from oil spills to climate change. But the energy gap case also highlights the complex politics of crisis in modern history, and so the paper will conclude with speculative proposals from a current project on energy’s potential as a useful category of historical and cultural analysis.

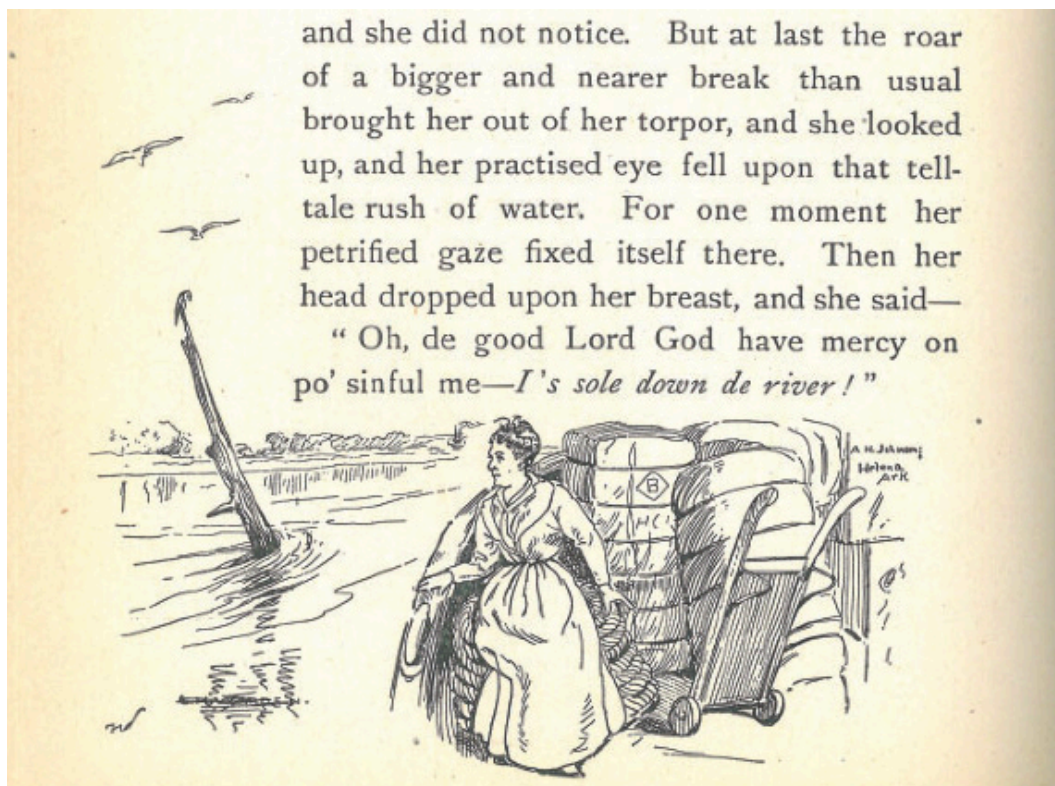
Caleb Wellum is a historian working at the intersection of energy, culture, and political economy in the twentieth century. He is the author of *Energizing Neoliberalism: The 1970s Energy Crisis and the Making of Modern America* (John Hopkins UP, 2023), as well as a variety of pieces in essay collections and leading journals such *Cultural Studies*, *Modern American History*, *Environmental History*, and *Enterprise and Society*. As Editor of *Energy Humanities* and as a member of the Petrocultures Research Group, After Oil Collective, and Fogo Island Collaborative Inquiry, Wellum is also committed to exploring how deep collaboration, methodological experimentation, and public engagement can enliven humanities research and enrich public discourse.



“Mark Twain and the Political Economy of Energy”

In *Fossil Capital*, Andreas Malm argues that the rise of fossil energy was not a technical or material inevitability but a project of capitalist dominance over the working class. Building on my earlier work on Mark Twain’s *Pudd’nhead Wilson*, which contests New Materialist accounts of agential matter, I argue that Twain was uniquely attuned to the specifically political economy of energy. Against critics who uncritically celebrate the agency of the nonhuman world as a corrective to human hubris—a surprisingly prevalent form of materialist determinism in nineteenth-century Americanist ecocriticism, closely related to the version Malm critiques—I read Twain as a theorist of how nonhuman forces, from river flows to fossil fuel deposits, derive their political significance from all-too-human social and economic structures.

Nate Wolff is Associate Professor of English at Tufts University. He is the author of *Not Quite Hope and Other Political Emotions in the Gilded Age* (Oxford University Press, 2019), which uses readings of Mark Twain’s *The Gilded Age* and *The American Claimant* to frame a literary prehistory of today’s emotional politics: the cynicism and exhaustion of democratic life in an age of inequality and corruption. He is currently working on a new book, *Disentangled: Nineteenth-Century U.S. Literature’s Political Ecologies*, contesting the influence of New Materialist ecocriticism on Americanist literary studies. Two pieces from this project—the first on Twain and Charles Chesnutt, the second on Frank Norris and W.E.B. Du Bois—have been published in *American Literary History*. His writing has appeared in other venues including *English Literary History*, *J19: The Journal of Nineteenth-Century Americanists*, *Leviathan: A Journal of Melville Studies*, and *The Washington Post*.



“Roxy traveling down the river.” Illustration from the 1900 U.S. reprinting of *Pudd’nhead Wilson* (first published in 1893). Chpt. XVI.

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Upcoming CMTS Events in 2026

Elmira 2026: The Tenth International Conference on the State of Mark Twain Studies (Thursday, July 30 to Saturday, August 1, 2026)

Since 1989, the Center for Mark Twain Studies has hosted The International Conference on the State of Mark Twain Studies. This quadrennial gathering is devoted to advancing and exploring the State of Mark Twain Studies. This quadrennial event takes place on the Elmira College campus and at Quarry Farm. Hundreds of scholars and enthusiasts from around the globe gather to study and celebrate the life of Sam Clemens and the literature of Mark Twain, constituting the world's largest scholarly conference focusing on Mark Twain and his literature.

Second Graduate Student Workshop: From Seminar Paper to Academic Article (Monday, August 3 to Friday, August 7, 2026)

This in-person workshop will provide an intensive writing experience for students hoping to transform a seminar or conference paper into an article ready to submit for publication. Although all approaches are welcome—and interdisciplinary approaches are encouraged – the paper must give substantial attention to Twain. Ph.D. candidates are invited to apply for the five-day workshop, which is scheduled to take place immediately following the Tenth International Conference on the State of Mark Twain Studies. Students will work with senior, well-established scholars and with each other, with ample time for writing and with access to the archive and library at Quarry Farm.

Successful applicants will be housed, free, in Elmira College dormitories, have their conference registration waived and be provided with breakfasts and lunches for the duration of the workshop, which will take place both at Elmira College and Quarry Farm. They will also be provided with a \$200 stipend and \$500 towards travel expenses. The workshop will be led by Susan Gustafson (University of Notre Dame) and Shirley Samuels (Cornell University)

The Eleventh Quarry Farm Symposium: Nineteenth Century Children's Literature October 2026

The Eleventh Quarry Farm Symposium will take an interdisciplinary approach to children's literature of the nineteenth century, with a particular emphasis on African-American literature.

The symposium will be organized by Brigitte Fielder (University of Wisconsin - Madison).

The keynote speaker will be David F. Walker, author of *Big Jim and the White Boy: An American Classic Reimagined* (2024), *The Second Chance of Darius Logan* (2024), *The Black Panther Party: A Graphic Novel History* (2021), and many others.





QUARRY FARM FELLOWSHIPS

NOW ACCEPTING APPLICATIONS

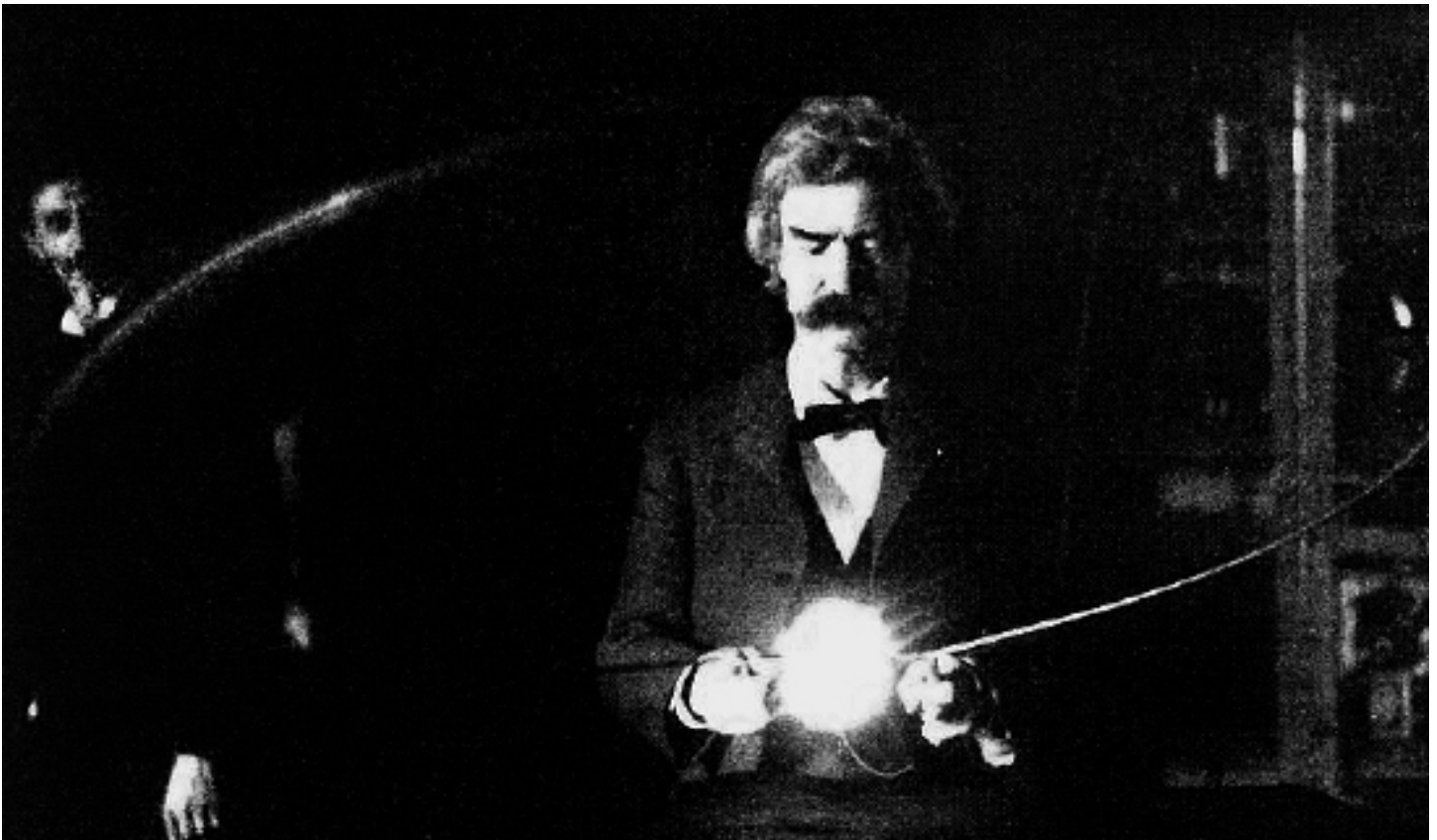
Quarry Farm Fellowships are open to any scholar working in any field related to Mark Twain Studies at any career stage. This is a unique opportunity to work on academic or creative projects at Quarry Farm, Mark Twain's summer retreat where he penned *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and other iconic works.

Eleven Quarry Farm Fellowships will be offered in 2026:

- Each fellowship comes with a two-week residency at the historic Quarry Farm and a \$1000 honorarium.
- At least three fellowships will be reserved for graduate students, contingent faculty, independent scholars, and faculty three or fewer years removed from completion of their Ph.D.
- At least one fellowship will be reserved for creative writers.
- At least one fellowship will be reserved for creative visual artists.



Applications are due November 30, 2025
Visit: www.marktwainstudies.com for more information.



*Image originally published in Century Magazine (April 1895).
Clemens is holding Nikola Tesla's experimental vacuum lamp. Tesla's face is visible in the background.*

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For more information about CMTS, past lectures, past symposia, upcoming events,
the Quarry Farm Fellowship Program, and much more,
visit ***Mark Twain Studies.com***.

