Stories of our Planet:
Climate Change in Literature, Virtual Reality Film, Games and Art

A January@GSAS Mini-Course (Jan 14-23, 2020)

Instructor: Nikhita Obeegadoo

All course readings and viewing material will be provided online via the course website.

Required readings are short readings that you will be asked to do before some classes.

Optional readings are readings that will be made available on the website, but that you are under no obligation to do. If they prove helpful to the directions our discussions take, I will offer summaries of these readings in class to enrich our conversation.

The course location is TBD. Once it is finalized, the course location will be updated on the January@GSAS website and also emailed to everybody who has signed up via the sign-up form.
**Tues Jan 14, 10am-12pm**

**Introduction**
This class will begin with an introduction of key concepts and vocabulary used to discuss climate change in the Humanities. We will discuss the stakes and participants in such conversations. Which perspectives are marginalized, and which dominate the conversation? If climate change can be explained and solved by science, why should we care about its representation in literature?

Key terms and concepts include:
- Anthropocene
- Capitalism
- Climate colonialism
- Climate ethics and climate justice
- Climate fiction (or “cli-fi”)
- Dystopia and dystopian fiction
- Ecocide
- Ecocriticism
- Ecofeminism
- Ecoliteracy
- Ecological refugees
- (The) ecological uncanny
- Environmental humanities
- Eremocine
- Hyperobjects
- Science fiction

During the second half of the class, we will discuss the central argument of Indian-American writer Amitav Ghosh’s nonfiction book *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2016) in relation to extracts of his latest novel, *Gun Island* (2019).

In *The Great Derangement*, Ghosh examines why “serious fiction” seems to refuse to grapple with climate change, and wonders what that means for the novel as a genre. He puts forward the claim that “the climate crisis is also a crisis of culture, and thus of the imagination” (21). In *Gun Island*, Ghosh offers us a Bengali-American tale of climate change and migration that oscillates between myth and reality, ultimately putting these very binaries themselves into question.

**Required Readings**

**Optional Readings**


**Wed Jan 15, 10am – 12pm**

**Climate Change and Novels Part I**

We will continue our discussion of novels and literature by contrasting Ghosh’s perspective with that of Australian novelist James Bradley’s: for the latter, once we attune ourselves to clues of climate anxiety in contemporary fiction, they are everywhere. This position will be our jumping board to begin exploring the genre and history of climate fiction, with special regards to extracts from two novels. The first is Bradley’s own novel *Clade*, a multi-generational family drama that mirrors the unfolding of climate change. The second is Kim Stanley Robinson’s *New York 2140*, a novel 120 years into the future in which New York is submerged but capitalism still refuses to let go. Interested students are welcome to skim Barbara Kingsolver’s *Flight Behaviour*, in which a migration of monarch butterflies to rural Kentucky becomes a symbol of climate change.

**Required Readings**


**Optional Readings**


Thurs Jan 16, 10am-1pm

Climate Change and Board Games

This class will revolve around *Terraforming Mars*, a board game premised upon the transformation of Mars to support human life.

We will begin the class by reviewing will the game rules for *Terraforming Mars*. Then, we will launch into a game. We will wrap up by reflecting upon our playing experience, paying particular attention to our (simulated) roles as “agents” in manipulating a planetary ecosystem, and the parallels with contemporary discourse regarding space colonization as a potential escape from a dying planet. We will also analyze the language and visual representations of the cards and board of *Terraforming Mars*, and discuss the game in comparison to other climate change games introduced in the required reading.

Required Readings
Read the rules for *Terraforming Mars*, so you can come to class ready to play!

Skim the following list of popular climate board games:
“Climate Change Games” on Board Game Geek

Optional Readings
Tues Jan 21, 10am-1pm

Climate Change in Virtual Reality and Film

During the first half of class, we will watch extracts of *Moana* and *Fast color* in class and discuss their depiction of climate change and activism, while paying special attention to concerns of gender, race, climate justice, and indigenous representation.

We will begin the second half of class by discussing the use of immersive virtual reality for climate change education and sensitization. We will then use available equipment to watch 360-degree VR climate change footage. We will end the class by discussing the effectiveness of the experience, especially in relation to other more/less interactive/passive media.

Examples of VR clips that may be watched include *Climate Change in Fiji: Our Home, Our People* and *The Meg*.

Required Readings
None.

Optional Readings

Wed Jan 22, 10am-12pm

**Climate Change and Novels Part II**
Having reached the halfway point of the class, we will bring our (hopefully growing) corpus of questions to two popular novels, paying special attention to themes of genetic engineering and bioterrorism. Both revolving around these themes, Paolo Bacigalupi’s *The Windup Girl* is set in Thailand while Michael Crichton’s *State of Fear* takes place in the United States. Interested students are welcome to skim a provided extract of Margaret Atwood’s post-apocalyptic *Oryx and Crake*.

**Required readings**


**Optional readings**
Thurs Jan 23, 10am-12pm

**Underwater Sculptures + Concluding session**
During the first hour of the class, we will discuss Jason deCaires Taylor’s work with submarine sculptures, which are also designed to be artificial reefs offering a new home to fauna and flora in this age of reef deterioration. Our conversation will be enriched by viewing, together as a class, extracts of *Angel Azul*, a documentary about Taylor’s work and the broader coral reef ecosystem in the Caribbean.

During the second hour, we will conclude the course with a wrap-up session in which participants will be encouraged to reflect upon the following questions: How did exploring climate change through these various media nourish (or not) your perception and/or understanding of the phenomenon? According to you, what can literature and art bring to the conversation about climate change? If you had to create a movie, sculpture or novel about climate change, what would you create and why?

Students will also be asked to fill in an anonymous online survey with feedback on the course.

Required Readings
Browse Jason deCaires Taylor’s website: [https://www.underwatersculpture.com/](https://www.underwatersculpture.com/)

Optional Readings