

Future Environments: Human Life After the End



Clock at Fort Tilden Beach, NYC. Fort Tilden Beach is expected to be underwater by the end of the century ([Source](#). See more expectations of underwater USA, circa 2100 [here](#)).

Prof. Aaron Pinnix
apinnix@fordham.edu

ENGL 3635-R01
Spring 2022

Course Overview

This course explores what our imagination of the future looks like, or, more precisely, the social and environmental changes that destruction, extinction, and the annihilation of the world we know now will entail. Beginning with tomorrow and moving into the far future, we will consider increasingly apocalyptic, and ultimately post-human, visions of the future. As we will see, while some authors imagine the future as dystopic, grim, and ugly, others imagine the future as beautiful and breathtaking in new, if perhaps terrifying, ways.

Central to our considerations are the ways that humans and the environment are entangled, or in other words how the environment affects humans and how humans affect the environment. Coined in 2000 by biologist Eugene Storer and chemist Paul Crutzen, the term “Anthropocene” refers to the contemporary period in Earth’s history during which human activity has begun to significantly alter climate, ecosystems, biodiversity, and the livability of the planet. Derived from the Greek words *anthropo*, for “man,” and *cene* for “new,” the Anthropocene is really just one of a variety of suggested terms, including Capitalocene, or the age of capital (For more, see [here](#)). Whatever term we might choose, humans are significantly affecting the environment. For instance, by 2050 ocean plastic, which disrupts the processes of life in a myriad of ways, is expected to outweigh fish in the sea ([World Economic Forum](#), 7). This is just one example of a number of large-scale changes that are occurring, which leads me to a major theme I discovered while thinking about this course—**the relationship between the individual or the singular and the larger collection, collective, or whole**. One season of drought may not be indicative of

climate change, but yearly recurrences of drought indicate large systemic changes. For instance, fueled by a climate-change induced long term drought, about 19% of California's giant sequoia trees were recently killed over a one year period due to particularly hot forest fires ([USA Today](#)). Trees that have lived for literally thousands of years are unlikely to survive into the future. Similarly, due to increasing ocean temperatures and acidification fueled by atmospheric pollution, coral is expected to be largely extinct by the end of the century ([UN](#)). The loss of both sequoias and corals entail not only the extinction of these creatures, but also the loss of the broader ecosystems that depend on sequoias and corals. For instance, approximately 25% of marine life is dependent on corals ([EPA](#)). One change or loss can in turn lead to others.

Overall, large scale environmental changes are already occurring and more are on the way. The environment is changing—how can we reckon with this? What sort of literary imaginaries can we draw on to help imagine or grapple with such changes? What might the world, and human life, look like in the future? Central to these questions is an approach to the world and environments that emphasizes and attends to **change**. Returning to my point above about the relationship between the individual (or the singular) and the larger collective (or whole), I invite you to consider change in deep ways, both in relation to the individual and the larger collective.

A note on mental wellness: Two recurring themes of this course are loss and grief. I have selected works that do important thinking about such issues. For instance, *All We Can Save* grapples with loss in important, meaningful ways. Nevertheless, I invite you to be attentive to your own feelings and to speak with me if you are feeling overwhelmed.

Required Texts

You should purchase the following books in **paperback (not digital)**. Our class discussions, Essays, and Reading Responses will require referring to particular page numbers, and it is important that we all (literally) be on the same page. **Again, purchase an actual book!- NOT a pdf, kindle or other digital copies.** Used or new are fine, assuming you purchase the correct ISBN.

Parable of the Sower

Octavia Butler

Grand Central Publishing; Reprint edition (April 30, 2019)

ISBN-13: 978-1538732182

All We Can Save: Truth, Courage, and Solutions for the Climate Crisis

Eds. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson and Katharine K. Wilkinson

One World (July 20, 2021)

ISBN-13: 978-0593237083

The Road

Cormac McCarthy

Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group (March 28, 2006)

ISBN-13: 978-0307387899

Moon of the Crusted Snow: A Novel
Waubgeshig Rice
ECW Press; 1st edition (October 2, 2018)
ISBN-13: 978-1770414006

Love after the End: An Anthology of Two-Spirit and Indigiqueer Speculative Fiction
Ed. Joshua Whitehead
Arsenal Pulp Press (October 20, 2020)
ISBN-13: 978-1551528113

We will also watch films:

I will supply you with links for any films that we watch. Most films will be available to stream via the Fordham library database Swank or Kanopy, but a few films you will need to digitally rent or find in your own manner.

Tiny Ecology Presentation

You will be responsible for **one presentation** at the end of the semester. Toward the end of the semester I will circulate a sign-up sheet for presentations. You are expected to present on the day you sign up for.

During the first week of class you will choose a place near where you live for intense and sustained ecological attentiveness. During the course of the seminar, from mid-January to late April, you will make frequent visits to note changes within this space.

There are no special requirements for the ecosystem and space you choose: A built environment, a natural space, a human-curated space like a park or garden, an abandoned corner or lot, a creek, or even just a tree. You will want to choose an area that you can easily revisit. The area can be as small as a concrete planter, a tree and its environs, or even a small park or a particular section of the Botanical Garden (like the native plants section). Attention should be paid to human influences and neglect (including pollution, detritus, etc.), nonhuman forces (such as weather, sunlight, decay), and the surfacings of particular histories, especially, but not limited to, the species of animals and plants you discover, as well as how all of these affect the space that you are studying.

Your process may entail learning more about your selected space and the various things that inhabit it, both living and not, such as the plants and creatures that inhabit it, as well as the location's larger history and the surrounding forces that affect it. For instance, you may want to want to identify what the plant growing among the tree's roots are, how old the detritus that you find is, how living and nonliving matter interacts in your selected space, etc.

Take ample notes, including noting the questions and insights that your observations elicit. I suggest making sketches, taking pictures, taking audio notes, writing poems, etc. **Be sure to keep track of the dates and times when you visit.** Indeed, I invite you to select a space that you will *want* to revisit and spend time in (the Botanical Garden may be a good location). Consider this as an opportunity to revisit, and revisit again, a space over the course of the semester. Get to know this tiny ecology and the changes that it goes through.

You will want to treat this project as if you are both a scientist and an artist. Keep track of your field notes in whatever format they may take. Perhaps dedicate a special journal to this project. Similarly, let this tiny ecology (and its changes) inspire you, perhaps in a variety of ways that you may not expect. This is an opportunity to purposefully revisit, rethink, and explore, thinking about how this tiny ecology (and perhaps you yourself) develops over the course of the semester.

At the beginning of the semester I want you to purposefully address the question: **“How do I think this space will develop into the future?”** By the end of the semester you will have some insight(s) into this question, as well as the processes of change that occurred there. By the end of the semester consider how your expectations were met, surpassed, challenged, etc. You are expected to create a presentation for the end of the semester that represents your observations, experiences, and new understandings of your selected tiny ecology. The format of your presentation is completely up to you. It should not be you simply talking to us. Indeed, I invite you to be *inventive* in your presentation. Examples of formats that a presentation might take could include drawings or paintings created over the course of the semester, a short video that you made of your visits, poems that you wrote, a selection of journal entries, a discussion of some important artifacts that you discovered and what you learned from them, etc. I really do invite you to select and get to know a space over the course of the semester, and then to translate both your experiences and the tiny ecology’s developments into a medium that you find interesting or exciting.

Given the size of our class, presentations will need to be brief: **about 5 minutes**

COURSE SCHEDULE

Week 1

Tue. Jan 18

-Syllabus

-Excerpt, Dean Cornett, “American Chestnut Blight - Greatest forest loss in history,”

<https://youtu.be/-xgbedXnbfw> [for more, see <https://www.esf.edu/chestnut/background.htm>]

-Excerpt, CTyankee, “The Passenger Pigeon's Extinction” https://youtu.be/sHSUQ_JsPnY

-“Shifting baseline syndrome”

Fri. Jan 21

-David Wallace-Wells “The Uninhabitable Earth” (supplied as .pdf)

-Harriet Burbeck, “A Note to My Remaining Students at the Close of the 2021 Fall Semester”

<https://www.mcsweeneys.net/articles/a-note-to-my-remaining-students-at-the-close-of-the-2021-fall-semester>

-Sarah Kaplan, “Today’s kids will live through three times as many climate disasters as their grandparents, study says.” *Washington Post*, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/climate-environment/2021/09/26/change-disasters-kids-science-study/>.

-Oliver Milman, Andrew Witherspoon, Rita Liu, and Alvin Chang, “The climate disaster is here” <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/ng-interactive/2021/oct/14/climate-change-happening-now-stats-graphs-maps-cop26>

- Santhosh Mathew, “Could humans really destroy all life on Earth?”
<https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20210520-could-humans-really-destroy-all-life-on-earth>
- Christopher Lyon et. al, “Our climate projections for 2500 show an Earth that is alien to humans” <https://theconversation.com/our-climate-projections-for-2500-show-an-earth-that-is-alien-to-humans-167744>
- The photography of Edward Burtynsky,
<https://www.edwardburtynsky.com/projects/photographs>
- Rasha Aridi, "Human-Made Materials Now Weigh More Than All Life on Earth Combined"
<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/human-made-materials-now-weigh-more-all-life-earth-combined-180976522/>
- Jonathan Watts, "Concrete: the most destructive material on Earth"
<https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2019/feb/25/concrete-the-most-destructive-material-on-earth>
- Jason Breslow, “20 Companies Are Behind Half Of The World's Single-Use Plastic Waste, Study Finds” <https://www.npr.org/2021/05/18/997937090/half-of-the-worlds-single-use-plastic-waste-is-from-just-20-companies-says-a-stu>
- Jess Colarossi, “The World’s Richest People Emit the Most Carbon”
<https://ourworld.unu.edu/en/the-worlds-richest-people-also-emit-the-most-carbon>
- The Guardian*, “1% of people cause half of global aviation emissions – study”
<https://www.theguardian.com/business/2020/nov/17/people-cause-global-aviation-emissions-study-covid-19>
- Jeanne Timmons, “Paleontologists Predict What Future Animals Might Look Like”
<https://gizmodo.com/paleontologists-predict-what-future-animals-might-look-1843678894>
- Mico Tatalovic, “Strange evolution: The weird future of life on Earth”
<https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20190715-strange-evolution-the-weird-future-of-life-on-earth>

Week 2

Tue. Jan 25

- Cal Flynn, “The Deluge and the Desert” (supplied as a .pdf)
- Margaret Atwood, “Time Capsule Found on the Dead Planet”
<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2009/sep/26/margaret-atwood-mini-science-fiction>
- Percy Bysshe Shelley, “Ozymandias”
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46565/ozymandias>
- Paolo Bacigalupi, “The Tamarisk Hunter” <https://www.hcn.org/issues/325/tamarisk-hunter-Bacigalupi>
- Benh Zeitlin, *Glory At Sea!* <https://vimeo.com/10066407>

Fri. Jan 28

- Phyllis Windle, “The Ecology of Grief” (supplied as a .pdf, read before watching film)
- Alfonso Cuarón, *Children of Men*
<https://digitalcampus.swankmp.net/fordham336495/watch/EE9BC0E43A7B7209>
- Matthew Olzmann “Letter to Someone Living Fifty Years from Now”
<https://poets.org/poem/letter-someone-living-fifty-years-now>
- Jane Hirshfield “Let Them Not Say” <https://poets.org/poem/let-them-not-say>

Week 3

Tue. Feb 1

Octavia Butler, *Parable of the Sower* pgs. **1-60**

All We Can Save, “Editors’ Notes,” “Begin,” Part 1 “Root” pgs. **xii-15**

All We Can Save References: <https://www.allwecansave.earth/references>

Fri. Feb 4

Octavia Butler, *Parable of the Sower* pgs. **61-115**

All We Can Save, Part 1 “Root” pgs. **16-48**

Week 4

Tue. Feb 8

Octavia Butler, *Parable of the Sower* pgs. **116-178**

All We Can Save, Part 2 “Advocate” pgs. **50-74**

Fri. Feb 11

Octavia Butler, *Parable of the Sower* pgs. **179-244**

All We Can Save, Part 2 “Advocate” pgs. **75-102**

Week 5

Tue. Feb 15

Octavia Butler, *Parable of the Sower* pgs. **245-329**

All We Can Save, Part 3 “Reframe” pgs. **103-120**

Fri. Feb 18

All We Can Save, Part 3 “Reframe” pgs. **121-144** [feel free to draw on this section in your essays]

Tiny Ecology Update 1 [By now you should have settled on a location, have visited it a couple of times, and have started to notice changes/developments]

Week 6

Tue. Feb 22 No class meeting. Classes follow Monday schedule.

Fri. Feb 25

Robin Wall Kimmerer “The Sacred and the Superfund” (supplied as a .pdf)

Robin Wall Kimmerer “The Honorable Harvest” (supplied as a .pdf)

Louise Erdrich, “I Was Sleeping Where the Black Oaks Move”

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43081/i-was-sleeping-where-the-black-oaks-move>

Joy Harjo, “Speaking Tree” <https://poets.org/poem/speaking-tree>

Waubgeshig Rice, *Moon of the Crusted Snow* pgs. **1-67**

Week 7

Tue. Mar 1

Waubgeshig Rice, *Moon of the Crusted Snow* pgs. **68-126**

All We Can Save, Part 4 “Reshape” pgs. **145-169**

Fri. Mar 4

Waubgeshig Rice, *Moon of the Crusted Snow* pgs. **127-174**

All We Can Save, Part 4 “Reshape” pgs. **170-183**

Week 8

Tue. Mar 8

Waubgeshig Rice, *Moon of the Crusted Snow* pgs. **175-213**

Bong Joon-ho, *Snowpiercer*,

<https://digitalcampus.swankmp.net/fordham336495/watch/7E67BDC407D58358>

Fri. Mar 11

Tiny Ecology Update 2

Week 9

Tue. Mar 15 Spring Recess. No Class.

Fri. Mar 18 Spring Recess. No Class.

Week 10

Tue. Mar 22

Cormac McCarthy, *The Road* pgs. **1-60**

All We Can Save, Part 5 “Persist” pgs. **185-204**

Fri. Mar 25

Cormac McCarthy, *The Road* pgs. **60-117**

All We Can Save, Part 5 “Persist” pgs. **205-227**

Week 11

Tue. Mar 29

Cormac McCarthy, *The Road* pgs. **117-190**

All We Can Save, Part 6 “Feel” pgs. **229-255**

Fri. Apr 1

Cormac McCarthy, *The Road* pgs. **190-240**

All We Can Save, Part 6 “Feel” pgs. **256-283**

Week 12

Tue. Apr 5

Cormac McCarthy, *The Road* pgs. **240-287**

George Miller, *Mad Max: Fury Road*

<https://smile.amazon.com/Mad-Max-Fury-Tom-Hardy/dp/B00XOXDXV8>

Fri. Apr 8

Tiny Ecology Update 3

Week 13

Tue. Apr 12

Love After the End, “Introduction,” “Abacus,” “History of the New World,” “The Ark of the Turtle’s Back” pgs. **9-76**

All We Can Save, Part 7 “Nourish” pgs. **285-300**

Fri. Apr 15 No Class. Easter Recess

Week 14

Tue. Apr 19

Love After the End, “How to Survive the Apocalypse for Native Girls,” “Andwànikàdjigan,” “Story for a Bottle” pgs. **77-133**

All We Can Save, Part 7 “Nourish” pgs. **301-320**

Fri. Apr 22

Love After the End, “Seed Children,” “Nameless,” Eloise” pgs. **135-188**

All We Can Save, Part 8 “Rise” pgs. **321-348**

Week 15

Tue. Apr 26

Hayao Miyazaki, *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*

<https://play.hbomax.com/page/urn:hbo:page:GXrHVaqyRPXUYOAEAAABO:type:feature>

All We Can Save, Part 8 “Rise” pgs. **349-368** and “Onward” pgs. **369-382**

Fri. Apr 29

Tiny Ecology Presentations, part 1

Week 16

Tue. May 3

Tiny Ecology Presentations, part 2