Earth, Sky, Stardust: Humans & the Cosmos

I saw no Way—The Heavens were stitched—
I felt the Columns close—
The Earth reversed her Hemispheres—
I touched the Universe—
- Emily Dickinson

Are we alone in the universe? And—if we are alone—why are we alone? Contemplating our place in the cosmos forces us to rethink the human condition: what it means to be alive and to be with others—how we alienate ourselves and create distance, or how we long for connection. Can studying how we try to communicate with entities beyond Earth tell us something about how we communicate with each other? Perhaps the question is not only are we alone, but do we want to be alone. This course explores the philosophical, ecological, political, and aesthetic valences of the cosmos. Space is a place of discovery—a site of human striving, resilience, and ingenuity—but it is also a place of isolation, disconnection, and even violence. Space is an escape: it is a frequent place of fantasy projection, as well as a “Plan B” we dream of when we are anxious about climate change and the sustainability of living on earth. But where should our priorities be in the Anthropocene—at home, or in the stars? And are we losing our wonderment? (Why, for example, did the public feel collectively underwhelmed at the first image of a black hole?) Is space the place where the sciences and the humanities can meet? The Greeks thought their stories were writ large in the sky. We still slip our stories in between the stars.
You will leave this course with skills and experience:

- analyzing primary sources (“close reading” many types of media: poems, fiction, non-fiction, paintings, photographs, films, music, etc.)
- reading a wide variety of theory, philosophy, and secondary sources (from many different subjects) for argument and style
- writing and articulating your thoughts
  - devising a unique argument based on observations and close-readings
  - tying together multiple sources to bolster your own arguments
- listening to others, building off their thoughts, and presenting your own ideas in classroom discussion

**COURSE REQUIREMENTS**

**Required Texts:**
- All other required readings will be available on Canvas.

**Grading:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assignment</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Paper 1 (3-4 pages, close reading)</td>
<td>15%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Paper 2 (4-5 pages, lens essay)</td>
<td>20%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Paper 3 (7-8 pages, research essay)</td>
<td>30%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Creative Project (2-3 page script and presentation)</td>
<td>15%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Active participation (attendance, discussion, presentation, workshops)</td>
<td>20%</td>
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* These assignments each have multiple parts (e.g. drafts, proposal, working bibliography, etc.). 5% of each of these percentages will count towards the early stages drafting work you do and the final versions of the papers, themselves, will account for the remaining percentage.

**Due dates:** (“P1V1” = “paper #1, version #1”)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assignment</th>
<th>Due Date</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>P1V1</td>
<td>Th, July 6th at 11:59PM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P1V2</td>
<td>M, July 10th at 11:59PM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P2V1</td>
<td>Th, July 13th at 11:59PM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P2V2</td>
<td>T, July 18th at 11:59PM</td>
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<tr>
<td>P3 Proposal and Working Bibliography</td>
<td>F, July 21st at 11:59PM</td>
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<tr>
<td>P3V1 Partial Draft</td>
<td>T, July 25th at 11:59PM</td>
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<tr>
<td>P3V1 Complete Draft</td>
<td>Sat, July 29th at 11:59PM</td>
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Major assignments:

**Short Presentation:** Bring in a space-related object (image, poem, film clip, etc.) and lead discussion.

**P1:** Close reading of Mailer’s “A Fire on the Moon” or “Psychology of Astronauts.”

**P2:** An essay about Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey* using a secondary text (either Sloterdijk or Kessler) as a “lens” to help you refine your argument.

**P3:** A research-based argument on a topic of your choice related to the course.

**Creative Project:** Design your own *Voyager Golden Record*: pick 20-30 “artifacts” to send into space to encapsulate humanity, & write a short essay/presentation to explain these choices.

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**READING & ASSIGNMENT SCHEDULE**

--- Subject to change ---

**Unit One: Off-Earth**

**M, Jul. 3**  
Introduction: A Fire on the Moon  
**Reading due:** * Norman Mailer, “A Fire on the Moon,” *LIFE Magazine* (August 1969), pp. 24-41  
**In class:**  
* Introduction to course, terms, and each other  
* Handout: Close Reading and finding a good essay question  
**N.B.:**  
* P1 assigned  
* For next class: Identify a passage that you might want to write on for your P1 and write a paragraph response with a tentative thesis.

**W, Jul. 5**  
Psychology of Astronauts  
**In class:**  
* Discussion: Summarizing vs. Analyzing; Working with Quotations  
* Workshop: responses/theses

**Th, Jul. 6**  
**N.B.**  
* DUE BY 11:59PM: First draft of Essay 1
### F, Jul. 7  
**Space Stations, Orbital Habitats**

**Reading due:**  
  "Insulations: For A Theory of Capsules, Islands, and Hothouses" pp. 287-332  

**In class:**  
* Discussion: Introductions and strong body paragraphs  
* Workshop: First draft workshop

### M, Jul. 10  
**The Astronomical Sublime**

**Reading due:**  
* Sinéad Baker, “Scientists just released the first-ever photograph of a black hole. Some people think it looks like a ‘smudge on the lens’.” *Business Insider* (11 April 2019)

**In class:**  
* Tracy K. Smith, selections from *Life on Mars* (2011)  

**N.B.:**  
* P2 assigned  
* DUE BY 11:59PM: Final draft of Essay 1

### W, Jul. 12  
**A Space Odyssey**

**Reading due:**  

**In class:**  
* Discussion: Transitions

### Th, Jul. 13

**N.B.:**  
* DUE BY 11:59PM: First draft of Essay 2

### F, Jul. 14  
**Robotic Vision**

**Reading due:**  
* Cecile Whiting, “It’s Only a Paper Moon’: The Cyborg Eye of Vija Celmins,”
**In class:**

* **Discussion:** Conclusions  
  * Workshop: First draft workshop

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**Unit Three: Excavating the Sky—Ghosts on the Horizon**

**M, Jul. 17**  
**Clouds, Mists**

**Due:**  
* The Guardian, “Barbican’s Rain Room: it’s raining, but you won’t get wet” (2012) [link] [4 min.]

**In class:**  
* Discussion: Choosing a Research Topic and Developing a Proposal  
* P3 assigned

**N.B.:**  
* DUE BY 11:59PM: Final draft of Essay 2

**T, Jul. 18**  
**N.B.:**

**W, Jul. 19**  
**Paths Across the Sky**

**Reading due:**  
* Neil deGrasse Tyson, “Paths to Discovery,” *Space Chronicles: Facing the Ultimate Frontier* (2012), pp. 84-106  

**In class:**  
* Library Visit: Identifying Sources

**F, Jul. 21**  
**The Planets, The Moon**

**Reading due:**  

**In class:**  
* Discussion: Working with sources: distinguishing what you say

**N.B.:**  
* DUE BY 11:59PM: Research Proposal & Working Bibliography due
Unit Four: Earth, From Above & Below

M, Jul. 24  The Pale Blue Dot
In class:  * Discussion: Specific tactics for working with sources


W, Jul. 26  Sputnik, Satellites, Space Junk
Reading due: * Hannah Arendt, selections from The Human Condition (1958), 1-6
In class:  * Discussion: Strategies for Revision (deepening, cutting, expanding)
  * Workshop Partial Draft

F, Jul. 28  Spaceship Earth
In class:  * Discussion: Conclusions
  * Writing time and One-on-one Instructor Consultations
N.B.:  * Presentation assigned

Unit Five: Messages To & From the Stars

M, Jul. 31  Speaking for Earth
Viewing due:  * Websites on the worksheet “Voyager Golden Record Assignment” sheet on Canvas
Reading due:  * Carl Sagan et al, Murmurs of Earth: The Voyager Interstellar Record (ca. 1978), Selections
In class:      * Discussion: Polishing (concision, clarity)

W, Aug. 2  UFOs, Hoaxes
Reading due:  * Carl Jung, selections from Flying Saucers: A Modern Myth of Things Seen in the Skies (1959)
N.B.:          * DUE BY 11:59PM: Essay 3 Final Draft

F, Aug. 4  In Class:  * Final Presentations
COURSE POLICIES

**Attendance:** This course is built on discussion, lectures on craft, and workshop ping, so attendance is vital and mandatory. I will accept one unexcused absence, no questions asked, across the semester. Missing more than one class will lower your grade, however, and more than three unexcused absences will result in a failing grade for the course. Frequent tardiness will lower your participation grade. Please be in touch with me if you need to speak about absences.

**Participation:** This classroom will benefit from the active participation of every student in it. Please carefully read all assigned texts before class and come ready to share your thoughts and questions. During class sessions, you should have your computer camera on and be ready to jump into conversation. When I was an undergrad, I was consistently a shy talker; if this sounds familiar to you, please set up a meeting with me ASAP so we can brainstorm effective ways for you to feel comfortable speaking up in class. I want this class to be one in which everyone feels comfortable participating. Please listen respectfully to your classmates, help each other articulate thoughts, and find room for forgiveness, generosity, and patience!

Once during the semester, I will ask each of you to bring in a space-related object (image, poem, article, film clip, advertisement, etc.) and lead us through a discussion. This will be a part of your participation grade. (FYI we will have a break in the middle of class to stretch our legs and refresh.)

**Zoom/Technology:** This course and my office hours will be held live online, via Zoom. To access our sessions, use the “Zoom” tab on our Canvas page. All of our readings will be on Canvas. In the interests of saving paper, I am perfectly happy for you to have your readings open on your laptop/tablet along with your Zoom window. Please, though, refrain from using social media, texting, browsing the Internet, etc. and be emotionally “checked in” during class.

**Plagiarism and academic honesty:** All assignments you turn in at Yale College must abide by the University’s code on plagiarism; all courses at Yale require you to produce your own intellectual work. Plagiarism includes (but is not limited to): copying the work of other students, cutting and pasting words or phrasing from sources without attribution, representing someone else’s intellectual work or writing as one’s own, and using ideas or logic found in another source without attribution (even if you have changed the exact wording). Build your own argument, use your own reasoning and your own interpretations, make sure you acknowledge your sources, and don’t leave your writing until the last moment! Plagiarism is academic fraud. Any student who turns in a paper that is plagiarized in full or that contains plagiarized material will be strictly disciplined by the university (including a permanent F for the course or getting suspended). Here are some helpful links:

- Review Yale’s policies here: [http://yalecollege.yale.edu/content/undergraduate-regulations](http://yalecollege.yale.edu/content/undergraduate-regulations)
- Understanding plagiarism: [http://writing.yalecollege.yale.edu/understanding-and-avoidingplagiarism](http://writing.yalecollege.yale.edu/understanding-and-avoidingplagiarism)
- Take the plagiarism quiz here: [http://ctl.yale.edu/plagiarismquiz](http://ctl.yale.edu/plagiarismquiz)
- Tips for using sources: [http://writing.yalecollege.yale.edu/using-sources](http://writing.yalecollege.yale.edu/using-sources)

**Resources:** Please take advantage of the many resources for writers across campus. You can find a selection of writing guides through the Center for Teaching and Learning ([http://ctl.yale.edu/writing](http://ctl.yale.edu/writing)). There are Drop-In Writing Partners ([http://ctl.yale.edu/tutoring/writing/drop-writing-partners](http://ctl.yale.edu/tutoring/writing/drop-writing-partners)), Residential
College Writing Tutors (http://ctl.yale.edu/tutoring/writing/residential-college-writing-tutors), and Writing Study Halls (http://ctl.yale.edu/tutoring/writing/writing-study-halls). If you need accommodations, consult the Resource Office on Disabilities (http://rod.yale.edu), and please feel free to be in touch with me with any concerns you have.

**Formatting:** Please submit all work as follows: double-spaced, 12 point, Times New Roman or Garamond font, with 1-inch margins. Your first page should include: your full name, my full name, the course title, the date, and a paper title. Each subsequent page should have, as a header in the upper right-hand corner: your last name and page numbers. Your paper should be formatted adhering to a MLA style. The Purdue MLA Website will be a great resource: (https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/).

**Submissions and extensions:** Unless otherwise noted, your papers/assignments are due, by email (sarah.weston@yale.edu), at 11:59pm on the date listed on the syllabus. Please submit all files in the “.docx” format. **No pdf's please!** Extensions will be granted only in extenuating circumstances. If your situation is foreseeable, you must request an extension at least a week before the deadline. If you have an emergency, please contact your dean for a Dean’s Excuse. In all other circumstances, please note that your grade will go down a third of a letter grade for every day an essay is late (that is, an A- paper will become a B+ the first day it is late, then a B the second day, etc.).

**Email and office hours:** I try to answer emails within 24 hours on weekdays and within 48 hours over the weekend. I do not take questions about grades by email, so please make an appointment with me to discuss those questions. If you cannot make my office hours, email me at least two days in advance of when you would like to meet, and we will find an alternate time.