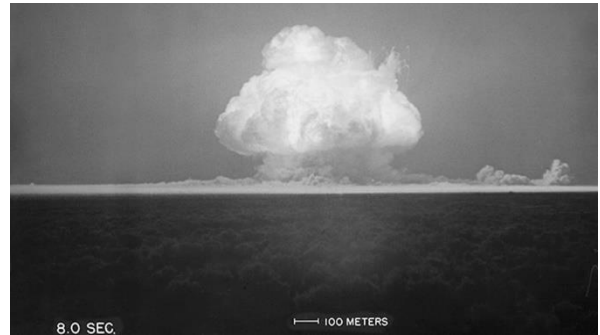


DISASTER AND RESILIENCE IN 20TH-CENTURY AND CONTEMPORARY ENVIRONMENTAL LITERATURE



DESCRIPTION

Disasters are inherently linked to the natural world through the etymology of the word, which means “ill-fated star.” This course focuses on narratives of natural, apocalyptic, and industrial disasters and their representations in literature and media. However, we will also consider the surprisingly positive effects of some disasters. For example, while many of the characters that we will encounter throughout the semester experience significant loss and hardship, in most of these narratives, glimmers of hope emerge, whether through the renewal of friendship or a bounty of apples that keeps them alive. During and after disasters, people must figure out how to recover and cope. Therefore, this course is fundamentally interested in the duality of disasters: their devastation and their possibilities. Guiding questions for this course include: How do people react amid eco-disasters? How do humans *and* the environment recover? What are the productive literary critical methods that can help scholars better understand narratives about disaster? What can we learn from disaster?

Drawing on ecocritical frameworks such as slow violence and environmental apocalypticism, we will read novels, nonfiction, and visual media from the 20th- and 21st-centuries that intersect with several different interdisciplinary fields. Our semester begins with Rebecca Solnit’s nonfiction book, *A Paradise Built in Hell*, which emphasizes the hope, mutual aid, and communal resilience that often accompany a disaster. Solnit’s case study on Hurricane Katrina will be of particular interest, as it will provide helpful context for our readings in the first unit on the intersections of ecocriticism, Black studies, and gender theory. At the end of this unit, students will produce a short paper on either *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, *Salvage the Bones*, or *Parable of the Sower*. The second unit focuses on apocalyptic disasters and healing from slow violence, featuring novels by Cormac McCarthy and indigenous authors, Gerard Vizenor and Leslie Marmon Silko. During this unit, students will be working toward solidifying their topic for the long research paper and finding secondary sources for an annotated bibliography. Our final weeks of the semester will focus on the interconnected, global effects of disaster, and students will produce a full draft of their research paper. By the end of the reading period, students will have written a polished, 20–25-page research paper. Moreover, each unit of this course will allow us to reflect on how the humans in these narratives suffer personal trials, engage with their devastated environments, and persevere despite (at-times) overwhelming circumstances.

READING GOALS

By the end of the semester students should:

1. Gain an in-depth understanding of ecocriticism and its intersections with African American studies, indigenous studies, and gender theory, among other critical approaches
2. Learn how to write a long-form (20–25 page) research paper of literary criticism
3. Have an improved ability to read and engage with secondary source materials related to literary works and identify secondary sources that are relevant to your topic
4. Develop clear and consistent writing skills for longer projects and cultivate other translatable skills (i.e. research, attention to detail) for future career opportunities

TEXTS

Given the cost, space, and environmental effects of buying physical books, I am committed to making as much of the course materials available online as possible, although the digital sphere is not without its own carbon footprint. For the books that you choose to have physically, consider buying gently used copies or checking them out from the library and taking notes separately. While I will reference specific page numbers from these editions in class, please feel free to use editions other than those listed below.

Alexievich, Svetlana. *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster*. Dalkey Archive Press, 2019.

Butler, Octavia. *Parable of the Sower*. Headline, 2019.

Hawken, Paul. *Regeneration: Ending the Climate Crisis in One Generation*. Penguin, 2021.

Hurston, Zora Neale. *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. HarperPerennial, 2018.

McCarthy, Cormac. *The Road*. Knopf, 2006.

Ozeki, Ruth. *A Tale for the Time Being*. Penguin, 2013.

Silko, Leslie Marmon. *Ceremony*. Penguin, 1977.

Solnit, Rebecca. *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities That Arise in Disaster*. Penguin, 2010.

Vizenor, Gerald. *Hiroshima Bugi, Atomu 57*. University of Nebraska Press, 2010.

Ward, Jesmyn. *Salvage the Bones*. Bloomsbury, 2012.

Critical Approaches:

Ecocriticism—**Donna Haraway**, “Introduction” and “Sowing Worlds: A Seed Bag for Terraforming with Earth Others,” in *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, 117–125 (Duke University Press, 2016).; **Janet Fiskio**, “Ghosts and Reparations: Thinking Through Enslavement and Climate Futures with Octavia Butler,” in *Climate Change, Literature, and Environmental Justice*, 52–79 (Cambridge University Press, 2021).; **Ursula K. Heise**, “Globality, Difference, and the International Turn in Ecocriticism,” *PMLA: Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 128, no. 3 (2013).; **Ursula K. Heise**, “Afterglow: Chernobyl and the Everyday,” in *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global* (Oxford University Press, 2008).

Slow Violence—**Rob Nixon**, “Introduction,” in *Slow Violence*, 1–45 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).; **Martin Premoli**, “‘His Sickness Was Only Part of Something Larger’: Slow Trauma and Climate Change in Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony*,” *American Imago: Psychoanalysis and the Human Sciences* 77, no. 1 (2020): 173–91.

Environmental Apocalypticism—**Lawrence Buell**, “Environmental Apocalypticism,” in *The Environmental Imagination*, 280–308 (Harvard University Press, 1996).; **Roy Scranton**, “Learning How to Die in the Anthropocene,” in *Energy Humanities: An Anthology*, edited by Imre Szeman and Dominic Boyer (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017).

Black Studies—**Sonya Posmentier**, “Collecting Catastrophe: How the Hurricane Roars in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*,” in *Cultivation and Catastrophe: The Lyric Ecology of Modern Black Literature*, 158–180 (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017).; **Alvin Henry**, “Jesmyn Ward’s Post-Katrina Black Feminism: Memory and Myth Through Salvaging,” *English Language Notes* 57, no. 2, 2019.

Gender Theory (Feminism and Queer Theory)—**Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick**, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading: Or, You’re so Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You,” in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, 123–151 (Duke University Press, 2003).; **Greg Garrard**, “Ecofeminism,” in *Ecocriticism* (New York: Routledge, 2012).; **Nicole Seymour**, “The Queerness of Environmental Affect,” in *Affective Ecocriticism: Emotion, Embodiment, Environment*, 235–256, edited by Kyle Bladow and Jennifer Ladino (University of Nebraska Press, 2018).

Indigenous Ecocriticism—**Lee Schweninger**, “‘What Can I Tell Them That They Will Hear?’: Environmental Sovereignty and American Indian Literature,” in *The Routledge Companion to Native American Literature*, 217–228, ed. by Deborah L. Madsen (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2016).; **Kyle Powys Whyte**, “Indigenous Climate Change Studies: Indigenizing Futures, Decolonizing the Anthropocene,” *English Language Notes* 55, no. 1-2, 2017.

ASSIGNMENTS

****Note: All assignments should be formatted in Times New Roman, pt. 12 Font, Double-Spaced, MLA or Chicago Style Citations, and turned in as a Word Document to Canvas.**

- **Weekly Journal, Participation, & Attendance (20%):** Select a short passage from one of the texts each week and write a brief 2–4 sentences about it in a “journal.” Why did the passage interest you? What questions do you have about it? These journals are ungraded exercises and should be viewed as informal reflections, but they should be in complete sentences and will be factored into your overall participation grade. They will be due 24 hours before our class time and should be posted to the Canvas page. I will read them and reference them during class.

Small seminars like this one thrive when everyone comes to class prepared and ready to participate in the discussion. Your preparation and active participation are expected each week, and therefore, you cannot have more than 1 unexcused absence without it affecting your grade.

- **Brief Annotation Assignment (5%):** This assignment asks you to print out two paragraphs of text and annotate them. Take me through your thought process, the inner workings and mechanics of the passage, and at least three threads of analysis; in other words, show your work from your engaged reading. I will provide examples before the assignment is due. (1–2 pages, DUE WEEK 3)
- **Short Paper (10%):** Using your annotated passage, write a short close reading paper that includes at least 1 secondary source and a coherent thesis statement. This paper will be practice for sustaining an argument. In consultation with me, you may choose a different text or passage to focus on than the one in your annotation assignment. (5–6 pages, DUE WEEK 5)
- **Prospectus with Annotated Bibliography (10%):** Your prospectus should summarize the topic and argument of your Junior Essay in 2 pages, double-spaced. Then, find at least 10 secondary sources and provide 1–2 sentences about how the argument of each source relates to your Junior Essay. I invite you to share your annotated bibliographies with each other via Canvas to see other approaches. (DUE WEEK 9)
- **Partial Draft (15%):** This is an exercise in imperfection. In other words, this is a *draft*, and I do not expect polish. I expect complete sentences and a preliminary thesis statement. You must demonstrate engagement with at least two secondary sources at this stage. (At least 10 pages, DUE WEEK 12)
- **Junior Essay (40%):** Write a polished research paper on a topic of your choosing, approved in advance, that makes a compelling and sustained argument for 20–25 pages. (20-25 pages, DUE DURING READING PERIOD)
- **Conference Presentation (ungraded but required):** A 5-minute presentation on your research and Junior Essay.

Additional Resources:

I encourage you to use [this database](#) of calls for papers (CFPs) for inspiration and writing prompts that are currently relevant in ecocritical conversations. You might even consider writing one of your papers to fit the usually broad parameters of a CFP and submit your prospectus for consideration, though this is optional.

COURSE POLICIES

Attendance and Participation:

Your contribution to this course through discussion, attendance, and the Canvas site is imperative for yours and your peers' overall learning. You are expected to attend every class session, but you are allowed to miss one week for any reason. More than one unexcused absence will result in a lower grade. Participation—active listening, asking questions, making comments, flagging passages from the readings, posting on time to the Canvas—is likewise expected in

every class. Please speak with me early on in the semester if you think you might be reluctant to participate, and we can work on strategies for participation together.

Laptops/Tablets/Phones:

You are allowed to use tablets and laptops for your readings if you have a method for taking notes from the readings. While I understand that your devices contain many distractions, I trust you to use your devices in class to reference readings only. This policy is subject to change if the class gives me reason to believe that these devices are detracting from our class discussions. Your phones should be turned off and put away for the duration of class, including the messaging apps on your tablet and laptops.

Due Dates/Late Grades:

In general, extensions will be given with good reason over the course of the semester if you contact me 24 hours in advance of the due date. However, failure to turn in an assignment or turning it in late without an official excuse will result in a lower grade or failure of the course.

Academic Honesty:

There is no excuse for taking someone's ideas and presenting them as your own. Plagiarism will *not* be tolerated and cheating can lead to serious consequences. Collaboration with your peers is encouraged but must be properly cited.

I expect you to follow the Harvard College Honor Code at all times, for every assignment: *“Members of the Harvard College community commit themselves to producing academic work of integrity – that is, work that adheres to the scholarly and intellectual standards of accurate attribution of sources, appropriate collection and use of data, and transparent acknowledgement of the contribution of others to their ideas, discoveries, interpretations, and conclusions. Cheating on exams or problem sets, plagiarizing or misrepresenting the ideas or language of someone else as one's own, falsifying data, or any other instance of academic dishonesty violates the standards of our community, as well as the standards of the wider world of learning and affairs.”*

Accommodations:

*“Students with documented disabilities at Harvard may be eligible to receive academic accommodations. [. . .] Early notification and active communication with instructors is the best way to ensure that accommodation requests are handled effectively. Students requiring academic accommodations will receive a Faculty Letter that verifies their registration with AEO and specifies the accommodations they are eligible to receive. **AEO asks that students deliver their Faculty Letter to course staff within the first two weeks of classes.** Please note that accommodations will not be provided retroactively.”* All discussions will remain confidential, unless I need to contact AEO to discuss appropriate implementation.

<https://aeo.fas.harvard.edu/accommodations-services/academic>

Campus Resources:

I am happy to direct you to various campus resources for Title IX, mental health, or any other kind of assistance. I am a mandatory reporter if anything is disclosed to me, but I can direct you to confidential resources if necessary. I also highly recommend taking advantage of CAMHS's ["Let's Talk"](#) program, which offers informal, confidential conversations in a variety of locations across campus without an appointment or fee.

Pronouns:

In order to foster equitable an classroom environment, I invite you, *if you would like*, to inform us how you would like to be called both in terms of your name and your [pronouns](#) (including but not limited to any combination of he/him, she/her, they/them, e/em/eir, ze/zir/zie, etc.). Pronouns can be a way to affirm someone's gender identity, but they can also be unrelated to a person's identity. I will do my best to address and refer to all students as they wish and will support you in doing so as well.

SCHEDULE OF READINGS AND DISCUSSION (SPRING 2024)

Week 1 | The Effects of Disaster

Primary Text:

Rebecca Solnit, *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities That Arise in Disaster* (2009)

UNIT 1: REPARATIVE BLACK ECOFEMINISM IN AMERICA

Week 2 | Reconstruction After Destruction (1928 Hurricane in Florida)

Primary Texts:

Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937)

Alice Walker, "Looking for Zora," in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (1983)

Secondary Texts:

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading: Or, You're so Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You," in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, 123–151 (Duke University Press, 2003).

Sonya Posmentier, "Collecting Catastrophe: How the Hurricane Roars in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*," in *Cultivation and Catastrophe: The Lyric Ecology of Modern Black Literature*, 158-180 (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017).

Optional:

Shinya Matsuoka, "Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* and Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*: An Ecofeminist Reading," in *Faulkner and Hurston*, edited by Christopher Rieger, Andrew B. Leiter, and Southeast Missouri State University (Cape Girardeau, MO: 2017).

Week 3 | Salvaging the Feminist Future (Hurricane Katrina)

Primary Text:

Jesmyn Ward, *Salvage the Bones* (2011)

Secondary Texts:

Greg Garrard, "Ecofeminism," in *Ecocriticism* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

Alvin Henry, "Jesmyn Ward's Post-Katrina Black Feminism: Memory and Myth Through Salvaging," *English Language Notes* 57, no. 2, 2019.

Optional:

Claudia Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014)

****DUE Week 3: Annotation Assignment****

Week 4 | Sowing Seeds Amid Eco-Disaster (Post-Apocalyptic Wildfire)

Primary Texts:

Octavia Butler, *Parable of the Sower* (1993)

Secondary Text:

Donna Haraway, “Introduction” and “Sowing Worlds: A Seed Bag for Terraforming with Earth Others,” in *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, 117–125 (Duke University Press, 2016).

Janet Fiskio, “Ghosts and Reparations: Thinking Through Enslavement and Climate Futures with Octavia Butler,” in *Climate Change, Literature, and Environmental Justice*, 52–79 (Cambridge University Press, 2021).

Optional:

Mathias Nilges, “‘We Need the Stars’: Change, Community, and the Absent Father in Octavia Butler’s *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*,” *Callaloo: A Journal of African Diaspora Arts and Letters* 32, no. 4, 2009.

Week 5 | Library Visit; Short Paper Conferences

We will visit the library this week in lieu of our usual meeting. You will turn in your short paper at the beginning of the week, and then we will schedule individual Zoom conferences to discuss your short papers at the end of the week. Please use this week to get ahead on the reading for Unit 2 and start thinking about topics for your Junior Essay. This would be a good week to read a text from later in the semester that interests you for your Junior Essay, if you do not plan to write on the texts from Weeks 1–4.

****DUE Week 5: Short Paper****

UNIT 2: HEALING THE LAND AND OURSELVES AFTER APOCALYPTIC DISASTERS

Week 6 | Life After the End (Unspecified Extinction Event)

Primary Text:

Cormac McCarthy, *The Road* (2006)

Secondary Texts:

Lawrence Buell, “Environmental Apocalypticism,” in *The Environmental Imagination*, 280–308 (Harvard University Press, 1996).

Roy Scranton, "Learning How to Die in the Anthropocene," in *Energy Humanities: An Anthology*, edited by Imre Szeman and Dominic Boyer (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017).

Optional:

Lydia Cooper, "Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* as Apocalyptic Grail Narrative," *Studies in the Novel* 51, no. 1, 2019.

Week 7 | Slow Violence as the Legacy of Disaster (Nuclear Weapons)

Primary Text:

Gerald Vizenor, *Hiroshima Bugi, Atomu 57* (2010)

Secondary Texts:

Ursula K. Heise, "Globality, Difference, and the International Turn in Ecocriticism," *PMLA: Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 128, no. 3, 2013.

Rob Nixon, "Introduction," in *Slow Violence*, 1–45 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).

Lee Schweninger, "'What Can I Tell Them That They Will Hear?': Environmental Sovereignty and American Indian Literature," in *The Routledge Companion to Native American Literature*, 217–228, ed. by Deborah L. Madsen (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2016).

Optional:

Terry Tempest Williams, "The Clan of One-Breasted Women" (1991)

March 9–17 | SPRING BREAK, NO CLASS

Week 8 | Learning to Heal in the Anthropocene (Nuclear Weapons)

Primary Texts:

Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony* (1977)

Selections from Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass* (2015)

Secondary Texts:

Martin Premoli, "'His Sickness Was Only Part of Something Larger': Slow Trauma and Climate Change in Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*," *American Imago: Psychoanalysis and the Human Sciences* 77, no. 1 (2020): 173–91.

Kyle Powys Whyte, "Indigenous Climate Change Studies: Indigenizing Futures, Decolonizing the Anthropocene," *English Language Notes* 55, no. 1-2, 2017.

Week 9 | Generational Eco-Activism (Climate Change)

Primary Text:

Paul Hawken, *Regeneration: Ending the Climate Crisis in One Generation* (2021)

Secondary Text:

Shamira Meghani and Anthony Carrigan, "Reframing Disaster: Creativity and Activism," *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 51, no. 2, 2016.

****DUE Week 9: Prospectus and Annotated Bibliography****

UNIT 3: INTERCONNECTED, INTERNATIONAL DISASTERS

Week 10 | Connected Fates (2011 Tsunami in Japan)

Primary Text:

Ruth Ozeki, *A Tale for the Time Being* (2013)

Secondary Texts:

Keren Omry, "Ozeki's Mirror Rooms: Posthumanism and *A Tale for the Time Being*," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 19, no. 2, 2019.

Crystal Yin Lie, "'A Temporal Stuttering': Dementia and Disaster in Ruth Ozeki's *A Tale for the Time Being*," *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies* 13, no. 1, 2019.

Optional:

Jun Young Jung, "The Future is Nao: A Present Day Apocalypse in Ruth Ozeki's *A Tale for the Time Being*," *Modern Fiction Studies* 26, no. 2, 2019.

Week 11 | Telling the Story of Disaster (Nuclear Disaster)

Primary Texts:

Svetlana Alexievich, *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster* (1997)

Episodes 1 and 2 of *Chernobyl*, directed by Johan Renck (miniseries, 2019)

Secondary Texts:

Ursula K. Heise, "Afterglow: Chernobyl and the Everyday," in *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global* (Oxford University Press, 2008).

****DUE Week 11: Partial Draft****

Week 12 | Draft Conferences

There is no assigned reading for this week because each student will meet individually with me to discuss their Junior Essay drafts. Please come prepared with questions, and I will provide comments on your draft.

Week 13 | Disaster and Remembrance

Primary Viewing:

When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts, directed by Spike Lee (film, 2006)

Secondary Texts:

David Ingram, "Rethinking Eco-Film Studies," in *The Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism*, edited by Greg Garrard (New York, Oxford University Press, 2014).

****5-minute Conference Presentations****

****May 1, 2024: Final Paper DUE by 5:00 pm****