

THE POLITICS OF THE ANTHROPOCENE

Geography 157

55A McCone Hall, Thursday 2–5pm

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COURSE DESCRIPTION

Globally, this year was the warmest year in recorded history. Alarming, the record it broke was set last year, which in turn broke the record from the year before. One-fifth of all humanity, 1 billion people, live in communities that do not meet the World Health Organization's air quality standards. Rates of extinction are purported to be 1,000 times higher than historic background rates, ocean acidification levels exceed *any* historical analogs, and by 2050 there will be more plastic than fish in the ocean by weight. Humans move more sediment and rock than all natural processes combined. Greenhouse gas levels have not been this high for over 1 million years. 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—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 for the definitions of humanity, temporality, species, sexuality, etc.? What are the different 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 400–500 words will make up 25% of your grade, class

presentation will make up 15%, participation in discussions will make up 25%, and a final paper of 10–12 pages will make up 35%.

Short Paper

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 12pm on Monday, May 8.

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 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: CONDITIONS

WEEK 1: INTRODUCTION

January 19

Goals, expectations, and course relevance.

WEEK 2: THE ANTHROPOCENE

January 26

Crutzen, P., & Stoermer, E. (2000). The Anthropocene. *Global Change Newsletter*, 41, 17–18.

Crutzen, P. (2002). Geology of mankind. *Nature*, 415(31), 23.

A Man-made world. (2011). *The Economist*, 399, 81–83.

Welcome to the Anthropocene. (2011). *The Economist*, 399, pages 1-4, 7-10.

Vaughan, A. (2016, January 7). Human impact has pushed Earth into the Anthropocene, scientists say. *The Guardian* [online].

Chakrabarty, D. (2009). The climate of history: Four theses. *Critical Inquiry*, 35, 197–222.

Nixon, R. (2014). The Anthropocene: The promise and the pitfalls of an epochal idea. *Edge Effects* [online].

Watch: Welcome to the Anthropocene (3:28 video)

WEEK 3: DYSTOPIA & THE END

February 2

McCarthy, C. (2006). *The Road* [Selections]. New York, NY: Vintage Books.

Yusoff, K. (2016). Anthropogenesis: Origins and endings in the Anthropocene. *Theory, Culture & Society*, (33)2, 3–28.

PART II. ANIMACIES, ALTERLIFES, RENDERINGS

A. Objects, Materials and Mattering

WEEK 4: INTOXICATED

February 9

Chen, M. (2011). Toxic animacies and inanimate affections. *GLQ*, 17(7), 266–286.

Argard-Jones, V. (forthcoming). Body burdens: Commodity and chemical entanglements in Martinique. *Cultural Anthropology*.

Shapiro, N. (2015). Attuning to the chemosphere: Domestic formaldehyde, bodily reasoning and the chemical sublime. *Cultural Anthropology*, 30, 368–393.

WEEK 5: OBJECT VIOLENCE

February 16

Winner, L. (1986/1980). Do artifacts have politics? In *The whale and the reactor: A search for limits in an age of high technology* (pp. 19–39). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Jain, L. (2006). “Come up to the ‘Kool’ taste”: African American upward mobility and the semiotics of smoking menthols. In *Injury: The politics of product design and safety law in the United States* (pp. 125–147). Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

De Leon, J. (2012). “Better to be hot than caught”: Excavating the conflicting roles of migrant material culture. *American Anthropologist*, 114(3), 477–495.

Latour, B. (2014). Agency at the time of the Anthropocene. *New Literary History*, 45, 1–18.

Stolberg, S., & Bidgood, J. (2016, July 27). All charges dropped against Baltimore officers in Freddie Gray case. *The New York Times* [online].

Wallace-Wells, B. (2016, July 13). What have the Freddie Gray trials achieved? *The New Yorker* [online].

WEEK 7: PAPER WORK

February 23

Topic and bibliography for papers.

WEEK 8: ONTOLOGIES

March 2

Kohn, E. 2013. *How forests think: Toward an anthropology beyond the human* [Selections]. Berkeley: University of California Press.

B. Interspecies Assemblages

WEEK 9: INTIMATE EXPLOITATIONS

March 9

Blanchette, A. (2017). *Porkopolis: American animality, standardized life, and the factory farm* [Selections]. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

WEEK 10: EXTINCTION

March 16

Lorimer, J. (2015). *Wildlife in the Anthropocene: Conservation after nature* [Selections]. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

C. Managerial Modernity

WEEK 11: KNOWLEDGE & AGENCY AND EXPERTS

March 23

Mitchell, T. (2002). *Rule of experts: Egypt, techno-politics, modernity* [Selections]. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Philip, K. (1998). English mud: Towards a critical cultural studies of colonial science. *Cultural Studies*, 12, 300–331.

WEEK 12: SPRING BREAK

March 30- Spring Break

WEEK 13: MECHANISMS AND SCALES

April 6

Myers, N. (2015). *Rendering life molecular: Models, modelers, and excitable matter* [Selections]. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Brown, K. (2015). *Plutopia: Nuclear families, atomic cities and the great Soviet and American plutonium disasters* [Selections]. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

WEEK 14: REMAKING LIFE

April 13

Helmreich, S. (2009). *Alien ocean: Anthropological voyages in microbial seas* [Selections]. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Masco, J. (2004). Mutant ecologies: Radioactive life in post–Cold War New Mexico. *Cultural Anthropology*, 19(4), 517–550.

PART III. ALTERLIFES, AFTERMATHS AND FUTURITY

WEEK 15: ALTERLIFES – LIVING WITH/AS KIN

April 20

Haraway, D. (2016). *Staying with the trouble: Making kin in the Chthulucene* [Selections]. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

WEEK 16: AFTERMATHS & SPECULATIVE FUTURES

April 27

Murphy, M. *Alterlife in the aftermath* [Selections]. Unpublished manuscript.

Scranton, R. (2015). *Learning to die in the Anthropocene: Reflections on the end of a civilization* [Selections]. San Francisco, CA: City Lights Books.

Nelson, A. (2002). Introduction: Future texts. *Social Text*, 20(2), 1–15.

Nelson, A. (2002). Making the impossible possible: An interview with Nalo Hopkinson. *Social Text*, 20(2), 97–113.

Flynn, A. (2014, September 4). Solarpunk: Notes toward a manifesto. *Hieroglyph* [online].

