



Carbon Nation: Fossil Fuels in the Making of American Culture (Culture America)

By Bob Johnson

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Carbon Nation: Fossil Fuels in the Making of American Culture (Culture America) By Bob Johnson

Fossil fuels don't simply impact our ability to commute to and from work.

They condition our sensory lives, our erotic experiences, and our aesthetics; they structure what we assume to be normal and healthy; and they prop up a distinctly modern bargain with nature that allows populations and economies to grow wildly beyond the older and more clearly understood limits of the organic economy.

Carbon Nation ranges across film and literary studies, ecology, politics, journalism, and art history to chart the course by which prehistoric carbon calories entered into the American economy and body. It reveals how fossil fuels remade our ways of being, knowing, and sensing in the world while examining how different classes, races, sexes, and conditions learned to embrace and navigate the material manifestations and cultural potential of these new prehistoric carbons.

The ecological roots of modern America are introduced in the first half of the book where the author shows how fossil fuels revolutionized the nation's material wealth and carrying capacity. The book then demonstrates how this eager embrace of fossil fuels went hand in hand with both a deliberate and an unconscious suppression of that dependency across social, spatial, symbolic, and psychic domains. In the works of Eugene O'Neill, Upton Sinclair, Sherwood Anderson, and Stephen Crane, the author reveals how Americans' material dependencies on prehistoric carbon were systematically buried within modernist narratives of progress, consumption, and unbridled growth; while in films like Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times* and George Stevens's *Giant* he uncovers cinematic expressions of our own deep-seated anxieties about living in a dizzying new world wrought by fossil fuels.

Any discussion of fossil fuels must go beyond energy policy and technology. In *Carbon Nation*, Bob Johnson reminds us that what we take to be natural in the modern world is, in fact, historical, and that our history and culture arise from this relatively recent embrace of the coal mine, the stoke hole, and the oil derrick.

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Editorial Review

Review

"Johnson not only eloquently examines the integral role of fossil fuel in ushering profound changes in American culture, he also offers insightful analyses of cultural texts like plays and film that narrate these shifts."—*Environmental History*

"A field-shaping work of scholarship that will be useful to scholars and students in energy studies, the history of technology, literature, American studies and many other disciplines."—*Technology and Culture*

"Challenges historians to elevate energy to the level of race, class, and gender, or even the metahistorical category of capitalism."—*Journal of American History*

"At a time when climate change has focused much of our attention on the economic and environmental impacts of a carbon-based economy, Johnson examines instead its influence on American culture. the result is a thought-provoking journey through the past that makes useful contributions to cultural history and to the growing discipline of energy history."—*American Historical Review*

"A concise, compelling account of a paradox—how today's knowledge of ecology and energy bring positive environmental change well within the range of possibility, and how at the same time modern culture evinces and intractable resistance to letting go of fossil fuels. On these terms, *Carbon Nation* makes a remarkable contribution to the growing field of energy studies in history and elsewhere in the haumanities."—*Journal of Interdisciplinary History*

"Johnson calls on a vast array of sources to effectively demonstrate the primordial fear and loathing that festers within the orchestrated embrace of US society and fossil fuel's hard energy path. Mandatory for energy and society scholarship."—*Choice*

"Johnson has crafted a unique and exciting interdisciplinary treatise on the concept of energy in American life that profoundly informs our understanding of the basic cultural patterns of twentieth-century living. His writing style is spry and intelligent, while his insights are provocative and terribly important and should inspire scholars in a number of fields."?Brian Black, author of *Crude Reality: Petroleum in World History and Petrolia: The Landscape of America's First Oil Boom*

"Bob Johnson examines the shift away from renewable energy to fossil fuels during the century before the energy crisis of the 1970s, and he explores the ambivalent cultural consequences of that transformation, as Americans sought to ignore its environmental costs as they embraced a narrative of technological empowerment"?David E. Nye, author of *Technology Matters*

"Armed with a dazzling array of facts and the insights of cultural criticism, Bob Johnson probes the subsoil ecology of the modern self, those psychic and material traumas that comprise the deepest collateral damage of our now international carbon economy."?Stephanie LeMenager, author of *Living Oil: Petroleum Culture in the American Century*

About the Author

Bob Johnson is a cultural critic and historian. He has been an Associate Professor at the New College of Florida and a Faculty Fellow in the History Department at UC Santa Barbara. He is now Chair of the

Department of Social Sciences at National University in La Jolla, California.

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