

**English 26040****Winter 2016**

Professor Benjamin Morgan

[bjmorgan@uchicago.edu](mailto:bjmorgan@uchicago.edu)Office Hours: M/W 12-1pm, by appointment via <http://bjm.ycb.me>**Climate Change Fiction**

Humans—or more precisely, a rich subset of them—are changing the earth system at a scale unprecedented in the 10,000-year period of hospitable climate conditions in which modern human civilization developed. The most significant anthropogenic impacts extend beyond climate change to include ocean acidification, biodiversity loss, and the modification of the nitrogen cycle. It is widely agreed that, unchecked, these changes will eventually render the earth unable to support the standards of life that have become second nature in the developed world. As awareness about this situation has grown, it has become a matter of concern well beyond the scientific and policy communities, informing a wide array of cultural production. A number of questions have emerged as central and recurrent in the cultural uptake of climate change. What narrative resources allow us to imagine humanity from a perspective beyond the end of human existence? Can art and literature help us think, act, and care at scales of time that far exceed that of the human life? What tropes and figures best capture the relationship between human and natural agency at a moment when human action has become irreversibly bound up with natural processes? How can cultural artifacts represent or convey a phenomenon like climate change that is so vastly distributed and slow as to be effectively invisible—even as it is also omnipresent? How do we come to terms with forms of catastrophe and violence that are “slow” and globally dispersed?

If the scale of anthropogenic impacts is new, questions about the appropriate human relationship to nonhuman nature certainly are not (the novelist Zadie Smith on climate change: “*Oh, what have we done!* It’s a biblical question”). This seminar examines and historicizes cultural responses to climate change by focusing on two historical moments. In the first half of the course we will study nineteenth-century Britain, when widespread fossil-fuel mining inaugurated modern industrialization, and when scientific discoveries of geological and evolutionary time scales transformed historical consciousness. We will discuss the literature and scientific thought of the fin-de-siècle in particular, in order to better understand emerging conventions of narrative and genre that afforded considerations of the human as a species inhabiting vast scales of time, and to think about how these conventions developed in relation to specific processes of industrialization. In the second half of this course, we turn to the twenty-first century, when the above-described concerns about climate change, the relationship between human and natural agency, and scales of deep pasts and futures increasingly shape the contemporary literary landscape, though often obliquely. We will examine how science fiction, mainstream literary fiction, and “new weird” fiction draw energy from growing anxieties about how humans are reshaping the earth system.

**Required books – you must purchase the edition indicated**

Course reader in Walker Museum copy room. Please keep this in a binder.

H.G. Wells, *The Time Machine* (Penguin classics)

M.P. Shiel, *The Purple Cloud* (Penguin classics)

Naomi Oreskes and Erik Conway, *The Collapse of Western Civilization: A View from the Future*

Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake* (Picador)

Ben Lerner, *10:04*

Jeff VanderMeer, *Annihilation* (note that this is the first book in the *Southern Reach Trilogy*, which may be purchased in single-volume form if you want the other books as well)

### Online resources you must set up

**Box:** Handouts, assignments, and any additional readings will be posted on Box at

<https://uchicago.box.com/ccf16>

**Email list:** Subscribe your uchicago email address to the course list-serv by going to this link: <https://lists.uchicago.edu/web/subscribe/ccf16>. Note that you must send to the list from a UC email address.

There is no chalk site for this course.

### Teaching Philosophy

This is a reading-intensive discussion seminar. It prioritizes sustained daily engagements with the reading over short bursts of intensive work. A substantial portion of your final grade will therefore be determined by your performance on day-to-day preparation, including your reading and research notes, quizzes, and weekly email posts. A primary goal of this model is to foster scholarly habits of research and analytical close reading. At our meetings, students will be largely responsible for framing, generating, and exploring questions. My role in the classroom is not primarily to convey information, but to structure, moderate, and deepen a discussion driven by students. I therefore require substantial, focused, and demonstrated preparation on the part of students prior to each class meeting.

### Requirements

1. Daily discussion preparation notes. At each session, I will collect the notes you have taken to prepare for that day's meeting.
  - For the first half of the course I will ask you to follow a template that I will give you (this will involve identifying formal features of a text, defining key terms, close reading, and using some designated research resources). For the second half of the course I will continue to collect notes, but you won't be required to use the template.
  - Each set of notes should be about four pages long (~2 single spaced if typed).
  - You must turn in notes for at least fourteen sessions (i.e. you may skip four).
  - They may be handwritten or typed but I want a hard copy in class.
  - Graded check/plus/minus.
2. Quizzes. About once a week, I will give a brief quiz. These will mainly require recalling major plot points and defining key terms. Quizzes are **cumulative**, meaning they may address material from previous weeks.

3. Weekly discussion prompt to email list. Each week you'll submit a discussion prompt to the class email list, [ccf15@lists.uchicago.edu](mailto:ccf15@lists.uchicago.edu). These should propose and begin to explore a question or issue that you want us to think through as a group.
  - Please quote and comment upon the assigned reading in the process of formulating a question.
  - You may respond to a classmate's post as your post.
  - They should be in the range of 200-400 words.
  - You must submit eight of these (meaning you may skip one).
  - These must be submitted by **Sunday at 5pm**—but you may send any time during the week.
  - These will be graded based on completion but you will not receive credit for questions that are excessively short, do not cite the text, or appear to be hastily composed. (I will let you know if this is the case.)
  
4. One group-led discussion. Four sessions of this course will be taught by small groups of students. For each of these days, you'll collaborate with two classmates to teach a 40-minute portion of the class in whatever way you like, though it should be mostly discussion-based. These are not presentations.
  - You may assign us up to fifteen pages of extra reading for these sessions, which must be distributed via the email list at least a week in advance.
  - I will ask you to turn in notes on your research and your discussion/teaching plan, as well as a brief reflection on the assignment.
  - The sign-up sheet for these discussions is at <https://goo.gl/5e1Oqz>. If you haven't signed up by the end of the second week, I will assign you to a group.
  - Letter graded.
  
5. Final paper. A 6-8 page argumentative paper. I will give suggested topics but you may also write on a topic of your choosing. The paper should address at least one fictional and one non-fictional text. I will send a receipt within two hours of the deadline to confirm I have opened the document successfully. Letter graded.

### **Grade breakdown**

Quizzes: 15%

Discussion prompts: 15%

Discussion preparation notes: 20%

Group-led discussion: 20%

Final paper: 30%

### **Policies**

*Attendance.* You must come to every class. If you miss more than one class, your final grade will drop one level (e.g. B to B-) for each class missed. If you miss more than three classes, you may be given an incomplete. If you miss a class, consult <https://uchicago.app.box.com/ccf16> for that day's discussion notes and speak to another student. In general, I am not able to go over missed material individually.

*Office Hours.* My office hours are **by appointment**, M/W 12-1pm. I will make additional office hours available prior to paper due dates and I can meet at other times if you have a regular conflict. **You must make an appointment at <http://bjm.ycb.me>.**

*Technology.* I do not allow laptops or other devices in class. Phones must be turned completely off before class begins.

*Online Submission Policy.* Papers for this course are submitted by email. Within 2 hours of the deadline, I will send you a receipt confirming that I have received and opened your paper/response. Until you have a receipt, the paper is not turned in. If you have not received a receipt within 2 hours of the deadline, contact me immediately. I will also respond to discussion questions with a grade, but this may take longer.

*Late Papers.* If your paper is late, it will lose a half grade (e.g. B -> B-). The grade will continue to drop every 24 hours. I give extensions only in case of major life events/emergencies.

*Formatting.* Papers must be double spaced, in Times New Roman typeface, with 1-inch margins, numbered, and include a header and title in MLA format. Papers must also include a works cited page in MLA format.

### **Academic Dishonesty and Plagiarism**

It is your responsibility to ensure that all of your written work conforms to accepted standards of academic honesty. Plagiarism is not only copying others' work; any improperly documented use of ideas can constitute plagiarism. Please consult the discussion of plagiarism and academic honesty in *Doing Honest Work in College: How to Prepare Citations, Avoid Plagiarism, and Achieve Real Academic Success*. If you were not given this book in your core humanities class, you may consult it on reserve at Regenstein library. It is crucial that you are familiar with these standards, and it is your responsibility to familiarize yourself with them. If these standards are in any way unclear to you or if you are uncertain about best practices with regards to note-taking please consult with me.

Any undocumented use of another person's ideas constitutes plagiarism. This includes copying another text word for word. It also includes summarizing and paraphrasing an original source with similar language and/or syntax, or presenting as your own an argument that you heard in another class or from another person. Please note as well that copying non-copyrighted material (such as Wikipedia or a non-copyrighted webpage) also constitutes plagiarism. Unintentional copying also constitutes plagiarism.

Academic dishonesty includes buying papers online, outsourcing your academic work to someone else (paid or unpaid), and submitting the same paper to more than one course. This is not an exhaustive list of the practices that constitute academic dishonesty and plagiarism. If you are uncertain about how or whether to cite your sources, please contact me. It is crucial that you do so before handing in work.

**Academic dishonesty is a very serious offense, even if it is unintentional. Any form of plagiarism may result in immediate failure of this course and disciplinary action.**

## Schedule

### **Part one: Climate change in literary history**

#### 1: Introduction

1/4:

Introduction

1/6:

H.G. Wells, *The Time Machine* (1-50)

Amitav Ghosh, “The Great Derangement: Fiction I” (recorded lecture, on Box)

Benjamin Kunkel, “Inventing Climate-Change Literature,” *The New Yorker*, 10/24/14 (Box)

Paul Crutzen, “Geology of Mankind,” *Nature* 415 (2002) (Box)

#### 2: Deep time and historical consciousness

1/11:

H.G. Wells, *The Time Machine* (to end)

Charles Darwin, “On the Lapse of Time” (208-212); “On Extinction” (234-237)

H.G. Wells, “On Extinction”

William Thompson (Lord Kelvin), “On the Age of the Sun’s Heat,” *Macmillan’s Magazine* 5 (1862)

1/13:

Naomi Oreskes and Erik Conway, *The Collapse of Western Civilization: A View from the Future*  
*Optional*: Mike Hulme, “The Collapse of Oreskes and Conway” (H-HistGeog, November 2014).

#### 3: Capitalism and Climate

1/18:

No class (MLK Day)

1/20:

Raymond Williams, “Ideas of Nature”

John Ruskin, “The Storm Cloud of the Nineteenth Century” (9-41)

J.M.W. Turner, “Rain, Steam, and Speed – The Great Western Railway” (1844) (Image on Box)

#### Week 4: Victorian Anthropocene?

1/25:

Gabriel Tarde, *Underground Man* (entire novel)

1/27

Gabriel Tarde, *Underground Man*

Will Steffen et al., “The Anthropocene: Conceptual and Historical Perspectives,” *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society A: Mathematical, Physical and Engineering Sciences* 369, no. 1938 (March 13, 2011): 842–67.

Simon L. Lewis and Mark A. Maslin, “Defining the Anthropocene,” *Nature* 519, no. 7542 (2015): 171–80, doi:10.1038/nature14258.

Week 5: Uncanny nature

2/1:

M.P. Shiel, *The Purple Cloud* (1-100)

2/3:

M.P. Shiel, *The Purple Cloud* (100-130)

Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny"

Week 6: Extinction

2/8:

M.P. Shiel, *The Purple Cloud* (130-230)Eugene Thacker, "Notes on Extinction and Existence," *Configurations* 20, no. 1 (2012): 137-48.

2/10:

M.P. Shiel, *The Purple Cloud* (GLD) (230-261)**Part two: What is climate change fiction?**Week 7: Engineered Nature

2/15:

Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake* (1-150)

2/17:

Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake* (150-225)Rockström, et al., "Planetary Boundaries: Exploring the Safe Operating Space for Humanity," *Ecology and Society* 14 (2009): 32-65Andreas Malm and Alf Hornborg, "The Geology of Mankind: A Critique of the Anthropocene Narrative," *The Anthropocene Review* 1 (2014): 62-9Week 8: Risk

2/22:

Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake* (GLD) (225-389)

2/24:

Ben Lerner, *10:04* (1-75)Ulrich Beck, "Living in the World Risk Society," *Economy and Society* 35, no. 3 (2006): 329-45.Week 9: Contingency

2/29:

Ben Lerner, *10:04* (75-200)Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History: Four Theses," *Critical Inquiry* 35 (2009): 197-222

3/2:

Ben Lerner, *10:04* (GLD) (200 -256)

Week 10: Weird Wild

3/7:

Jeff VanderMeer, *Annihilation* (1-150)

Timothy Morton, "A Quake in Being: An Introduction to Hyperobjects," *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).

3/9:

Jeff VanderMeer, *Annihilation* (150-208) (GLD)

**3/12 (Saturday), 5pm: Final paper due via email.**