Black Speculative Fictions & the Anthropocene

Professor Heather V. Vermeulen
Thursdays, 1:20-4:10 pm, CFH 106

—Wangechi Mutu, Ye Mama, 2003

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Course Description

The genre of black speculative fiction—in the form of literature, art, music, and theory—provides a generative framework through which to (re)think understandings of race, gender, sexuality, class, the body, disability, citizenship, and the human. Often couched as taking place in the “future,” black speculative fictions also engage the past and critique the present. This makes the genre a critical resource for addressing the Anthropocene. The term Anthropocene first emerged from the discipline of Geology in 2000. Scientists proposed that Earth had entered a new epoch (following the Holocene) in which “humans” had become geological forces, impacting the planet itself.

However, the term Anthropocene raises numerous questions. First and foremost: What is “the human”? Who has defined this term historically, and how is the human being (re)defined in the present? What is the place of colonization and transatlantic slavery in narratives of the Anthropocene’s emergence and implications? What does it mean to think about the human at the level of a “species”? What constitutes evidence of the Anthropocene and when did it begin? Who is
responsible for the Anthropocene’s attendant catastrophes, which include earthquakes, altered ocean waters, and massive storms? Does the Anthropocene overemphasize the human and thus downplay other interspecies and human-nonhuman, animate-inanimate relations? Or does it demand a (potentially fruitful) reconceptualization of the human? Further, how does artificial intelligence complicate definitions of the human and, by extension, of the Anthropocene?

Centering the work of black speculative thinkers and placing it in conversation with scientific studies ranging from marine biology and geology to cybernetics, this seminar takes an interdisciplinary approach to the Anthropocene that endeavors to (re)conceptualize the human, ecological relations, and Earth itself. For your final, you will have the option of completing either a research paper or a work of speculative fiction (short story, work of art, musical score, etc.), accompanied by an artist’s statement indicating how your creative response directly engages the course’s assigned texts and themes.

Students with Disabilities

Wesleyan University is committed to ensuring that all qualified students with disabilities are afforded an equal opportunity to participate in, and benefit from, its programs and services. To receive accommodations, a student must have a disability as defined by the ADA. Since accommodations may require early planning and generally are not provided retroactively, please contact Accessibility Services as soon as possible.

If you have a disability, or think that you might have a disability, please contact Accessibility Services in order to arrange an appointment to discuss your needs and the process for requesting accommodations. Accessibility Services is located in North College, rooms 021/022, or can be reached by email (accessibility@wesleyan.edu) or phone (860-685-5581).

Accessibility

This course utilizes pen/pencil, typed, and oral assignments; the materials on the syllabus are literary, visual, and sonic in nature. If these formats pose challenges to you, please let me know. I will make arrangements to facilitate your engagement with the course’s required materials. Note also Wesleyan’s statement on accommodations pasted above.

CHUM Fall 2018 Lecture Series

This course is in conversation with the Fall 2018 theme at The Center for the Humanities: Corporeal Techniques and Technologies. There is a fabulous lineup of lectures, and I do hope that you will attend as many as you can. Where possible, I’ve structured the syllabus so that what we’re engaging in class connects to the speakers’ topics. The lecture line-up is available here. For your convenience, I have included the lectures in the course schedule below. Unless otherwise noted on the website, the lectures are on Mondays, 6:00 pm, in the Daniel Family Commons (Usdan University Center).
Course Objectives

In this seminar, we will practice and hone the following skills:

1. Performing close readings of images, texts, and music
2. Critically analyzing authors’ key terms, stylistic choices, and language (i.e., how does their writing work? What’s at stake? What’s problematic, and why?)
3. Bringing various genres of material into conversation (e.g., scientific studies and novels)
4. Determining the main arguments and interventions of scholarly literature, then evaluating those arguments and interventions
5. Crafting generative discussion questions rooted in the assigned material (these are also the kinds of questions behind excellent papers!)
6. Being engaged audience members and providing constructive feedback
7. Participating in class discussions and activities
8. Presenting materials in a clear and compelling manner, then responding to audience members’ questions
9. Producing academic analyses and creative responses to the assigned material that incorporate individual research

Assignments and Grading

1. Participation and attendance (both required): 20%
   a. You are permitted one unexcused absence without affecting your grade. If you are unable to attend class for any reason, please email me.
   b. Come to class having studied all assigned texts and being prepared to discuss them.
2. In-class presentation on assigned material (approx. 10-15 minutes): 10%
   a. Brief summary of key themes and/or arguments of all required texts
   b. Close analysis of a passage, work of art, etc. in which you present an argument about the piece and make a connection to its historical time period and/or current events
   c. 1-2 discussion questions for the class, with selected passage(s), art, etc. for our consultation as we engage your question(s)
3. Reading response papers (3-4 pages, double-spaced; due Oct. 5 and Nov. 2, by 11:59 pm, via email): 20%
4. Bibliography of sources for final research paper (or speculative fiction project), accompanied by a draft of your introduction and thesis statement (or a synopsis of your speculative fiction project), due Nov. 16, 11:59 pm, via email: 5%
5. Final paper or project presentation (approx. 10 minutes), followed by Q&A with class: 15%
6. Final paper or speculative fiction project (due Thurs., Dec. 13, by 11:59 pm, via email): 30%
   a. Research paper: 10-12 pages, double-spaced, on a topic of your choosing, in consultation with me
      OR
   b. Speculative fiction project: short speculative fiction story (approx. 8 pages, double-spaced) or other approved creative work (visual, sonic, etc.), accompanied by an author’s/artist’s statement that indicates how your project critically engages specific texts and themes from the syllabus (2-3 pages, double-spaced)

*** Please follow the due dates posted above. Late work will result in the deduction of 1/3 of a letter grade per day (e.g., from an A- to a B+), unless I grant an extension in advance of
If you anticipate requiring an extension or are aware of a scheduling conflict, please contact me as soon as possible and we’ll work something out.

Course Materials

The following three novels are available at the bookstore:
1. Octavia Butler, *Dawn*
   a. Note: if you’re purchasing *Dawn*, you might want to get the trilogy as one book (*Lilith’s Brood*); sometimes it’s cheaper than just purchasing *Dawn*
2. N. K. Jemisin, *The Fifth Season*
3. Samuel Delany, *Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand*

Where possible, I will place required and relevant texts (including art catalogs) on reserve at Olin Library. You also may want to try Interlibrary Loan.

Course Schedule

Sept. 6  Introduction: Keywords

*** If possible, please come to class having read the following. PDFs are on Moodle, but if you can’t access them, please email me: hvermeulen@wesleyan.edu.

   - “Introduction: Haunted Landscapes of the Anthropocene” (G1-G14)
   - “Introduction: Bodies Tumbled into Bodies” (M1-M12)
   **Note:** I have scanned into one PDF all selections from *Keywords* that we’ll be reading in class over the course of the semester; only the following are for day 1:
   #3. Jan Zalasiewicz, Mark Williams, and Colin N. Waters, “Anthropocene” (14-16)
   #22. Reinmar Seidler and Kamaljit S. Bawa, “Ecology” (71-75)
   #41. Joni Adamson, “Humanities” (135-139)
   #43. Kyle Powys Whyte, “Indigeneity” (143-146)

Sept. 13  The Human and/after the End of the World

   -- “A Note” (ix-xii)
   -- “From the Lab Notes of the Last Experiments” (1-30)


Sept. 20

**The Human: Definitions and Disruptions**

***Visit to Archaeology and Anthropology Collections; meet in Exley 301***

2. From *Keywords*:
   #46. Noel Castree, “Nature” (151-156)
   #52. Catriona Sandilands, “Queer Ecology” (169-171)

Recommended:

**Sept. 24**

**CHUM:** Alexandra Hui, “Form(s of) Listening from Edison to Muzak and Beyond”

**Sept. 26**

**Opening reception for Kahlil Robert Irving’s exhibition *Street Matter—Decay & Forever/Golden Age*, 4:30-6:00 pm; including a conversation between Irving and Prof. Anthony Hatch at 5 p.m. Location: Ezra and Cecile Zilkha Gallery (283 Washington Terrace)**

**Sept. 27**

**Rising (Black) (Atlantic) Waters: Drexciya and Ellen Gallagher**

6. Choose TWO of the following scientific studies and be prepared to discuss highlights, interesting language, etc. with the class:

Recommended:
** Oct. 1  ** CHUM: Neel Ahuja, “Figuring the Climate Refugee: Precarity, Adaptation, and Risk in Representations of Environmental Migration”

Oct. 4  ** Species Being: Wangechi Mutu  **

3. Choose two (or read all three if you can/wish!): Selections from Wangechi Mutu: A Fantastic Journey (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013). (This is the catalog from Mutu’s 2013 exhibition at Duke’s Nasher Gallery)
   -- Trevor Schoonmaker, “A Fantastic Journey” (21-47)
   -- Greg Tate, “The Gikuyu Mythos vs. the Cullud Grrrl from Out of Space, A Wangechi Mutu Feature” (83-91)
   -- Wangechi Mutu and Trevor Schoonmaker, “A Conversation” (95-117)
5. Interview with Wangechi Mutu and Santigold on The End of Eating Everything (2013): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XczdrcLUXMA.

Recommended:

*** Oct. 5: First response paper due ***

** Oct. 8  ** CHUM: Mel Chen, TBA

Oct. 11  ** Queering the Anthropocene, part 1  **

2. From Keywords: #40. Stefania Barca, “History” (132-135)
**Oct. 15**

**CHUM:** Heather Vermeulen, “Oceanic Feelings in the Anthropocene: Ellen Gallagher’s Rising (Black) Atlantic”

**Oct. 18**

**Queering the Anthropocene, part 2**

3. From *Keywords*:
   #45. Priscilla Wald, “Natural Disaster” (148-151)

**Recommended:**

**[Fall Break, Oct. 20-23]**

**Oct. 29**

**CHUM:** Ron Kuvila, “Hearing Changes”

**Nov. 1**

**Race, Gender, Sexuality, and Class “After” the Human**


**Janelle Monáe**
   https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3XvpQbOtzu&list=PLvMEOuJmqgq65LL2qlEvhGomBu15aD2.
   https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LHgbzNHVg0c.
   https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lqmORiHNtN4.
Grace Jones

Recommended:

*** Nov. 2: Second response paper due ***

** Nov. 5 **

**CHUM:** Laura Ann Twagira, “Embodied Engineering: Gender, Technology, and Body Politics in Mali (West Africa)”

Nov. 8

Technology, Desire, and the Human, part 1


Recommended:

** Nov. 12 **

**CHUM:** Megan Glick, “The Children’s Hatchery: On the Nonhuman Origins of Neonatology”

Nov. 15

Technology, Desire, and the Human, part 2


Recommended:

*** Nov. 16: Bibliography and related writing due ***

*** Nov. 19-20: Meetings to discuss your papers/projects ***
** Nov. 19  ** CHUM: Christina Crosby, “Written on the Body, The Temporalities of Grief”

[November Break, Nov. 21-25]

** Nov. 26  ** CHUM: Marisa Fuentes, “Refuse Bodies and the Technologies of Waste Production in the Transatlantic Slave Trade”

Nov. 29  ** Bina48 and/as the Human

10. If we can get it in time, we'll read a chapter from Tavia Nyong’o, *Afro-Fabulations: The Queer Drama of Black Life* (New York: NYU Press, 2018).

** Dec. 3  ** CHUM: Alison Kafer, “After Crip, Beyond Disability”

*** Dec. 6  ** Final paper/project presentations

1. TBD (based on what you all are presenting, we may do a bit of preparatory study)

**Final paper/project due:**
*** Thursday, Dec. 13, by 11:59 pm, via email ***