Expos 20: What Do We Talk About When We Talk About Climate Change?

Course Description:

This class will explore how to write, think, and talk about the complexities of global climate change. We are living in a moment where the reality of massive, human-made global climate change has become unavoidable. In the face of our changing plane—the loss of ordinary seasons, bugs, expected weather, known landmarks—language can seem hard to find. While fires burn in California and coastlines disappear, artists, politicians, business owners, and citizens seem to still be casting about for a way to comprehend and talk about the changes that are already taking place, and the ones that are coming. The negative effects of climate change are inflicted unevenly. How do we create narratives about environmental loss and the injustice of this loss? How do we write about a world in flux? In order to begin to answer these questions we will read scientific articles and works in the environmental humanities, become familiar with climate change related newsletters and organizations, read realist and sci-fi responses to the crisis, and watch news specials and films. In unit one, we will investigate how different experts describe the current effects of the climate crisis. We will read the newest IPCC report on the climate crisis and use it to analyze two projects written and designed by scientists and journalists alongside a series of green or eco advertisements considering this scientific and international understanding of the crisis. In the second unit, we will turn to competing stories about the origins of the climate crisis. Some scientists and historians claim that the Anthropocene, a name for this geological era of human-made change, begins with the start of agriculture or the beginning of the nuclear age; others place the beginning in the rise of the plantation system in the Americas. Reading poetry by Tommy Pico, fiction by Patricia Lockwood, and watching the film Daughters of the Dust, alongside selections from the scientific journal Nature and Kyle Whyte’s “Indigenous Climate Change Studies,” we will compare how each starting point tells a different story about the cause, and the continuing effects, of climate change. In unit three, we will turn to the future, asking why so many of our climate crisis narratives, often found in films, imagine the end of the world and asking what it means to imagine the future in the moment of crisis. Final research papers will evaluate visions of the future, with such examples as seed-saving projects, Octavia Butler’s novel The Parable of the Sower, the student-lead climate change movement “Fridays for the Future,” and the Green New Deal.

In Expos 20 we will be focusing on writing. This is a class built around the elements of the academic essay: you will be learning how to build an argument, analyze primary and secondary sources, supporting your argument with detailed evidence, and writing engaging and thoughtful essays. The focus of this class is the practice of writing, and our primary concern will be learning how to write clearly and well. The climate crisis is a crisis, as many have said, of storytelling and knowledge: what stories do we tell about the origins, and current effects, of the rising global temperatures? The answers to these question shape perception, action and policy (for example: for years journalists and scientists have stated that we could not attribute extreme weather to climate change, in the past years, this has dramatically changed). As we read, analyze, and question government reports, newspaper articles, poems, films, and stories, we will be asking not only what stories about the climate are present in these sources, but also what arguments, and stories, we are building and writing ourselves.

Course Readings and Assignments:

This course is organized around three units
Unit One: We are in the midst of a climate crisis, one that not only affects every element of our lives – from the temperature outside, to the air we breathe, to the geography of our coasts – but that is also affected by, created by, humanities long-term use of carbon. We will begin class by reading the UN Report on the Climate Crisis and outlining the causes and effects of the current crisis, and imagining different governmental responses to, and responsibilities for, future effects of increasing carbon levels. We will then turn to considering the ways that scientists, artists, and even corporations are interpreting this description of the current climate crisis. We will begin by considering the way that in recent years, along with a rise in calls to buy clothes, products, and cars that produce less carbon, or are “eco” or “green,” businesses have decided to direct attention to ways that they are limiting, or offsetting, their carbon footprint. After analyzing the imagery of “green” business, we will read an essay on environmental writing by the critic and poet Camille T. Dungy, before considering how the artist and reporter Lauren Redniss, and the scientists and artists Christina Conklin and Marina Psaros use graphic design, cartography, and art to question, underline, or reinterpret both the information in the IPCC report and the language of green advertising. In your paper for this unit, you will use your skills of analyses to read one of their two projects – Redniss’ Thunder and Lightning or Conklin and Psaros’ The Atlas of Disappearing Places – and ask how the writers combine science, storytelling, and art to draw attention to particular effects, or experiences, of the climate crisis.

Unit Two: In the second unit, we will turn to the origins of the climate crisis. Throughout, we will be asking what kinds of stories do we tell about how we came to be in this moment of crisis? How do these stories change our response to the crisis? In this unit we will be using work by environmental humanists, scientists, and literary critics, as a lens through which we can understand art made in response to the climate crisis. We will begin by reading works that define the Anthropocene by a collection of anthropologists and historians in Edge Effects, professor of environmental justice and organizer Kyle Whyte, philosopher Timothy Morton, and selections from Rob Nixon’s Slow Violence. We will then read Nature Poem by Tommy Pico, alongside fiction by Patricia Lockwood, and the film Daughters of the Dust by Julie Dash. In your second paper you will ask how does the definition, or timeline, of the Anthropocene you find in Morton, Edge Effects, Whyte, or Nixon, illuminate or contradict the way that the climate crisis is present in the fictional work? This essay will ask you to compare two separate responses to, and stories about, climate change in order to come to a fuller, and more complex, understanding how we talk about the cause of our current crisis.

Unit Three: In Pleasure Activism: The Politics of Feeling Good, adrienne maree brown writes “I believe that all organizing is science fiction—that we are shaping the future we long for and have not yet experienced.” In this unit we will be investigating different visions of the future— from Octavia Butler’s science fiction, to the post-apocalyptic films that dominate our screens, to projects that work to decolonize the practice seed saving for the future, to the writer Rebecca Solnit’s call for a cautious climate optimism—in order to understand what people are hoping, or organizing for in the face of crisis. Throughout this unit we are going to be thinking about what people are willing to change to address the climate crisis, and what systems, practices, and narratives certain communities or individuals continue to perpetuate. Your final paper will be a research paper, where you will evaluate any of these topics, or something that we have not yet discussed in class—such as “Fridays for the Future”, the Green New Deal, or post-apocalyptic films—that is imagining a response to, or the reality of, a future shaped by the climate crisis.