Expos 20: Climate Fictions

This class will explore art that attempts to respond to 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. While fires burn in California and coastlines disappear there have been calls for art that explores and imagines the present and oncoming disaster, with critics such as Amitav Ghosh ask “where is the fiction about climate change?” At the same time, many argue that we already have fiction, art, and poetry about climate change, while others wonder whether art about climate is all that important in the face of crisis. Throughout the class we will be asking questions about representation and imagination: How do we describe a climate in flux? The negative effects of climate change are inflicted unevenly. How do people create narratives about environmental loss and the injustice of this loss? Is “Cli-Fi” a genre and if it is what does it look like? What does it mean to imagine the end of humanity or the end of the world, or, as importantly, what does it mean to imagine a future within or after crisis?

In the first unit we will read poetry by Tommy Pico, and short fiction by Patricia Lockwood, alongside film and non-fiction that focuses on different everyday experiences of climate change and ask what it mean to observe the climate crisis in the present. How do people trace something that is often described as spectacular, terrifying, a crisis in the everyday world? In the second section we will turn to works of speculation. We will be investigating different visions of the future alongside selections from Rob Nixon’s Slow Violence and Kyle Whyte’s “Indigenous Climate Change Studies,” in order to ask how speculative fiction can help us to see both the origins, and the future possibilities, of climate change. In the final unit we will be breaking the boundaries between these sections: asking how images and narratives can help us to imagine the unimaginable in the present and how predictions for the future can seem to reinscribe the past by turning our attention to films by Hayao Miyazaki and comics by Richard McGuire. Final research papers will examine a representation of, or response to, climate change in film, visual art, or literature.

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. We will be asking if the climate crisis is also a crisis of storytelling and knowledge: what stories do we tell about the origins, and current effects, of the rising global temperatures? 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. In the first section we will ask what does it mean to observe the climate crisis in the present? To read it into texts that describe
climate change now? 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 read two works that make different, contradictory, claims for the need for writing about the climate crisis: Amitov Ghosh’s call for more fiction about climate change and Camille Dungy’s claim that “All Writing is Environmental.” We will use these two texts to think about Tommy Pico’s Nature Poem, writing by Patricia Lockwood, and a contemporary film to consider how artists and writers are tracing the changes outlined in the IPCC report in the everyday present. In your paper for this unit, you will use your skills of analyses to read one of these projects and ask how people trace something that is often described as spectacular, terrifying, a crisis in the everyday world.

Unit Two: 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 and asking what it means to speculate about future. First, 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. 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, and selections from Rob Nixon’s Slow Violence. We will then read speculative works by Octavia Butler and Brenda Shaughnessy we will ask how their imaginations of the future both ask us to imagine something new and force us as readers to understand the long history of climate change and how it shapes our future understandings. In your second paper you will ask how does the definition, or timeline, of the Anthropocene you find in a theoretical text, illuminates or contradicts the way that the climate crisis is projected into the future 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 speculate about our current crisis.

Unit Three: In the final unit we will be breaking the boundaries between these sections: asking how images and narratives can help us to imagine the unimaginable in the present and how predictions for the future can seem to reinscribe the past by turning our attention to films by Hayao Miyazaki and comics by Richard McGuire. Your final paper will be a research paper, where you will evaluate any artistic that is imagining a response to, or the reality of, a future shaped by the climate crisis within a larger political, artistic, or ecological context.