Lost World/New World: Literature and the Anthropocene (ENGL 160)

Tuesdays 1:10pm to 4:00pm
Fall 2016
Conference Room
Shapiro Writing Center
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COURSE DESCRIPTION

For more than 200,000 years, since before the dawn of Homosapiens, the Earth has been relatively cool, often mantled in vast ice sheets. For the past 10,000 years, humans have thrived in the mild, stable climate of the Holocene. Within a few generations, though, we will see global temperatures increasing by up to 7° F, sea levels rising, oceans turning acidic, rivers evaporating, and countless species dying off. How do we make sense of this change?

This is not the first time we’ve tried to make sense of worldwide catastrophe or the idea of living in a different ecosystem. In fact, we’ve been reckoning with climate change for millennia, most spectacularly since the nineteenth century, when scientific ideas about the history of the Earth were revised to include evolution, dinosaurs, geological change, and the very idea of the global climate itself. More recently, thinkers and writers confronted with dizzying new technologies (the atomic bomb, space travel, genetic engineering) have tried to imagine commensurately new futures, new worlds, and new modes of thought.

In this course, we’ll begin with the idea of the “Lost World,” looking at archaeological lost worlds and the myth of the flood in comparison with biological lost worlds and the problem of extinction, then consider how the discovery of dinosaurs and evolution transformed our notions of the human past. From there, we’ll track the metaphor of a “lost world” through the industrial revolution, the conquest of the Arctic, and the Great Depression. Finally, we’ll explore the idea that we’re living in a “new world” created by carbon-fueled climate change—the “Anthropocene”—through fiction, journalism, and poetry that asks what life in this new world might look like. In the end, we’ll come away with an appreciation for the ways that lost worlds and new worlds imagined in the past might influence, limit, and inspire how we imagine such worlds today.

REQUIRED TEXTS

William Blake, The Marriage of Heaven and Hell (New York: Dover, 1994 [1794])
Octavia Butler, The Parable of the Sower (New York: Grand Central, 2000 [1993])
Daniel Defoe, Robinson Crusoe (New York: Penguin, 2001 [1719])
Arthur Conan Doyle, The Lost World (New York: Dover, 1998 [1912])
Frank Herbert, Dune (New York: Ace, 2010 [1965])
Elizabeth Kolbert, The Sixth Extinction (New York: Picador, 2015)
Ben Lerner, 10:04 (New York: Faber & Faber, 2014)
RECOMMENDED TEXTS


Patricia Smith, *Blood Dazzler* (Minneapolis: Coffee House, 2008)

COURSE REQUIREMENTS AND GRADING

This will be a writing- and reading-intensive course. You should be prepared to work hard, think hard, and spend serious time revising your work. Students will complete five short essays (750–1250 words each) and a final longer project (2500–3500 words).

Class participation 15%
Five Short Essays 10% each (50% total)
Final Paper/Project Thesis Statement/Proposal 5%
Final Paper/Project Outline 5%
Final Paper or Project 25%

• For your first short essay, I would like you to write a brief review (750 words) of one book, movie, piece of music, or work of art *not* on the syllabus that addresses climate change. You must describe how the work in question describes and talks about climate change and you need to discuss how the work makes an argument. This paper is due in Week 2.

• For your second short essay, I would like you to write a literary-critical essay (1250 words) discussing how race and gender relate to the idea of “Nature” in William Blake’s *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, H.P. Lovecraft’s “Call of Cthulhu,” or Arthur Conan Doyle’s novel *The Lost World*. This paper will be due in Week 3.

• For your third essay, I would like you to write a concise (750 words) close reading of William Wordsworth’s poem “The World Is Too Much With Us.” This paper will be due in Week 4.

• For your fourth short essay, I would like you to write a literary historical essay (1250 words) discussing how one of the texts on the syllabus was shaped by its historical context. You will need to cite at least two reputable sources. This paper will be due in Week 5.

• For your fifth short essay, I would like you to write an expository essay (1000 words) exploring one key term we’ve touched on in class and discussing its use in at least two texts from the course. Possible key terms might include “Capitalism,” “Climate,”
“Primitive,” “Future,” “Lost,” “Civilization,” “Memory,” or “New.” This paper will be due in Week 6.

- For your final paper or project, you have two options: a critical essay or a creative project. You must decide which option you choose by Week 7.
  - If you take the paper option, you will write a comparative critical essay (2500–3500 words) that discusses two or more texts from the course. You may discuss any of the texts assigned, and you may talk about any aspects of the texts you like, but at least one of the texts must be from the final half of the course (William T. Vollmann’s *The Rifles*, J.G. Ballard’s *The Drowned World*, Frank Herbert’s *Dune*, Octavia Butler’s *Parable of the Sower*, Ben Lerner’s *10:04*, or Patricia Smith’s *Blood Dazzler*). You must have a thesis and you must have an argument. You will have to draft a thesis by Week 8 and an outline by Week 9. The first draft will be due in Week 11 (Nov. 24), and the final draft on December 15.
  - If you take the project option, you will undertake a creative writing project of your own choosing (fiction, poetry, creative nonfiction, or something else), subject to instructor’s approval. You will draft a proposal (or “pitch”) by Week 8 and an outline by Week 9. The first draft will be due in Week 11 (Nov. 24), and the final draft on December 15.

- For papers, follow MLA guidelines for citation and presentation. Proofread with care. *The requirements for word counts are exact:* you will be graded down for exceeding the word count or failing to meet it. More specific information on paper assignments will follow.
- Papers are due at the beginning of class on the day they are due. You will turn in two copies, one with your name and word count, one without. Each copy must be stapled. We will workshop portions of some papers anonymously in class.
- Papers will be marked down a third of a grade (e.g., from a B+ to a B) each day they are late; papers will not be accepted more than a week after the due date.
- Revisions are encouraged. Any paper may be revised and turned in no more than twice.
- **Office hours:** My office hours are 4:15pm to 6:15pm, Tuesdays, by appointment. Email me and we’ll set up a time. My office is located at 285 Court St. #210. I’m available to talk about your work in the class, course content, and general academic and career questions.

**CONTENT ADVISORY**

The material in this course deals with species extinction, global ecological collapse, refugees, genocide, death, violence, sexual violence, racism, drug abuse, colonialism, existential despair, cruelty, and suffering. Some of the material is itself racist (notably the Doyle and the Lovecraft; the Ballard is questionable as well). Much of it is intense. None of it is optional. In this course, we will read everything together and we will talk about it together. If you don’t like a certain text, if you find it overwhelming or disturbing or frightening or offensive, I invite you to bring those feelings and concerns into the classroom and articulate them in discussion with your peers. That’s what the course is about.
Schedule
(Texts with an asterisk (*) will be provided digitally. Texts with a hashtag (#) can be found online)

Part I: Lost Worlds

Week 1: Introduction—“What Does It Mean To Be Lost?” (Tue., Sept. 8)

Week 2: Remnants (Tue., Sept. 15)
Elizabeth Kolbert, *The Sixth Extinction*, Prologue, Ch. I–VI, Ch. XII–XIII
*The Epic of Gilgamesh*, The Standard Version, Tablets I–XII
SHORT PAPER #1 DUE

Week 3: Monsters (Tue., Sept. 22)
William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*
Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Lost World*
*H.P. Lovecraft, “The Call of Cthulhu”*
SHORT PAPER #2 DUE

Week 4: Uncivilization (Tue., Sept. 29)
Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*
#Dark Mountain, “Uncivilization: The Dark Mountain Manifesto” (http://dark-mountain.net/about/manifesto/)
SHORT PAPER #3 DUE

Week 5: Drought (Tue., Oct. 6)
John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*, Chapters 1–19
SHORT PAPER #4 DUE

Week 6: Refugees (Tue., Oct. 13)
SHORT PAPER #5 DUE
FALL BREAK (Tue., Oct. 20)

Week 7: The Arctic (Tue., Oct. 27)
William T. Vollmann, *The Rifles*

**Part II: New Worlds**

Week 8: Sea Level Rise (Tue., Nov. 3)
J.G. Ballard, *The Drowned World*
#Jeff Goodell, “Goodbye, Miami,” *Rolling Stone* (July 4, 2013)
THESIS FOR FINAL PAPER/PROJECT DUE

Week 9: Death (Tue., Nov. 10)
Frank Herbert, *Dune*, Book I
OUTLINE FOR FINAL PAPER/PROJECT DUE

Week 10: Rebirth (Tue., Nov. 17)
Frank Herbert, *Dune*, Books II & III

Week 11: Change (Tue., Nov. 24)
Octavia Butler, *The Parable of the Sower*
#Roy Scranton, “Learning How to Die in the Anthropocene”
(http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/11/10/learning-how-to-die-in-the-anthropocene)
FIRST DRAFT OF FINAL PAPER/PROJECT DUE

Week 12: Memory (Tue., Dec. 1)
Ben Lerner, *10:04*
* Patricia Smith, “What To Tweak,” “Don't Drink the Water,” “34,” and “Give Me My Name” (from *Blood Dazzler*)

FINAL DRAFT PAPER/PROJECT DUE TUESDAY, DECEMBER 15