

ENGL 440/529: Novel Ecologies: Realism, Fiction, and the Planetary

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Office Hours: By Appointment*

* I'm happy to talk to you, but don't plan to schedule "office hours" because staring at myself in an empty Zoom meeting sounds depressing as hell.

Overview:

This course will ask what it means to read "realist" fiction in the Anthropocene (a proposed geological age defined by human action), exploring how the modes of representation associated with the realist novel as a literary and cultural institution are bound up with the Anthropocene's emergence, in order to consider how (and whether) such an understanding might help us navigate this catastrophic moment in Earth's history. This will entail asking a set of inter-related questions:

- What is a "realist" novel? Where did the genre come from? How did it rise to prominence?
- What vision of the human, and human community, does it imagine into being? Is the novel an exclusively anthropocentric (human centered) genre? Is the novel's vision of the human the same as the "Anthropos" in "Anthropocene"?
- How does the realist novel work? What are its strategies of representation, narration, and plot? How does it help us think about the Anthropocene as a human story? Or a planetary one?
- How does it relate to other forms of narrative? How does the realist novel relate to travel narrative, speculative fiction, epic, natural history, climate modeling?
- What is the work of *reading* novels, and offering interpretations of them? How does interpretive, critical work come to matter (indeed, does it matter?) in the context of planetary crisis?

Our point of departure will be Amitav Ghosh's controversial claim that "serious fiction" is complicit in rendering climate change "unthinkable" because of its failure to represent the agency of nonhumans, or the dynamism of the Earth System. We will examine Ghosh's argument, including his restriction of "serious fiction" to realism, the cognitive political work he attributes to storytelling, and his insistence on a planetary perspective, and take it as a provocation for our own interventions. We will then "test" it against a series of (at least nominally) realist novels written across a nearly 300-year span that is itself coincident with the Anthropocene's emergence.

Disclaimer: Everything here is a work in progress. This course is cross-listed as a senior capstone and graduate seminar, which means that students are coming into with many different goals, interests, and priorities. Plus, we're riding out a pandemic. We all have pressing demands on our time and attention beyond academics. I want this course to work for *you*. Please adapt it to your needs and interests. Thus, if you have concerns, problems, issues, or questions of any kind – at any time during the term – please do not hesitate to be in touch. I will do my best to respond quickly. Let's be as patient, supportive, and generous with one another as we can.

Grade Breakdown:

Discussion Board (20%)

Reflection Essay / Field Statement (20%)

Final Project (60%)

Plans & Procedures:

This course is designed as a “choose your own adventure.” You can, and should, tailor it around your own interests and goals. I will serve as a guide: pointing out possible routes through the material, highlighting points of potential interest, staging questions, and modeling interpretations or lines of inquiry. However, it is up to you to decide where to focus your efforts and attention.

Your grade will depend primarily on a significant research project, due at the end of the term (details below). Everything else is designed to help you build toward that project, including the course readings. Dive deeply into those readings that most interest you, while skimming (or skipping) others. I do hope that you will read all of the novels, in part because I have selected them to speak to one another. However, I encourage you to choose one or two that you are going to read carefully, while skimming through the others more quickly. If you think you are going to want to write on *Lord Jim* or *The Hungry Tide*, read them now! Alternatively, look through the list of supplemental readings and start working on those, so that by the time you decide on a novel you already have a robust critical apparatus to bring to bear on it. If you want to bring in material from another course, go for it. The point of a “capstone” course is to bring together your experience in the English major. Thus, it is perfectly appropriate to put this course in dialogue with others that you have taken, or to return to work you've done in the past and build on it here.

Class Zoom Meetings:

During our scheduled class time, I will hold “participatory lecture” sessions via Zoom, which will be linked through the course Canvas page. These will be followed by a live discussion, all of which will be recorded and available on the Canvas site so that you can view them when you are able. Participation in these live sessions is optional. It will not affect your grade. I hope you will be able to join and will find doing so worthwhile, but there will be no penalty or judgement if you can't make it.

You are welcome to build on these lectures/discussions in your final project. However, if you are actively using or responding to another student's comment, I expect you to check with that person first. If you need help identifying them, ask me. While we are embarked on a collective enterprise, each person's ideas are their own. Please respect that. This is particularly important in this context, since I would ordinarily not record class discussions. **Please note: sharing these recorded lectures and discussions beyond our class is strictly prohibited.** Doing so will be treated as a violation of both the University of Washington Code of Academic Conduct and federal laws governing student privacy and intellectual property.

Research Teams / Group Discussion:

The Canvas discussion board will be our primary mechanism for collaboration. Please use it freely: share links, start threads, pose questions. There will also be a series of required posts, building toward your final project. These will begin early in the term, with your initial "take" on Ghosh's *Great Derangement*, and the novels and/or questions that most interest you. My hope is that this will allow groups to form around shared interests, texts, or questions. These groups will begin somewhat amorphously, and then become more clearly defined as your projects develop. By the middle of the term, they will become research teams, where you will share work and get feedback. Full disclosure: I've never done this before (certainly not online). No doubt there will be some kinks, but we'll figure it out. Hopefully the benefits of teamwork will outweigh any logistical difficulties.

Writing:

You will be asked to do several kinds of writing in this course, with the requirements varying between ENGL 440 and 529. These will include:

- Reading Journal (completely ungraded, private to you)
- Discussion Board Posts (graded for effort/engagement, not content)
- Reflection Essay 1,000 words (440 only; graded)
- Field Statement 1,000 -1,500 words (529 only; graded)
- Final Research Project (Requirements vary; graded)

Reading Journal

As you read, please keep a "reading journal," recording observations about the books, ideas they prompt, and also the circumstances of your reading. What are you thinking about? Where are you? How do the particular (and exceptional) circumstances in which you are reading these novels affect your understanding of them? These journals are personal. They will not be graded or collected. In this sense, they are optional. Nonetheless, I strongly urge you keep one, even if only for a few minutes a day. Doing so will transform your reading experience, and seems particularly important given that we are reading in isolation. Nonetheless, this is an excellent practice under any circumstances. Writing begets writing. Journaling will help you arrive at ideas, and cultivate an "active" relation to the text. It will also help localize your reading, offering a window into what makes your reading experience distinct, and thus to your own unique perspective.

Discussion Board

The graded aspect of the discussion board includes all required posts (listed on the syllabus schedule, below), and generous participation with your small group. Required posts include:

- 1.) Initial response to *The Great Derangement*
- 2.) Preliminary Research Question (including novels of interest)
- 3.) Final Research Question and Annotated Bibliography
- 4.) Peer Review within Small Group.
- 5.) At least 2 posts + 2 responses to general discussion of the novels and/or supplemental readings. Initial posts should call our attention to a particular scene/passage/or pattern, while responses should follow directly on the line of inquiry that the initial poster suggested. This will help people try out their ideas and get feedback. It's a great place to post questions.

Activity on the discussion boards beyond these requirements will boost your score, but is not required.

440 Only: Reflection Essay (approx. 1,000 words / 4 pages)

Over the course of the term, you will prepare two related documents, which will be submitted portfolio-style at the end of the term. The first is a reflection essay of 1,00-1,500 words (4-6 pages) in which you answer the question “why study literature?” Take this as an occasion to think back over your studies in the English major, to think about skills you’ve learned, and how your reading practice has changed. Feel free to include frustrations, obstacles that you have had to contend with, or things you remain confused about. This essay can take multiple forms: a memoir, a manifesto, an interview, a letter to your former (or future) self, a short story in which your favorite author’s ghost haunts you for misinterpreting their work, an opinion piece telling high school students why they should major in English.

While the form is up to you, this reflection is intended to complement your final project. Your interpretive reading should reflect the kinds of skills you talk about in the reflection, and/or dramatize what you see as the benefits of literary study. This is your chance to preach what you practice, while the final project is your venue to practice what you preach. Thus, while I am asking you to prepare it a separate document, you are welcome to incorporate material from it directly into your final essay.

529: Field Statement (1,000 – 1,500 words; 4-6 pages)

Over the course of the term, you will identify a particular “field” or critical conversation, represented by 7-10 articles, book chapters, etc. This will likely begin in the supplemental reading for the course, but must also include your own research following up on those leads. The form will be modeled on a “literature review” or “review essay,” as opposed to an annotated bibliography. That is to say that it should present an argument or narrative, but that argument is more about mapping the discussion than venturing your own intervention, though it can (and should) certainly include your own perspective on strengths, weaknesses, gaps, and patterns in the material you are reading. This is a miniature version of what you will be asked to do in your comprehensive exam, and thus should be good practice. While this should be a separate document, submitted alongside your final project, you are free to incorporate material from it directly into your final essay.

Final Research Project / Essay

Your work for the quarter will culminate in a substantial piece of original research, offering a critical reading or interpretation. These will begin as responses to Ghosh's *The Great Derangement*. In some cases, that may remain a structuring principle of the essay: either arguing with Ghosh, extending his argument, or some combination of both. For others, Ghosh may prove a point of departure, something that you leave behind and don't even reference in the final project. Either option is fine. However, using Ghosh as a touchstone/provocation should help focus all of our thinking, as well as providing a common point of reference among the various projects. Based on your initial "takes" on *The Great Derangement*, the novel(s) you are writing on, and the topics of your research I will be forming small research groups or teams, with whom you will share drafts and materials throughout the term.

The parameters vary between 440 and 529, mainly in terms of length and engagement with outside sources. While the requirements below are keyed to the idea of an interpretive essay, you are welcome to work in a less traditional format – podcast, storymap, etc. – in which case the guidelines may be modified as needed. I am also open to the prospect of "creative" projects, but will want to hear an explicit rationale for what the interpretive apparatus will be. More details will be forthcoming. However, the basic requirements are:

- Length: 3,000 words (440); or 5,000 words (529).
- Substantive engagement with outside sources such as critical essays, theory, historical or biographical context beyond the novel(s) you are reading. For 440, this means at least 5 sources, more like 8-10 for 529. Depending on the format of your project, these can either be incorporated directly or take the form of a bibliographic essay appended as a separate document. You are welcome to draw on the supplemental readings, but I would like to see you find at least a couple of sources on your own.
- Outline / slideshow or poster versions will be presented at the end of the term. These offer a succinct encapsulation of your argument in a different format (or media) than you are using for the main project, and will be graded separately.

All projects must:

- Have a thesis, or at least a clearly articulated point of view.
- Present evidence, and be reflexive about the connection between the thesis and the kind of evidence upon which it draws.
- Be interpretive. That is to say that it must make the work of interpretation – of generating subjective knowledge or understanding of an artifact – explicit.
- Clearly articulated stakes. The connection between the stakes and/or payoff of the project its other features must be explicit.

Primary Readings:

Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2016)
Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe* (1719)
George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss* (1860)
Joseph Conrad, *Lord Jim* (1900)
Amitav Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* (2004)

Secondary Readings:

These are here to supplement your reading of the novels, and to serve as a starting point for your own research. I do not expect you to read all of them. They are listed on the syllabus alongside novels for which I think they make good “pairings,” but many are equally relevant elsewhere. Hence, they appear below loosely divided along the two main axes of the course in order to help you identify those readings most germane to your own interests. I tried to include only material that is available electronically. In a few cases, that means PDFs on Canvas, but most of the titles below are articles or e-books linked through the UW library (requires login).

Environmental Humanities / Ecocriticism / The Anthropocene:

Chakrabarty, Dipesh. “[The Climate of History: Four Theses](#)” (2009)

---. “[Postcolonial Studies and the Challenge of Climate Change](#)” (2012)

---. “[Climate and Capital: On Conjoined Histories](#)” (2014)

---. “[The Planet: An Emergent Category for Humanists](#)” (2019)

Cole, Lucinda. [Imperfect Creatures: Vermin, Literature, and the Sciences of Life, 1600-1740](#) (2016)

Gómez-Barris, Macarena. [The Extractive Zone: Social Ecologies and Decolonial Perspectives](#) (2017)

Haraway, Donna. [Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin the Chthulucene](#). (2016)

Heise, Ursula K. “[Lost Dogs, Last Birds, and Listed Species: Cultures of Extinction](#)” (2010)

Also recommended, but unavailable online: *Imagining Extinction: The Cultural Meanings of Endangered Species* (2016)

Johnson, Bob. [Mineral Rites: An Archeology of the Fossil Economy](#) (2019)

Latour, Bruno. “[Agency at the Time of the Anthropocene](#)” *New Literary History* (2014)

Lewis, Simon & Mark Maslin. “[Defining the Anthropocene](#)” *Nature* (2015)

King, Tiffany Lethabo. [The Black Shoals: Offshore Formations of Black and Native Studies](#) (2019)

Kohn, Eduardo. [How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human](#) (2013)

Malm, Andreas. “[The Origins of Fossil Capital: From Water to Steam in the British Cotton Industry](#)” *Historical Materialism* (2013). Precursor his book: *Fossil Capital: Steam Power and the Origins of Global Warming* (2016)

Mentz, Steve. *Shipwreck Modernity: Ecologies of Globalization, 1550-1719* (2015)

Moore, Jason W. “[Ecology, Capital, and the Nature of Accumulation & Crisis in the Capitalist World-Ecology](#).” Precursor to his book, *Capitalism in the Web of Life* (2015).

Purdy, Jedediah. *After Nature: A Politics for the Anthropocene* (2015)

Ronda, Margaret. “[Mourning and Melancholia in the Anthropocene](#)” (2013)

Simon, Zoltán Boldizár. “[The Limits of Anthropocene Narratives](#)” *European Journal of Social Theory* (2018).

Springer, Anna-Sophie & Etienne Turpin. “[Vestiges of 125,660 Specimens of Natural History](#)” (2015). See also: <http://reassemblingnature.org>

Tsing, Anna. “[Unruly Edges: Mushrooms as Companion Species](#)” (2012);
Also highly recommended, her books *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection* (2004) (unavailable online) and *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (2015)

Wenzel, Jennifer. “Introduction” to *The Disposition of Nature: Environmental Crisis and World Literature* (2020). PDF on Canvas.

Wynter, Sylvia & Katherine McKittrick. “[An Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species?](#)” in McKittrick, ed. *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human As Praxis* (2015)

The Novel:

Armstrong, Nancy. “Introduction” from *How Novels Think* (PDF on Canvas)

Ayuoung, Elaine. *When Fiction Feels Real: Representation and the Reading Mind* (2018)

Bode, Christophe, Rainer Dietrich. *Future Narratives: Theory, Poetics, and Media-Historical Moment* (2013)

Buckland, Adelene. *Novel Science: Fiction and the Invention of Nineteenth Century Geology* (2013)
(PDF of Intro on Canvas)

Duncan, Ian. “Introduction” from *Human Forms: The Novel in the Age of Evolution* (PDF on Canvas)
Also recommended: Chapter 5, “George Eliot’s Science Fiction”

- Esty, Jed. [*Unseasonable Youth: Modernism, Colonialism, and the Fiction of Development*](#) (2011).
- Freedgood, Elaine. “[Ghostly Reference](#)” *Victorian Studies* (2014).
(Wanted to include her new book *World’s Enough: The Invention of Realism in the Victorian Novel*, but it isn’t available electronically.)
- Gallagher, Catherine. “The Rise of Fictionality” (PDF on Canvas)
- Griffiths, Devin. [*The Age of Analogy: Science and Literature Between the Darwins*](#) (2016).
- Griffiths, Devin & Deanna Kreisel, “[Open Ecologies](#)” [Special Issue VLC](#) – Rest of the issue is great, and includes several recommended articles (2020)
- Hensley, Nathan. [*Forms of Empire: The Poetics of Victorian Sovereignty*](#) (2016)
- Hensley, Nathan & Philip Steer. [*Ecological Form: System & Aesthetics in the Age of Empire*](#) (2018)
- James, Erin, [*The Storyworld Accord: Econarratology and Postcolonial Narratives*](#) (2015)
- Kornbluh, Anna. Introduction to *The Order of Forms: Realism, Formalism, and Social Space* (2020).
(PDF on Canvas)
- Markley Robert. “[The Southern Unknown Countries](#)”: [Imagining the Pacific in the Eighteenth Century Novel](#)” (2012)
- . “[Leaving Crusoe’s Island](#)” – Introduction to Special Issue of *Eighteenth Century Fiction*. Other articles may also be of interest.
- Plotz, John. [*Semi-Detached: The Aesthetics of Virtual Experience Since Dickens*](#) (2017)
- Steinlight, Emily. [*Populating the Novel: Literary Form and the Politics of Surplus Life*](#) (2018).
- Taylor, Jesse Oak. [*The Sky of Our Manufacture: The London Fog in British Fiction from Dickens to Woolf*](#) (2016).
- See also: “[The Novel After Nature, Nature After the Novel: Richard Jefferies’s Anthropocene Romance](#)” (2018)

Schedule:

Reading	Supplemental Reading	Writing (Due by Friday @ Noon)
<p>Week 1 M. March 30. “Welcome to the Anthropocene”; Begin Ghosh, The Great Derangement (pp. 3-9)</p>	<p>Lewis and Maslin, “Defining the Anthropocene”; Haraway, “Introduction” to Staying with the Trouble; Latour, “Agency at the Time of the Anthropocene”; Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History”; Menely & Taylor, “Introduction” to <i>Anthropocene Reading</i> (PDF on Canvas); Simon, “The Limits of Anthropocene Narratives”</p>	
<p>W. April 1 Ghosh, The Great Derangement Part 1 “Stories” Defoe, <i>Robinson Crusoe</i>, pp. 5-41: “<i>For sudden Joys, like Griefs, confound a first.</i>”</p>	<p>Gallagher, “The Rise of Fictionality” (PDF on Canvas); Armstrong, from <i>How Novels Think</i> (PDF on Canvas); Taylor, “Introduction” to The Sky of Our Manufacture</p>	<p>Begin posting responses to Ghosh (optional, due next week)</p>
<p>Week 2 M. April 6 Defoe, <i>Robinson Crusoe</i> pp. 41-174: “I made him know his name should be <i>Friday</i>...”</p>	<p>Tsing, “Unruly Edges”; Mentz, “Preface,” Ch. 1, Ch. 7 from Shipwreck Modernity; Wynter & McKittrick, “Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species?”; King, “Introduction” to The Black Shoals</p>	
<p>W. April 8 Defoe, <i>Robinson Crusoe</i>, FINISH</p>	<p>Chakrabarty, “Postcolonial Studies & the Challenge of Climate Change”; Cole, “Introduction” & Ch. 5, from Imperfect Creatures; Markley, “The Southern</p>	<p>Initial Response to Ghosh Posted to Discussion Board: include your main points of interest, agreement, and/or disagreement with him, and questions you’d like to explore further.</p>

	<p>Unknown Countries” & “Leaving Crusoe’s Island”</p>	
<p>Week 3 M. April 13 Eliot, <i>The Mill on the Floss</i> Book 1</p>	<p>Duncan, from <i>Human Forms</i>; Freedgood, “Ghostly Reference”; Auyoung, “Introduction” & Ch., When Fiction Feels Real; James, “Preface” & Ch. 1 to The Storyworld Accord; Bode & Deitrich, “Introduction” to Future Narratives</p>	
<p>W. April 15 Eliot, <i>The Mill on the Floss</i> Books 2-3</p>	<p>Malm, “Origins of Fossil Capital”; Chakrabarty, “Climate and Capital: On Conjoined Histories”; Johnson, “Introduction” to Mineral Rites</p>	<p>Novel(s) of primary interest posted to Discussion Board with rationale</p>
<p>Week 4 M. April 20 Eliot, <i>The Mill on the Floss</i> Books 4-5 Ghosh, The Great Derangement Part 2: “History”</p>	<p>Darwin, from <i>On the Origin of Species</i>; Lyell, from <i>Principles of Geology</i> (PDFs on Canvas)</p>	
<p>W. April 22 Eliot, <i>The Mill on the Floss</i> Book 6</p>	<p>Griffiths, “Introduction” & Ch. 4 from Age of Analogy; Buckland, “Introduction” to <i>Novel Science</i> (PDF); Steinlight, “Introduction” to Populating the Novel; Miller “The Ecological Plot”</p>	
<p>Week 5 M. April 27 Eliot, <i>The Mill on the Floss</i> FINISH</p>	<p>Miller, “Fixed Capital and the Flow” in Ecological Form & “Drill Baby Drill”; McCauley, “George Eliot’s Estuarial Form”; Plotz, “Introduction” to Semi-Detached; Hensley,</p>	

	“Introduction” & Ch. 1 from Forms of Empire	
W. April 29 Conrad, <i>Lord Jim</i> , Ch. 1 – 9.	Conrad, “ Henry James: An Appreciation ”	Preliminary Research Questions Posted to Discussion Board
Week 6 M. May 4 Conrad, <i>Lord Jim</i> , Ch. 10-18 Ghosh, Great Derangement Part 3: “Politics”	Purdy, “Introduction” & Ch. 5-6, from After Nature ; Williams “Ideas of Nature” (PDF)	
W. May 6 Conrad, <i>Lord Jim</i> , Ch. 19-29	Wallace, Ch 31 “Aru Islands” The Malay Archipelago ; Springer & Turpin “ Vestiges of 125,660 Specimens of Natural History ”; Moore, “ Ecology, Capital, and the Nature of Accumulation ”; Gómez-Barris, “Introduction” to The Extractive Zone	
Week 7 M. May 11 Conrad, <i>Lord Jim</i> , Ch. 29-35	Esty, “Introduction” & Ch. 3 from Unseasonable Youth ; Hensley & Steer, “Signatures of the Carboniferous” in Ecological Form ; Tondre, “ Conrad’s Carbon Imaginary ”; Vandertop, “ The Earth Seemed Unearthly ”; McCarthy, “ A Choice of Nightmares ”	
W. May 13 Conrad, <i>Lord Jim</i> ; FINISH	Chakrabarty, “ The Planet: An Emergent Category for Humanists ”	Expanded / Refined Research Question & Annotated Bibliography Posted to Discussion Board
Week 8 M. May 18	Wenzel, from <i>The Disposition of Nature</i> ;	

Ghosh, <i>The Hungry Tide</i> , “Tide Country” – “Crabs”	Nixon, “Introduction” to <i>Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor</i> ; DeLoughrey & Handley, “Introduction” to <i>Postcolonial Ecologies</i> ; Huggan & Tiffin, “Introduction” to <i>Postcolonial Ecocriticism</i>	
W. May 20 Ghosh, <i>The Hungry Tide</i> , “Travels” – “Transformation”		
Week 9 M. May 25: MEMORIAL DAY Keep reading <i>The Hungry Tide</i> , “A Pilgrimage” – “A Killing”	Kohn, “Introduction” & Ch. 1 from <i>How Forests Think</i> ; Heise, “ Lost Dogs, Last Birds, and Listed Species ”; Ronda “ Mourning and Melancholia in the Anthropocene ”;	
W. May 27 Ghosh, <i>The Hungry Tide</i> , FINISH		Share Drafts with Groups on Discussion Board
Week 10 M. June 1 Presentations		Final Project “Poster” Shared on Canvas
W. June 3 Presentations		Final Project “Poster” Shared on Canvas
		Final Projects Due (on Canvas) June 10th