

Imagining Otherwise: Futures and Futurisms in Contemporary American Science Fiction

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Course Description:

Why imagine the future? Who gets to do so? What kinds of bodies, minds, and selves populate our imagined futures? This course explores science fiction's potential to imagine otherwise. We will examine a series of literary movements within sf that group writers based on identity categories such as race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality, and that also imply a shared political project: expanding the range of culturally imaginable futures. In studying these different "futurisms," we will discuss the benefits and drawbacks of terms like "Afrofuturism," "Indigenous Futurisms," and "Queer sf" that center a specific identity of a work's creator and/or its characters, and will consider how these movements have been constituted from within, by the writers themselves, and from without, by critics, literary organizations, and readers. We will also reflect on the ways that our literary texts illuminate, complicate, and problematize existing social structures and understandings of identity. We will begin with texts from the late 1960s but will focus mainly on sf from the twenty-first century, reading short stories and novels and watching one film. Our primary texts are all "American," using Wai Chee Dimock's understanding of that category as referencing a "complex tangle of relations," rather than a discrete national entity.¹ In addition to writing that theorizes different futurisms, students will read critical texts that present a range of methodological and theoretical frameworks, including narrative theory, feminist theory, queer theory, disability studies, and ethnic studies. 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:

- Think critically about the ways that writers, filmmakers, and the broader American culture imagine possible futures
- Analyze the form and content of science fiction texts
- 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

¹ Wai Chee Dimock, *Through Other Continents: American Literature across Deep Time* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 3.

Assignments:

- **Short Essay (10%)**
 - This 5- to 6-page paper is due Week 5.
- **Prospectus & Annotated Bibliography (10%)**
 - A two-page prospectus for the junior essay, outlining your topic and provisional argument, is due 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 Week 9 and a full draft Week 11. Students will complete in-class workshops of both drafts 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 is due [date TBA] (a deadline mandated by the Junior Tutorial program).
- **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, and response papers.
- **Conference Presentation (ungraded but required)**
 - Each student will present a 5-minute paper on their research at the Junior Tutorial Conference, which will take place during reading period.

Required Texts:

Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Left Hand of Darkness*

Octavia E. Butler, *Dawn* | Grand Central Publishing, 2021 | ISBN 9781538753712

Rivers Solomon, *An Unkindness of Ghosts* | Akashic Books, 2017 | ISBN 9781617755880

Louise Erdrich, *Future Home of the Living God* | Harper Perennial, 2018 | ISBN 9780062694065

Cherie Dimaline, *The Marrow Thieves* | Cormorant Books, 2017 | ISBN 9781770864863

Ernest Hogan, *High Aztech* | Strange Particle Press/Createspace, 2016 | ISBN 9781533139566

Chang-Rae Lee, *On Such a Full Sea* / Riverhead, 2014 | ISBN 9781594486104

Ling Ma, *Severance* | Picador, 2018 | ISBN 9781250214997

All assigned reading not listed above will be provided on Canvas.

Content and Compartment:

The texts in this course contain sensitive and difficult content, including sexual assault, physical violence, violence against children, forced separation of children from parents, pregnancy and pregnancy loss, violence against animals, misogyny, racism, homophobia, and climate change. Should 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. If you have concerns

about course content, please meet with me early in the term and we can discuss how our readings might or might not affect you and then devise any necessary accommodations.

Our classroom will offer space for a range of intellectual and emotional reactions to the course material, and we will work to support one another as we tackle difficult content and provocative ideas. I ask that you engage with each other and with the assigned readings in good faith, while also monitoring your own well-being and stepping away from the conversation should you need to do so. Our course content raises weighty social and political questions, many of which will touch some or all of us personally. Our conversations may at times generate moments of misapprehension, exclusion, discomfort, or even harm, and I pledge to be careful of my language, assumptions, and arguments, in an attempt to create and sustain a safe, affirming, and energizing classroom environment. I ask that you work toward that same end. We should all treat each other with respect by attending carefully to others' comments, responding honestly and directly, approaching disagreements as learning opportunities, and working to remedy the situation when we cause harm or fail to engage productively.

Note on Language: Some of our texts feature offensive language, including the n-word. I ask that when reading aloud, students do not voice the n-word or other slurs and instead skip over these words. However, our critical readings also contain former slurs (e.g., queer, crip) that have been reclaimed by members of the communities that they describe. These words I will speak and read aloud, and you may comfortably do the same.

Accessibility:

I want to work together to ensure that our course best meets your learning needs. You can request accommodations without divulging to me the reason(s) that they are necessary, although you may share such personal information if you feel comfortable doing so. I will keep all information in confidence, unless you give me permission to share it. Should you require academic accommodations for a documented disability, please present your accommodation notification letter from the Accessible Education Office (AEO) as soon as possible, so that we may make appropriate arrangements. AEO guides and assists students with disabilities; for information about their services and the process of requesting an accommodation letter, see <https://aeo.fas.harvard.edu/students>. Should you anticipate difficulties with your schoolwork this term unrelated to a documented disability, I recommend speaking with me about your particular situation. All such discussions will remain confidential. If, during the term, you experience persistent challenges or face an emergency, please communicate with me and with your Resident Dean, who can serve as a helpful liaison to your instructors and as a bridge to University resources. If you do not require accommodations due to a disability, understand that some of your fellow students might, and it is important to me that you do not make assumptions about how your classmates learn most productively.

Student Wellbeing:

I care most fundamentally about your wellbeing and your ability to be fully present for our work together. Before being an academic, I am a person; before being a student, you are a person. We are currently living through multiple crises, including a pandemic, and this semester may well

prove a psychological challenge for all of us. Harvard offers mental health resources—such as the CAMHS 24/7 support line at (617) 495-2042—but these may not always be adequate. If you find yourself in distress or facing persistent challenges, I encourage you to let me know, if you feel comfortable doing so, because there may be ways that I can help. Should you experience dangers to your health and safety, such as an unstable housing environment or food insecurity, know that there are resources available locally, and I can help connect you with these resources.

Should you wish to discuss an experience of sexual or gender-based harassment or assault at Harvard, you need to know that as an instructor, I am a “responsible employee” and so am legally required to report any such instances to the University, under Title IX. You are still welcome to make disclosures to me, but I cannot serve as a confidential resource on such matters. Sexual Harassment/Assault Resources & Education (SHARE) counselors from Harvard’s Office of Gender Equity can provide support that is both confidential and privileged, meaning that information that you disclose cannot be shared without your consent, even in a court of law, absent certain special circumstances. The SHARE 24/7 crisis hotline is (617) 495-9100, and you can arrange for an appointment with a counselor by calling (617) 496-5636 or emailing oge_share@harvard.edu. If you would rather receive support from outside Harvard, the Boston Area Rape Crisis Center (BARCC) maintains a 24/7 hotline at 800-841-8371, as well as an online support chat at <https://barcc.org/help>.

Academic Integrity:

Students are expected to abide by the Harvard College Honor Code (<https://honor.fas.harvard.edu/honor-code>), which includes being honest in your communications with me about coursework. Please do not lie to me. All assignments submitted for the course must be your own work. While you are encouraged to discuss your work with other students and to integrate their feedback into your writing, you must provide attribution for the language and ideas of others. Plagiarism includes any use of others’ work without appropriate citation; see the Harvard Guide to Using Sources (<https://usingsources.fas.harvard.edu/>) for information about proper methods for engaging with other people’s ideas in your writing. For specific guidance about citation formatting, see the Notes and Bibliography section of the Chicago Manual of Style Online or the MLA Handbook, Ninth Edition (links to both on the course Canvas site).

Digital Technologies:

When we meet in person, you may wish to bring electronic devices, such as a laptop or tablet, to use during class, and such devices are welcome. I trust you to use them responsibly while maintaining focus on our work together, but if you regularly seem distracted, we may need to discuss whether the presence of your devices best serves your learning.

On the Formulation of This Syllabus:

The ideas above have been informed by many other educators, and I have, at times, borrowed or adapted language from other teachers, including Derek Miller, Alex Creighton, Durba Mitra, Matthew Ocheltree, and Jesse Stommel.

Schedule

Week 1: Imagining Otherwise

Primary Reading:

- Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), including Le Guin's "Introduction" (labeled as "Author's Note" in some editions)

Secondary Reading:

- Fredric Jameson, "Progress versus Utopia, or, Can We Imagine the Future?"
- Bodhisattva Chattopadhyay, "Manifestos of Futurisms"

Week 2: Science Fiction and/as Estrangement

Primary Reading:

- Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969)

Secondary Reading:

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

Week 3: Afrofuturism

Primary Reading:

- W.E.B. Du Bois, "The Comet" (1920)
- Samuel R. Delany, "The Star Pit" (1967)

Secondary Reading:

- Samuel R. Delany, "Racism and Science Fiction"
- Mark Dery, "Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose"
- Kodwo Eshun, "Further Considerations on Afrofuturism"

Week 3: Sex, Gender, Sexuality

Primary Reading:

- Samuel R. Delany, "Aye, and Gomorrah" (1967)

Secondary Reading:

- Judith Butler, excerpt from *Gender Trouble*
- Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, excerpt from *Epistemology of the Closet*

Week 4: Queer Futurities

Primary Reading:

- Octavia E. Butler, *Dawn* (1987)

Secondary Reading:

- Lee Edelman, excerpt from *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*
- José Muñoz, excerpt from *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*

Week 5: Disability Studies and Crip Futurity

* Short Essay due Week 5 *

Primary Reading:

- Rivers Solomon, *An Unkindness of Ghosts* (2017)

Secondary Reading:

- Alison Kafer, “Introduction: Imagined Futures,” from *Feminist, Queer, Crip*
- Two sample junior essays

Week 6: Library Visit

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.

Week 7: Climate Change and Native Dystopia

*** Prospectus and Annotated Bibliography due Week 7***

Primary Reading:

- Louise Erdrich, *Future Home of the Living God* (2017)

Secondary Reading:

- Kyle Powys Whyte, “Indigenous science (fiction) for the Anthropocene: Ancestral dystopias and fantasies of climate change crises”
- Silvia Martínez-Falquina, “Louise Erdrich’s *Future Home of the Living God*: Uncertainty, Proleptic Mourning and Relationality in Native Dystopia”

Spring Break, March 11–19

Week 8: Indigenous Futurisms and Survivance

Primary Reading:

- Cherie Dimaline, *The Marrow Thieves* (2017)

Secondary Reading:

- Grace Dillon, “Imagining Indigenous Futurisms”
- Gerald Vizenor, “Aesthetics of Survivance: Literary Theory and Practice”

Week 9: Partial Draft Workshop

*** Partial Draft due Week 9 ***

Primary Viewing:

- Bong Joon-ho, dir. *Snowpiercer* (2013)

No secondary reading

Week 10: Chicaxfuturism

Primary Reading:

- Ernest Hogan, *High Aztech* (1992)

Secondary Reading:

- Cathryn Josefina Merla-Watson and B.V. Olguín, “Altermundos: Reassessing the Past, Present, and Future of the Chican@ and Latin@ Speculative Arts”
- Lysa Rivera, “Chicana/o Cyberpunk after el Movimiento”

Week 11: Full Draft Workshop

No reading.

Week 12: Dystopian Collectivity

Primary Reading:

- Chang-rae Lee, *On Such a Full Sea* (2014)

Secondary Reading:

- Natalya Bekhta, excerpt from *We-Narratives: Collective Storytelling in Contemporary Fiction*
- Jeshua Enriquez, “Crossing the Threshold of B-Mor: Instrumental Commodification and the Model Minority in Chang-rae Lee’s *On Such a Full Sea*”

Week 13: Zombie Present, Zombie Future

Primary Reading:

- Ling Ma, *Severance* (2018)

No secondary reading

➤ Junior Tutorial Conference [date TBA]