

# Introduction to the Environmental Humanities: Ecology, Nature, and Justice in the Anthropocene

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## abstract

As an emerging interdisciplinary field of research, the Environmental Humanities ties together insights from a number of disciplines such as environmental studies, human geography, philosophy, geology, critical animal studies, as well as feminist theory. In this introductory course, we will get introduced to key concepts and ideas of the Environmental Humanities and develop a broad understanding of the relationship of nature, culture, science, technology, politics, and economy against the backdrop of today's multiple planetary crises.



## course description

A specter is haunting the world: the specter of the Anthropocene. The Anthropocene marks the “Age of Man”—that is, a geological era in the history of the planet in which humans as a collective are said to have become a geo-physical force on a planetary scale, crossing multiple planetary boundaries and, in doing so, affecting the functioning of the Earth system as a whole. It was only recently that scientists, hence, proclaimed that we have reached “the end of nature”.

Rather than departing from nature and culture as pre-existing realms, the emerging field of the Environmental Humanities shifts the view to the myriads of natural-cultural organic, technological, and discursive entanglements that constitute our world, tying together insights from environmental studies, philosophy, cultural anthropology, feminist and critical theory, political ecology, and the natural sciences. As we work our way through the literature, in this interdisciplinary course, we will get introduced to key concepts and ideas of the Environmental Humanities and thus develop a broad understanding of the relationship of nature, culture, science, technology, politics, and economy. We will unwrap the many meanings of “nature”, “ecology”, and of “the environment”.

We will understand how and why race and class in their entanglement with one another are playing a determining role in questions of social and environmental inequality, as indigenous people, people of color, and poor people are the ones who suffer most from environmental pollution and toxic waste. In this wake, we will explore the political and theoretical foundations of the environmental justice movement and discuss why environmentalism cannot be a politics of and for the privileged.

Engaging with recent theories and research in environmental studies and environmental philosophy, we will examine how technologies such as, for instance, smartphones and notebooks are not only made of Earth's materials but also end up constituting a gigantic layer of hazardous materials which will remain as a human legacy inscribed into rock and the soil for millennia to come. Moreover, we will engage with the bio-politics of waste, and ask what it means to understand waste as a social process, or even as a natural-cultural relation, rather than an a-political object.

## methods and goals

This course will be run as a reading and discussion intensive seminar. Preparation for class discussion by careful reading of the week's literature is required. Through a close reading of the literature, discussions, and group work, participants who take this course will:

- get introduced into key theories, concepts, and approaches in the Environmental Humanities
- be able to interpret and communicate complex ideas on the environment effectively
- develop a broad understanding of the multi-layered and historical contingent relationship of nature, culture, politics, economy, and science
- discuss different takes on environmental, social, and multispecies justice

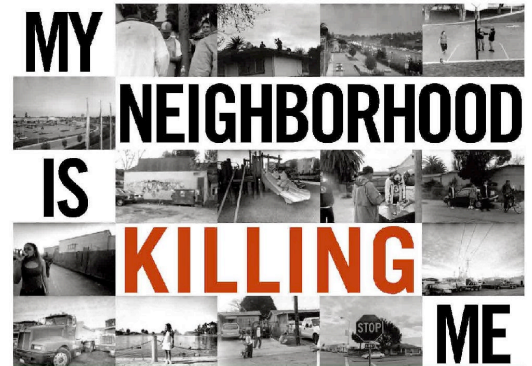
## requirements

The classroom should function as a forum for intellectual exchange wherein participants have read the material, critically reflected upon the content, and are willing to engage in discussion with fellow scholars. Since we will learn together as a group, each participant is expected to a) attend the classes and participate in ongoing discussions, b) present the key arguments of a paper (~30 min.) and lead the class discussion on that paper, c) prepare a short (3 pages) critical commentary as well as 2-3 discussion questions on the presented paper, and d) write a final term paper (15 pages) in which the readings are related to each other or used for a research project. Alternatively, participants can write three short essays (each 5 pages) on the papers to be read for the course.

## grading

- Attendance and participation (including short commentaries, discussion leading, and group work): 20%
- Co-chairing and presentation of a paper: 25%
- Short critical commentary (3 pages): 15%
- Final term paper (15 pages) OR three short essays (each 5 pages): 40%

*All requirements must be met in order to pass the course.*



Environmental racism “is the deliberate targeting of people-of-color communities for hazardous waste facilities, such as landfills and incinerators.”  
(Lynn Norment 1993)



Dead albatross filled with lethal quantities of plastic waste.  
(Photo: Chris Jordan)



The Great Pacific Garbage Patch is a gyre roughly the size of the North American continent consisting of floating trash between 135°W and 42°N in the Pacific Ocean.

# class schedule and readings

## Week 1

### Introduction: Welcome to the Anthropocene

#### Readings:

Crutzen, Paul J. 2002. "Geology of Mankind." *Nature*, 415 (January 3, 2002): 23.

Chakrabarty, Dipesh. 2009. "The Climate of History: Four Theses." *Critical Inquiry*, 35 (Winter 2009): 197–222.

Economist, The. 2011. "The Anthropocene: A Man-Made World." *The Economist*, May 26, <<http://www.economist.com/node/18741749>>.

## Week 2

### The Social History of Nature

#### Readings:

Carolyn, Merchant. 2016. *Autonomous Nature: Problems of Prediction and Control from Ancient Times to the Scientific Revolution*. New York and London: Routledge. Chapters "Greco-Roman Concepts of Nature" and "Nature Personified: Renaissance Ideas of Nature", 21–41 & 63–78.

## Week 2

### The Emergence of Ecology and the Environment

#### Readings:

Stauffer, Robert C. 1957. "Haeckel, Darwin, and Ecology." *The Quarterly Review of Biology*. 32 (2): 138–144.

Wulf, Andrea. 2016. *The Invention of Nature: The Adventures of Alexander von Humboldt*. London: Hodder and Stoughton. Chapters "Beginnings" & "Imagination and Nature: Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Humboldt", 13–38.

## Week 3

### Environmentalism and Ecocriticism

#### Readings:

Rachel, Carson. 2002 (1962). *Silent Spring. Fortieth Anniversary Edition*. Boston and New York: Mariner Books. Selected Chapters.

Oppermann, Serpil. 2014. "From Ecological Postmodernism to Material Ecocriticism: Creative Materiality and Narrative Agency." In *Material Ecocriticism*. Eds. Serenell Iovino and Serpi Oppermann. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 21–36.

## Week 4

### The Biopolitics of Waste and the Deep Time of Ecology

#### Readings:

Alaimo, Stacy. 2014. "Oceanic Origins, Plastic Activism, and New Materialism at Sea." *Material Ecocriticism*. Eds. Serenell Iovino and Serpi Oppermann. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 186–203.

Parikka, Jussi. 2015. *The Anthroscence*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

## Week 6

### Environmental Racism and Justice

#### Readings:

- Cole, Luke W., and Sheila R. Foster. 2001. *From the Ground Up: Environmental Racism and the Rise of the Environmental Justice Movement*. New York and London: NYU Press, 19–33.
- Taylor, Dorceta E. 2014. *Toxic Communities: Environmental Racism, Industrial Pollution, and Residential Mobility*. New York and London: NYU Press. Chapter: “Toxic Exposure: Landmark Cases in the South and the Rise of Environmental Justice Activism”, ??-32.
- Zimring, Carl A. 2016. *Clean and White: A History of Environmental Racism in the United States*. New York and London: NYU Press. Chapters: “Out of Waste, Into Whiteness” and “We are Tired of Being at the Bottom”, 169–216.

## Week 7

### Decolonizing Nature: Postcolonial and Indigenous Environmentalism

#### Readings:

- Chakrabarty, Dipesh. 2012. “Postcolonial Studies and the Challenge of Climate Change.” *New Literary History*, 43 (1): 1–18.
- Rob, Nixon. 2005. “Environmentalism and Postcolonialism”. In *Postcolonial Studies and Beyond*. Eds. Ania Loomba, Suvir Kaul, Matti Bunzl, Antoinette Burton, and Jed Esty. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 233–251.
- Whyte, Kyle. 2017. “Our Ancestor’s Dystopia Now: Indigenous Conservation and the Anthropocene.” In *Routledge Companion to the Environmental Humanities*. Eds. Ursula K. Heise, Jon Christensen, and Michelle Niemann. New York: Routledge.

## Week 8

### Queer and Feminist Ecologies

#### Readings:

- Evans, Mei Mei. 2009. “‘Nature’ and Environmental Justice.” In *The Environmental Justice Reader: Politics, Poetics, and Pedagogy*. Eds. Joni Adamson, Mei Mei Evans, and Rachel Stein. Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 181–193.
- Sandilands, Catriona. 2017. “Some ‘F’ Words for the Environmental Humanities: Feralities, Feminisms, Futurities.” In *Routledge Companion to the Environmental Humanities*. Ed. Ursula K. Heise. New York: Routledge.
- di Chiro, Giovanna. 2010. “Polluted Politics? Confronting Toxic Discourse, Sex Panic, and Eco-Normativity.” In *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire*. Eds. Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 199–230.

## Week 9

### Extinction

#### Readings:

- Kolbert, Elizabeth. 2014. *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History*. New York: Holt and Co. Chapter: “The Sixth Extinction”, 1–22.
- Dawson, Ashley. 2016. *Extinction: A Radical History*. New York and London : O/R Books. Chapter: “Capitalism and Extinction”, 38-62.

## Week 10

### Multispecies Relations in a More-Than-Human World

#### Readings:

- van Dooren, Thom, Eben Kirksey, and Ursula Münster. 2016. "Multispecies Studies: Cultivating Arts of Attentiveness." *Environmental Humanities*, 8 (1): 1–23.
- Heise, Ursula K. 2017. "Planet, Species, Justice—and the Stories We Tell about Them." In *The Routledge Companion to the Environmental Humanities*. Eds. Ursula Heise, Jon Christensen, and Michelle Niemann. London and New York: Routledge.

## Week 11

### Environmental Literature and Fiction

#### Readings:

- Glotfelty, Cheryll. 1996. "Literary Studies in an Age of Environmental Crisis." In *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. Eds. Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm. Athens, GA and London: The University of Georgia Press, xv–xxv.
- Le Guin, Ursula K. 1996. "The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction." In *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. eds. Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm. Athens, GA and London: The University of Georgia Press, 149–154.
- Heise, Ursula K. 2015. "Environmental Literature and the Ambiguities of Science." *Anglia: Journal of English Philology*, 133 (1): 22–36.

## Week 12

### Art in the Anthropocene

#### Readings:

- Davis, Heather, and Etienne Turpin. 2015. "Art & Death: Lives Between the Fifth Assessment & the Sixth Extinction." In *Art in the Anthropocene: Encounters Among Aesthetics, Politics, Environments and Epistemologies*. Eds. Heather Davis and Etienne Turpin. London: Open Humanities Press, 3–30.
- Demos, T. J. 2016. "¡Ya basta! Ecologies of Art and Revolution in Mexico." In *Decolonizing Nature: Contemporary Art and the Politics of Ecology*. Berlin: Sternberg Press, 133–166.
- Heartney, Eleanor. 2014. "Art for the Anthropocene Era." *Art in America*, February 6.  
<<http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-features/magazine/art-for-the-anthropocene-era/>>

## Week 13

### The Environmental Humanities as Posthumanities

#### Readings:

- Foucault, Michel. 2005/1966. *The Order of Things. An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. London and New York: Routledge. Chapter: "The Human Sciences", 375–422.
- Neimanis, Astrida, Cecilia Åsberg, and Johan Hedrén. 2015. "Four Problems, Four Directions for Environmental Humanities: Toward Critical Posthumanities for the Anthropocene." *Ethics and the Environment*, 20 (1): 67–97.
- Heise, Ursula K. 2016. "The Environmental Humanities and the Futures of the Human", *New German Critique*, 43 (2): 21–31.

## Week 14

### Course Wrap-Up and Reflection

Final remarks and discussion.