

## **Dystopian Visions**

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### **Course Description:**

How do we envision the future, and how can such speculative visions shape the world that actually comes to be? This course explores the generic contours and cultural uses of Anglophone dystopian fiction written during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. We will consider what makes fiction “dystopian” and work to sketch the boundaries of that genre in relation to those of speculative fiction, science fiction, and (post-)apocalyptic narrative. We will also consider the affective appeal and the political and philosophical usefulness of imagining dark futures. Why are we, as contemporary readers, so obsessed with dystopias?

The course is divided into four units. The first unit introduces the concepts of utopia and dystopia, as well as the fictional genres associated with these ideas. It offers a brief survey of utopian fiction, before turning to two of the most influential dystopian novels from the first half of the twentieth century. Then we proceed through three themed units: “Dystopias of Reproductive Control,” “Dystopias of Incarceration and ‘Rehabilitation,’” and “Capitalist Dystopias.” While each unit focuses on literary texts that share a certain political concern, our critical readings will have their own theme each week, introducing students to a range of methodological and theoretical frameworks, including narrative theory, queer theory, feminist criticism, disability studies, Indigenous studies, and biopolitics. Students will further develop their critical faculties through engagement with these literary and scholarly texts, and the course will ultimately guide students through the process of conceptualizing, researching, writing, and revising a 20- to 25-page scholarly essay on a topic related to our reading.

### **Course Goals:**

During the course, students will learn to:

- Identify the contours of Anglophone dystopian fiction as a genre
- Think critically about the ways that writers—and cultural figures more broadly—imagine possible futures
- Design a research question
- Consider a range of methodological and theoretical frameworks and choose the most appropriate one for a given research question
- Develop a critical bibliography around that question by locating appropriate secondary sources
- Put their own ideas into conversation with those of other scholars
- Write with greater confidence, clarity, and precision
- Complete a 20- to 25-page work of original literary criticism

**Assignments:**

- **Short Essay (10%)**
  - This 5- to 6-page paper is due during week 4.
- **Prospectus & Annotated Bibliography (10%)**
  - A two-page prospectus for the junior essay, outlining your topic and provisional argument, is due during week 7, along with an annotated bibliography of 8 to 10 sources. The bibliography should reproduce in a few sentences the main argument of each source and should also indicate, in a few sentences, how you plan to engage with that argument.
- **Essay Drafts (15%)**
  - A partial draft of the junior essay is due during week 9 and a full draft during week 11. Students will complete an in-class workshop of the full draft during week 11 and are also required to meet with the Departmental Writing Fellow.
- **Junior Essay (45%)**
  - The junior essay is a 20- to 25-page work of original scholarship. The final draft will be due during Reading Period (date TBA).
- **Participation & Preparation (20%)**
  - This portion of the grade includes attendance, well-prepared engagement in discussion, and small weekly assignments, such as seminar starters, critical summaries, response papers, and outlines.
- **Conference Presentation (ungraded but required)**
  - Each student will present a 5-minute paper on their research at the Junior Tutorial Conference, which occurs at the end of the semester.

**Required Texts:****Primary Texts:**

Yevgeny Zamyatin, *We*, translated and with an introduction by Clarence Brown | Penguin Classics, 1993 | ISBN 978-0-14-018585-0

George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* | Edition TBD

Katharine Burdekin, *Swastika Night*, with an introduction by Daphne Patai | The Feminist Press, 1985 | ISBN 978-0-935312-56-0 | Available in PDF via Project MUSE; link on Canvas

Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* | Anchor, 2017 | ISBN 978-0385490818

Louise Erdrich, *Future Home of the Living God* | Harper Perennial, 2018 | ISBN 978-0-06-269406-5

Anthony Burgess, *A Clockwork Orange*, edited by Mark Rawlinson | Norton Critical Edition, 2010 | ISBN 978-0-393-92809-9

Octavia Butler, *Parable of the Talents* | Grand Central Publishing, 2000 | ISBN 978-1-5387-3219-9

Chang-Rae Lee, *On Such a Full Sea* | Riverhead, 2014 | ISBN 978-1-59448-610-4

Kazuo Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go* | Vintage, 2006 | ISBN 978-1-4000-7877-6

**Secondary Texts:**

Secondary readings will be provided on Canvas.

## Content Warning

The texts in this course contain sensitive and difficult content, including sexual assault, physical violence, torture, violence against children, forced separation of children from parents, pregnancy and pregnancy loss, violence against animals, misogyny, racism, homophobia, eugenics, and climate change. If students desire it, I will do my best to prepare you for the content of specific texts in advance, but students taking this course must be able to read the assigned texts and engage in discussions about upsetting and potentially triggering content. Our classroom will offer space for a range of intellectual and emotional reactions to the material, and we will work to support one another as we engage with difficult content and provocative ideas.

## Schedule

**Advance Reading:** If you have not read Octavia Butler’s *Parable of the Sower*, I suggest doing so before class begins. We will be reading the sequel, *Parable of the Talents*, during the semester.

### Unit 1: The Concepts and Origins of Utopia and Dystopia

#### Week 1: Utopia

**Primary Reading:**

- Thomas More, excerpt from *Utopia* (1516), in translation
- Edward Bellamy, excerpt from *Looking Backward: 2000–1887* (1888)
- H.G. Wells, excerpt from *A Modern Utopia* (1905)
- Charlotte Perkins Gilman, excerpt from *Herland* (1915)

**Secondary Reading:**

- Fátima Vieira, “The Concept of Utopia”
- Fredric Jameson, “Progress versus Utopia, or, Can We Imagine the Future?”

#### Week 2: Dystopia, Science Fiction, and Estrangement

**Primary Reading:** Yevgeny Zamyatin, *We* (1924)

**Secondary Reading:**

- Viktor Shklovsky, “Art as Technique”
- Darko Suvin, “Estrangement and Cognition”

#### Week 3: Dystopian Politics of Time

**Primary Reading:** George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949)

**Secondary Reading:**

- Gary Saul Morson, “Backshadowing,” from *Narrative and Freedom: The Shadows of Time*
- Diletta De Cristofaro, “The Politics of the Archive in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*”

*Junior Tutorial General Meeting (Date and Time TBA)*

## Unit 2: Dystopias of Reproductive Control

### Week 4: Queer Theory

\* Short essay due \*

**Primary Reading:** Katharine Burdekin (as Murray Constantine), *Swastika Night* (1937)

**Secondary Reading:**

- Lee Edelman, “The Future Is Kid Stuff,” from *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*
- Alexis Lothian, “A Speculative History of No Future: Feminist Negativity and the Queer Dystopian Impulses of Katharine Burdekin’s *Swastika Night*”

### Week 5: Feminist Criticism

**Primary Reading:** Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985)

**Secondary Reading:**

- Linda S. Kauffman, “Twenty-first Century Epistolarity in *The Handmaid’s Tale*,” from *Special Delivery: Epistolary Modes in Modern Fiction*
- Raffaella Baccolini, “Gender and Genre in the Feminist Critical Dystopias of Katharine Burdekin, Margaret Atwood, and Octavia Butler”

### Week 6: Library Visit and Research Workshop

No assigned reading this week. Use this time to read ahead in the syllabus, if you think that you might want to write the junior paper on a text we haven’t gotten to yet.

*Junior Tutorial General Meeting (Date and Time TBA)*

### Week 7: Indigenous Studies

\* Prospectus and annotated bibliography due \*

**Primary Reading:** Louise Erdrich, *Future Home of the Living God* (2017)

**Secondary Reading:**

- Kyle Powys Whyte, “Our Ancestors’ Dystopia Now”
- Silvia Martínez-Falquina, “Louise Erdrich’s *Future Home of the Living God*: Uncertainty, Proleptic Mourning and Relationality in Native Dystopia”

## Unit 3: Dystopias of Incarceration and “Rehabilitation”

### Week 8: Control and the Carceral

**Primary Reading:** Anthony Burgess, *A Clockwork Orange* (1962)

**Secondary Reading:**

- Michel Foucault, excerpt from *Discipline and Punish*
- Jan Alber, “The Control of Violence,” from *Brainwashing: Fictions of Mind Control*

**Week 9: Disability Studies****\* Partial draft due \*****Primary Reading:** Octavia Butler, *Parable of the Talents* (1998)**Secondary Reading:**

- Alison Kafer, “Introduction: Imagined Futures,” from *Feminist, Queer, Crip*
- Sami Schalk, “The Future of Bodyminds, Bodyminds of the Future,” from *Bodyminds Reimagined: (Dis)ability, Race, and Gender in Black Women’s Speculative Fiction*

**Week 10: Student Choice****Primary Reading:** Finish *Parable of the Talents***Secondary Reading:** Students will choose one of the following themes/approaches:

Utopia:

- Patricia Melzer, “‘All that you touch you change’: Utopian Desire and the Concept of Change in Octavia Butler’s *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*”
- Peter G. Stillman, “Dystopian Critiques, Utopian Possibilities, and Human Purposes in Octavia Butler’s *Parables*”

Afrofuturism:

- Isaiah Lavender III, “Contemporary Science Fiction and Afrofuturism”
- Michael Brandon McCormack, “‘Your God is a Racist, Sexist, Homophobic, and a Misogynist ... Our God is Change’: Ishmael Reed, Octavia Butler and Afrofuturist Critiques of (Black) American Religion”

Historicist Readings:

- Jeff Menne, “‘I live in this world, too’: Octavia Butler and the State of Realism”
- Hee-Jung Serenity Joo, “Old and New Slavery, Old and New Racisms: Strategies of Science Fiction in Octavia Butler’s *Parables* Series”

Ecocriticism:

- Shelley Streetby, “Climate Refugees in the Greenhouse World: Archiving Global Warming with Octavia E. Butler”
- Nick Earhart, “‘When Apparent Stability Disintegrates’: Speculative Theology in Octavia Butler’s *Parable* Series”

**Unit 4: Capitalist Dystopias****Week 11: Draft Workshop****\* Full draft due \*****Week 12: Collectivity and Community****Primary Reading:** Chang-Rae Lee, *On Such a Full Sea* (2014)

- Sue-Im Lee, “Introduction: The Paradox of Community,” from *A Body of Individuals: The Paradox of Community in Contemporary Fiction*

- Natalya Bekhta, excerpt from *We-Narratives: Collective Storytelling in Contemporary Fiction*

### **Week 13: Biopolitics**

**Primary Reading:** Kazuo Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go* (2005)

**Secondary Reading:**

- Timothy Campbell and Adam Sitze, “Introduction: Biopolitics as Encounter,” from *Biopolitics: A Reader*
- Annabel Herzog, “Dystopia, Trauma, and Resignation: A Reading of Perec’s *W*, or the Memory of Childhood and Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go*”

\* Junior essay due [date TBA] \*

*Junior Tutorial Conference [date and time TBA]*