

Mini-Syllabus: Writing the Anthropocene

written by Guest Contributor | July 9, 2019



Course Description

Microsoft Word's spell check doesn't know the word Anthropocene and yet this that word has become not only the time in which but also the place where we live. I remember my chemistry teacher in high school telling me that evolution was over because humans now controlled the environment to adapt to them rather than nature selecting for traits that adapted to it. Mr. Vanderhooft must have meant only human species have quit adapting to nature since some species still adapt. As polar bears fail to find sea ice from which to predate on seals, they have begun to move in with grizzlies. This is the kind of hope we're looking for except that it turns out, the claws you need to catch salmon differ from the claws you need to catch seals and the hollow see-through fur of the white bears serves no one well in the dark forest. Now both species are in severe decline.

The world does seem to be made for humans. The temperature in our house stays at a comfortable 70 degrees. Humans can live anywhere, even in boiling deserts because, at 120 degrees, you can walk from air-conditioned house to air-conditioned garage to air-conditioned car to air-conditioned parking garage to air-conditioned shopping mall.

Writers map this world from what we like to imagine is the pristine pastoral. They map the world from the gritty city. Rarely, do these two worlds overlap. But in this course, we will read authors whose work explores how these maps overlap, how the impact of humans affects every corner of the natural world and also how the natural world never abandoned the human one. Nature is everywhere. [So are humans. Humans write about themselves as much as humans make the world temperatures serve their comfort needs.] But, since humans are the only ones who read what humans write, we are going to read and write about the way humans pushed nature into their special comfort zone—and the way nature is pushing back.

Here is the thing about the Anthropocene: Our imaginations brought us here.

Perhaps there is hope that imagination, or stubbornness, that will get us out of here. The texts we will read say this is the deep bottom of the desecration. Also. This is rock bottom. The place from where we may start again.

The texts combine despair with imagination because at rock bottom, and that's when, supposedly, you build yourself back up. We will read across genre because in the Anthropocene, we need every tool of the imagination to document it, elegize it, learn from it, undo it and build something less anthropocentric back up.

Nonfiction

- Elizabeth Kolbert, *The Sixth Extinction*
- Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement*
- Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass, Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*
- Roy Scranton, *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene*
- Barry Lopez, *Horizon*
- Thich Nhat Hanh, *Love Letter to the Earth*
- Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*
- Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*

Fiction

- Louise Erdrich, *Future Home of the Living God*
- Jeff Vandermeer, *Annihilation*
- Richard Powers, *The Overstory*
- Tana French, *In the Woods*
- Jesmyn Ward, *Salvage the Bones*
- Terese Svoboda, *Great American Desert*
- Alexis Wright, *The Swan Book*

Poetry

- Aimee Nezhukumatathil, *Oceanic*
- Jake Skeets, *Eyes Bottle dark with a Mouthful of Flowers*
- Camille Dungy, *Trophic Cascade*
- Joy Harjo, *Conflict Resolution for Holy Beings*

Extra-literary Resources

- Artists on Climate
change: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/22/t-magazine/climate-change-art.html>
- Graphic art climate
change: <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/95/228045/stubborn/>



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Nicole Walker, co-author with David Carlin of *The After-Normal: Brief, Alphabetical Essays on a Changing Planet* (Rose Metal Press, 2019), is the author of *Sustainability: A Love Story* (2018), *Where the Tiny Things Are* (2017), *Egg* (2017), *Micrograms* (2016), *Quench Your Thirst with Salt* (2013), and *This Noisy Egg* (2010). She edited the essay collections *Science of Story* with Sean Prentiss and *Bending Genre: Essays on Creative Nonfiction* with Margot Singer. She is the recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts award and is a noted author in *Best American Essays*. She teaches Creative Writing as Professor of English at Northern Arizona University.