

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. How can we write about a world in flux? How do the effects of environmental disaster change in relation to class, or race, or gender, or location? How do we create narratives about environmental loss? 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 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 Karen Tai Yamashita, and watching the film [Daughters of the Dust](#), alongside selections from the scientific journal *Nature* and excerpts from work by ecofeminist Donna Haraway, 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 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 questions 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. Then we will turn to a different group responding the crisis: corporations. 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. We will read a recent article on BP’s involvement in the idea of the individual “carbon footprint,” as well as selections from Rob Nixon’s *Slow Violence* before looking at a series of eco advertisements from this past year. In your paper for this unit, you will use your skills of analyses to read, and question, a green advertisement and to ask what the advertisements define as green, how they tell us they are eco-conscious, and who they seem to be saving the planet for.

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, feminists, 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 the feminist critic Donna Haraway, professor of environmental justice and organizer Kyle Whyte, selections from *Hyperobjects* by Timothy Morton, the podcast [Floodlines](#) and an essay on environmental writing by the critic and poet Camille T. Dungy. We will then read *Nature Poem* by Tommy Pico, alongside fiction by Karen Tai Yamashita and Lauren Groff, 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, Dungy, Whyte, or Haraway, 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.