

GRADUATE SCHOOL
THEMATIC WORKSHOP SERIES 2022

THE ANTHROPOCENE AND
ECOCRITICISM

Tuesday
25 October 2022
Online (MS TEAMS)



PROGRAMME OF EVENTS

Session 1: 9.30 - 10.50

Anthropocene and Deep Time (40 mins)

Presenters: Louise Green and Eckard Smuts

Since it was first proposed as the new name for the current geological age in 2000, the term 'anthropocene' has been rapidly adopted into wider public discourse to describe the unprecedented impact that human activities are having on the earth. This session will explore the 'anthropocene' as a complex and controversial concept for confronting the current environmental crisis. We will discuss the new scales of temporality required for thinking the Anthropocene, and what it might mean when, as Michel Serres puts it, 'global history enters nature; global nature enters history' inaugurating something 'utterly new in our philosophy.'

Readings:

- Will Steffen, Wendy Broadgate, Lisa Deutch, Will Gaffney, and Cornelia Ludwig. "The Trajectory of the Anthropocene: The Great Acceleration." (2015)
- Robert MacFarlane, "The Hiding Place" (2019)
- Chakrabarty, "Anthropocene 1" (2017)
- Rob Nixon, "Anthropocene 2" (2017)

Mapping the Environmental humanities (40 mins)

Presenter: Tilla Slabbert

Environmental humanities is a huge and growing field. In this session Tilla Slabbert will map this new research terrain and show how different disciplines within the humanities have developed specific approaches to address the problem of environmental crisis.

Readings:

- Hannes Bergthaller et al., "Mapping Common Ground" (2014)

Session 2: 11.00 -12.30

Anthropocene or Capitalocene (40 mins)

Presenter: Steven Robins

Dipesh Chakrabarty has noted that his academic training and intellectual background did not prepare him for the kinds of social, economic, ecological, and political questions and challenges that have been thrown up by the planetary-scale crises of the Anthropocene/Capitalocene. This session focuses on contentious debates and perspectives on the Anthropocene/Capitalocene. The session will also engage with a recent ethnography by Julia Livingston entitled "Self-Devouring Growth." Livingston's study of Botswana raises the following kinds of questions: What are the implications of "self-devouring growth" for countries in the global South that remain committed to modernist approaches to "development" and growth?

Readings

- Chakrabarty, D. 2021. "Introduction". *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age*.
- Moore, J.W. 2016. "Introduction" and optional reading of Ch.3. Jason W. Moore ed. *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History and the Crisis of Capitalism*.

- Livingstone, J. 2019. *Self-devouring Growth: A Planetary Parable as Told from Southern Africa*. (Read as much as possible)
Also see <https://www.africasacountry.com/2019/09/self-devouring-growth>

Consumption and Fueling Culture (40 Mins)

Presenter: Louise Green

Graphs showing increases in human consumption and changes in earth systems show an exponential rise in the period since 1950 indicating unequivocally the correlation between human activity and changes to the earth's physical, chemical, and biological processes. As these 'Great Acceleration' graphs show, human impact on the planet has resulted largely from a global culture based on the consumption of manufactured goods and a lifestyle dependent on the burning of fossil fuels. This session will discuss critical work on the forms of consumption that emerges after World War Two and introduce 'petrocultures' as a critical field of study for responding to the crisis produced by energy intensive cultures.

Readings:

- John Bellamy Foster and Brett Clark, 'The Ecology of Consumption' (2010)
- Louise Green, 'Living in the Subjunctive' (2020)
- Michael Watts, 'Petro-violence' (2017)

Lunch

12.30-13.30

Session 3: 13.30-15.00

The Apes of the Anthropocene: baboons and us (30mins)

Presenter: Sandra Swart

One would imagine the Anthropocene to be quintessentially aware of human dependence on the non-human 'Other'. After all, it declares that *Homo sapiens* have been anything but 'wise apes', and that we have ignored our interconnectedness with the planetary biosphere to our own newly obvious peril. This session will employ the tools of history, alongside contributions from anthropology, literary studies, together with the environmental and life sciences, to understand the current crisis more fully, offering a multi-species analysis. Bringing history into dialogue with the sciences will enable us to question the meaning of both the 'animal' and the 'human', the 'natural' and the 'unnatural'.

Readings

- Sandra Swart, 'The Lion's Historian: Animals from the South' (Inaugural Lecture)

Animals and Microbes (30mins)

Presenter: Andries Visagie

We cannot see microbes with the naked eye, but they are everywhere and they are essential for the healthy functioning of our bodies. The fact that our bodies consist to a high degree of microbial matter is cause for an adjustment in the way that we view human subjectivity. The human subject is not a monolith but fundamentally multiple and symbiotic but how do we humanly process the scientific fact of our fundamental co-existence with microbes?

Readings:

- Prologue and first chapter of Ed Yong's book *I Contain Multitudes. The Microbes within Us and a Grander View of Life* (2016)
- Antjie Krog's poem about microbes "(1st attempt: the bus)" from *Synapse* (2014)

15.15-16.15

Deserts: Using theory to pile on and dig through layers of deserts (30mins)

Presenter: Doret Jordaan

The disciplines ecocriticism, geocriticism and comparative literature complement one another in the literary search for the desert ecosystem. In this presentation, the example of the depiction of the desert ecosystem in literature will be used to demonstrate how a researcher could go about combining these three theoretical frameworks. This session will also involve a practical application of the theory, looking at a few short excerpts of texts depicting deserts.

Readings:

- Brigitte le Juez, 'Positive Uncertainty and the Ethos of Comparative Literature'
- Hout, Syrine C, 'Grains of Utopia: The Desert as Literary Oasis in Paul Bowles's *The Sheltering Sky* and Wilfred Thesinger's *Arabian Sands*.'

Visual Arts (30 mins)

Presenter: Lize van Robbroeck

In this session Lize van Robbroeck will look at practice-based visual arts projects addressing settler colonial hauntologies of the Anthropocene. She will focus in particular on South African women artists who work with many of the key issues which have been raised in the other sessions discussed during this workshop – landscape, petrocultures, deep time etc.

16.15 – 16.30

Keywords for the Anthropocene

Participants choose which word they think will be most useful to them going forward.