THE POLITICS OF THE ANTHROPOCENE

Geography 157
575 McCone Hall, Thursday 11-2

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COURSE DESCRIPTION
Globally, this year was the warmest year in recorded history. Alarmingly, the record it broke was set last year. One-fifth of all humanity, a billion people, live in communities that do not meet the World Health Organization’s air quality standards for air pollution. Rates of extinction are purported to be 1000 times higher than historic background rates, ocean acidification level exceed any historical analogs, and by 2050 there will be more plastic by weight than fish in the ocean. Moreover, there is not a person, soil, plant, or body of water on this planet that does not bear the radioactive traces of the nuclear industrial complex. In this context, it is not surprising that geologists have defined a new epoch called the Anthropocene that puts human agency at the level of glaciers, massive meteors, and catastrophic volcanic eruptions in terms of its ability to transform the geophysical properties of the earth and the atmosphere. While the dangers of apocalyptic predictions are not new, the intensity and scale of geophysical transformations and the related proliferation of discourses, institutions, and subjectivities warrant an attentive and critical engagement with the concept.

This course seeks to trace the rise of the anthropogenic epoch as a political epistemology, changing material milieu, and amorphous and contested political signifier. In many ways, the notion of the Anthropocene challenges the very boundaries of nature and culture that have plagued and defined modernity. Natural forces and inanimate objects from storms and bodies, ocean flows and river currents, soil layers and chemical reactions are more and more commonly understood as always already natural/cultural. What does this purported new epoch portend, not only for how we think about resource degradation, wilderness, and environmental conservation but also the definitions of humanity, temporality, species, sexuality, etc.? What are the differential ways that the universal categories of the human at the heart of the concept of the Anthropocene mask the differential responsibility and liability for these epochal changes? How might we understand the vast unevenness of its effects across geography and difference? Finally, how do we both refuse and undermine the conditions of this epoch’s most violent harbingers—capitalism, racism, war etc.—and their destructive legacies while at the same time inhabiting and exploring the forms and beings that are the conditions and kin of modern existence?

COURSE REQUIREMENTS
This course is designed to run as an intensive seminar. You are expected to read ALL of the material for class. Weekly commentaries of 400 to 500 words will make up 25% of your grade, class presentation 15 %, participation in discussions 25%, and a final 10-12-page paper 35%.

Short Papers
You will be expected to write a short paper of 10-12 pages. This assignment will be on a topic of your choosing, but it should be closely related to class readings, lectures, and our in-class discussions. Details will be discussed in class. A hard copy of the paper is due in my box in McCone hall by noon on Monday May 9th.

Class Participation
As a seminar, this class requires your attendance and engaged participation. Everyone is allowed two free, no-questions-asked absences during the semester. Each subsequent absence will negatively affect your participation grade. You are responsible for bringing the readings with you to class. This is an unplugged seminar; electronic devices aren’t allowed in class. After the second week, we will be working with the app Slack Chat to post and communicate outside of class.

Required Texts for Course
The course reader will be available at Vick Copy and online by the end of the second week.
PART I: SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY STUDIES

WEEK 1: INTRODUCTION
January 21th

Goals, expectations, and course relevance

WEEK 2: THE ANTHROPOCENE
January 28th


WEEK 3: THE POLITICS OF NATURE
February 4th


WEEK 4: SCIENCE, STANDARDS AND CERTAINTY
February 11th


WEEK 5: HUMANITY
February 18th


PART II. CRITIQUES OF THE ANTHROPOCENE

WEEK 6: COLONIAL CRITIQUES
February 25th


WEEK 7: CAPITALOCENE
March 5th


**WEEK 8: OTHER CENES**  
*March 10th*


**PART III. EMERGENCES, COLLECTIVES AND ALTERLIFES**

**WEEK 9: ENVIRONMENTAL SECURITIES**  
*March 17th*


**WEEK 10: SPRING BREAK**  
*March 24th*

**WEEK 11: POLITICAL TOXICITIES**  
*March 31th*


**WEEK 12: INTERSPEICES ASSEMBLAGES**  
*April 7th*


**WEEK 13: PAPERS**  
*April 14th*


**WEEK 14: GEOENGINEERING & ALTERLIFES & THE END**  
*April 21st*


Murphy, M. *Alterlife in the Aftermath*. Unpublished manuscript. Selections


**WEEK 15: REVIEW**  
*April 28th*