Feminist & Queer Ethnographies: Dystopia, Catastrophe, Extinction

WGSS S308E / ANTH S308E | Summer 2023, Session A

Tuesdays 9am – 12:15pm
Thursdays 9am – 12:15pm

Zoom: TBA

Instructor
Eda Pepi (she/her/hers)
Women’s, Gender & Sexuality Studies
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Office Hours
Tuesdays and Thursday 12:15pm – 1pm
Location, on Zoom: TBA

Course Overview
This seminar centers the analytics and methods that feminist and queer ethnographic analyses have brought to the fore to revisit a cluster of topical issues, this summer assembled around the theme: *Dystopia, Catastrophe, Extinction*. Key to the overall class will be the relation between humans and the world and the way in which different “ends of the world” configure humankind as an entity to whom the world belongs. It has been said that ethnography sets out to build a believable world, but one that the reader will accept as factual. In this moment of anthropocenic, epidemiological, and sociopolitical crises – from climate change to the Covid-19 pandemic to renewed attention to police brutality worldwide – we will consider how feminist and queer ethnographies construct existing but also possible worlds, all the while retaining an alternate “made” world.

The course engages in decolonial readings of classic and contemporary ethnographies of dystopias and disasters—emerging from phenomena like slavery, liberalism, infrastructural failures, climate change, poverty, reproductive control, nuclear proliferation, and mass production farming. Students will grapple with the processes of naturalization and denaturalization through which the “political” is mobilized and dyads like human/nonhuman, citizen/noncitizen, kin/stranger, are made to appear. Over the course of the semester, we will be reading and talking about what constitutes a crisis or a catastrophe in ways that challenge the ineffable feeling that our times are exceptional. But we will also engage with feminist and queer methodologies that conjure up speculative fabulations for, what Saidiya Hartman has called, “the radical hope for living otherwise.”
### Course Requirements

*Please type all assignments in 12-point Times New Roman font, using double-spacing and one-inch margins on all sides. Always include your name, class, instructor information, week number, title, and date.*

- **Participation (20%)**: Please join our seminar as an active participant, prepared with questions on the assigned readings and your classmates’ think pieces.
- **Two Think Pieces (40%)**: Students will sign up for two classes in which they will write three-page think pieces based on that week’s ethnography. Guidelines about what constitutes a think piece and how to approach writing within this genre can be found on Canvas. **Think pieces are due via email to the instructor the day before class by 5pm.**
- **Final Research Paper or Science Fiction Essay (40%)**: At the end of the semester, students will be required to submit a 7- to 10-page final paper. If the student chooses to complete a research paper, they are expected to show both mastery of the relevant literature and some original research. If the student chooses to complete a science fiction essay, they are expected to draw from the themes, places, and people we have explored in the class. **The final paper is due via email to the instructor on July 7th by 5pm.**

### Writing Resources

I encourage all students to take advantage of the free tutoring services offered by the Yale Summer Session. For more information, see [https://summer.yale.edu/admitted-students/summer-session-tutoring](https://summer.yale.edu/admitted-students/summer-session-tutoring)

### Absence & Tardiness Policy

Attendance and participation are critical to your success in this course. **Absences must be made up by writing a three-page think piece about the readings of the class you missed.** If you must come late for any reason (or request to leave early), please let me know. Frequent tardiness will be penalized.

### Students with Documented Disabilities

Students who may need an academic accommodation based on the impact of a disability can initiate the request with the Resource Office on Disabilities (ROD). Professional staff will evaluate the request with required documentation, recommend reasonable accommodations, and prepare a Letter of Accommodation for faculty dated in the current semester in which the request is being made. The ROD is located at 35 Broadway (rear entrance), Room 222 (phone: 203-432-2324). Office hours are held Monday through Friday, 8:30 am to 4:30 pm. URL: [http://rod.yale.edu/](http://rod.yale.edu/)

### Academic Integrity

Plagiarism includes, but is not limited to, using the logic and ideas of another source without attribution (even if the exact wording has been changed), cutting and pasting wording and phrasing from sources without attribution into your own text, and copying the work of other students. Plagiarism is academic fraud; it is committed when others’ intellectual work or writing is represented as one’s own work or writing. Any student who turns in a paper that contains plagiarized material or is plagiarized in full will be severely sanctioned by the university. The most common penalty is suspension from the university, but students caught plagiarizing are also subject to lowered or failing grades as well as the possibility of expulsion. If you are in doubt
about what constitutes plagiarism in the context of a particular assignment, talk with the instructor. For more information, visit: http://catalog.yale.edu/undergraduate-regulations/policies/definitions-plagiarism-cheating/.

Content Warning
During the course of this class, some difficult topics may come up, including gender-based and race-based violence and sexual assault. There are other topics in this class that may also trigger difficult memories for you. You should feel free to talk to me about any issues you have with the topics we are discussing and ask for excused absences.

Statement of Inclusivity and Diversity
This classroom is a hate-free zone, and is part of WGSS’s commitment addressing and redressing racism, Islamophobia, xenophobia, homophobia, transphobia, anti-Blackness, and all systems of privilege and oppression in our classes, in our academic units, and in higher education. To that end, you are expected to engage with one another with respect.

Course Materials
All required readings will be made available under ‘Files’ or under ‘Course Reserves’ on the Canvas course page.

SCHEDULE

Week 1 – Tuesday: Cautionary Tales – Grief, Nostalgia, Annihilation

This class will commence with an introductory lecture that lays out the themes of the course and provides an overview of the history of feminist and queer anthropology. After a short break, we will embark on a seminar discussion of the assigned readings.


The fascination of Western publics with extinction can be primarily traced to the nineteenth century, when Charles Darwin articulated the principle of natural selection—made visible in popular publications and exhibitions of fossils. In this introductory class, we consider loss and grief in its concrete and abstract, individual and collective dimensions. While personal death and grief had always already preoccupied humans, a demographic anxiety emerging from the prospect of threatened humanity was a distinctly 19th-century conception. We build on Janet Chernela’s observation that it is worth considering the extent to which it was not so much the idea of “common origins” in Darwin’s The Origin of Species as the specter of a “common ending” between human and nonhuman animals (lying outside the book itself) that posed the biggest challenge to Western
visions of humanity’s destiny. Humanity was for the first time included in a possibility of a final, meaningless end – an end that would reduce or return us to our animal origins, as configured by the epistemic framework of natural selection. This new ontological orientation made possible scientific investments in race, gender, and sexuality that continue to shape our worldview today. The class introduces feminist and queer ethnography as anti-disciplinary responses to this racialized and gendered invention of man.

**Week 1 – Thursday: Slavery and the Logics of Storytelling Traditions**


*Barracoon* — the word comes from the Spanish word for "barracks" — came about in 1927, when the then-unknown Hurston was assigned a task by famed anthropologist Franz Boas: interviewing an 86-year-old former slave living in the tiny town of Plateau, Alabama. Oluale Kossula, also known by the slave name of Cudjo Lewis, had a remarkable past. Raised to the age of 19 in West Africa, he was was brought to the United States as a captive on *Clotilda*, the fabled last ship ever to ply the waters of the transatlantic slave trade. He was then the only person alive to tell the story of this integral part of the nation’s history. Hurston was there to record Cudjo’s firsthand account of the raid that led to his capture and bondage fifty years after the Atlantic slave trade was outlawed in the United States. In 1931, Hurston returned to Plateau, the African-centric community three miles from Mobile founded by Cudjo and other former slaves from his ship. Spending more than three months there, she talked in depth with Cudjo about the details of his life. Unlike other well-known slave narratives, which often include escape or bids for self-purchase, or speak to the abolition struggle, *Barracoon* stands alone. The narrative does not recount a journey forward into the American Dream. It is a slave narrative in reverse, journeying backwards to barracoons, betrayal, and barbarity. And then even further back, to a period of tranquility, a time of freedom, and a sense of belonging.”

**Week 2 – Tuesday: Progressive Dystopia and Liberal Antiblackness**


San Francisco is the endgame of gentrification, where racialized displacement means that the Black population of the city hovers at just over 3 percent. The Robeson Justice Academy opened to serve the few remaining low-income neighborhoods of the city, with the mission of offering liberatory, social justice--themed education to youth of color. While it features a progressive curriculum including Frantz Fanon and Audre Lorde, the majority Latinx school also has the district's highest suspension rates for Black students. In *Progressive Dystopia* Savannah Shange explores the potential for reconciling the school's marginalization of Black students with its sincere pursuit of multiracial uplift and solidarity. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork and six years of experience teaching at the school, Shange outlines how the school fails its students and the community because it operates within a space predicated on antiblackness. Seeing San Francisco as a social laboratory for how Black communities survive the end of their worlds, Shange argues for abolition over revolution or progressive reform as the needed path toward Black freedom.
**Week 2 – Thursday: Engendering the Banality of Violence – Hunger and Love**


When lives are dominated by hunger, what becomes of love? *Death Without Weeping* is an account of the everyday experience of scarcity, sickness and death that centers on the lives of the women and children of a hillside "favela" in Northeast Brazil. Bringing her readers to the impoverished slopes above the modern plantation town of Bom Jesus de Mata, where she has worked on and off for 25 years, Nancy Scheper-Hughes follows three generations of shantytown women as they struggle to survive through hard work, cunning and triage. It is a story of class relations told at the most basic level of bodies, emotions, desires and needs. Most controversial is her finding that mother love, as conventionally understood, is something of a bourgeois myth, a luxury for those who can reasonably expect, as these women cannot, that their infants will live.

**Week 3 – Tuesday: Waste Worlds**

  **On electronic course reserve.**

Uganda's capital, Kampala, is undergoing dramatic urban transformations as its new technocratic government seeks to clean and green the city. *Waste Worlds* tracks the dynamics of development and disposability unfolding amid struggles over who and what belong in the new Kampala. Garbage materializes these struggles. In the densely inhabited social infrastructures in and around the city's waste streams, people, places, and things become disposable but conditions of disposability are also challenged and undone. Drawing on years of ethnographic research, Jacob Doherty illustrates how waste makes worlds, offering the key intervention that disposability is best understood not existentially, as a condition of social exclusion, but infrastructurally, as a form of injurious social inclusion.

**Week 3 – Thursday: Biological Citizenship**


On April 26, 1986, the Chernobyl nuclear reactor exploded in then Soviet Ukraine. *Life Exposed* is the first book to comprehensively examine the vexed political, scientific, and social circumstances that followed the disaster. Tracing the story from an initial lack of disclosure to post-Soviet democratizing attempts to compensate sufferers, Adriana Petryna asks: What happens to politics when state officials fail to inform their fellow citizens of real threats to life? What are the moral and political consequences of remedies available in the wake of technological disasters? Through extensive research in state institutions, clinics, laboratories, and with affected families and workers of the so-called Zone, Petryna illustrates how the event and its aftermath have not only shaped the course of an independent nation but have made health a negotiated realm of
entitlement. She tracks the emergence of a “biological citizenship” in which assaults on health become the coinage through which sufferers stake claims for biomedical resources, social equity, and human rights.

**Week 4 – Tuesday: Reproductive Justice on Infertile Grounds**


*On electronic course reserve.*

*On Infertile Ground* presents a unique critique of international development that blends the study of feminism, environmentalism, and activism in a groundbreaking way. Since the turn of the millennium, American media, scientists, and environmental activists have insisted that the global population crisis is “back”—and that the only way to avoid catastrophic climate change is to ensure women’s universal access to contraception. Did the population problem ever disappear? What is bringing it back—and why now? Jade S. Sasser explores how a small network of international development actors, including private donors, NGO program managers, scientists, and youth advocates, is bringing population back to the center of public environmental debate. While these narratives never disappeared, Sasser argues, histories of human rights abuses, racism, and a conservative backlash against abortion in the 1980s drove them underground—until now.

**Week 4 – Thursday: Fossil-Fueled Utopias and Climate Change**


In 2006 Abu Dhabi launched an ambitious project to construct the world’s first zero-carbon city: Masdar City. In *Spaceship in the Desert* Gökçe Günel examines the development and construction of Masdar City's renewable energy and clean technology infrastructures, providing an illuminating portrait of an international group of engineers, designers, and students who attempted to build a post-oil future in Abu Dhabi. While many of Masdar's initiatives—such as developing a new energy currency and a driverless rapid transit network—have stalled or not met expectations, Günel analyzes how these initiatives contributed to rendering the future a thinly disguised version of the fossil-fueled present. *Spaceship in the Desert* tells the story of Masdar, at once a “utopia” sponsored by the Emirati government, and a well-resourced company involving different actors who participated in the project, each with their own agendas and desires.

**Week 5 – Tuesday: Posthuman Labor and the Factory Farm**


In the 1990s a small midwestern American town approved the construction of a massive pork complex, where almost 7 million hogs are birthed, raised, and killed every year. In *Porkopolis* Alex Blanchette explores how this rural community has been reorganized around the life and death cycles of corporate pigs. Drawing on over two years of ethnographic fieldwork, Blanchette
immerses readers into the workplaces that underlie modern meat, from slaughterhouses and corporate offices to artificial insemination barns and bone-rendering facilities. He outlines the deep human-hog relationships and intimacies that emerge through intensified industrialization, showing how even the most mundane human action, such as a wayward touch, could have serious physical consequences for animals. Corporations’ pursuit of a perfectly uniform, standardized pig—one that can yield materials for over 1000 products—creates social and environmental instabilities that transform human lives and livelihoods. Throughout Porkopolis, which includes dozens of images, Blanchette uses factory farming to rethink the fraught state of industrial capitalism in the United States today.

**Week 5 – Thursday: Making Livable Worlds**


When Hurricanes Irma and María made landfall in Puerto Rico in September 2017, their destructive force further devastated an archipelago already pummeled by economic austerity, political upheaval, and environmental calamities. To navigate these multiple ongoing crises, Afro–Puerto Rican women have drawn from their cultural knowledge to engage in daily improvisations that enable their communities to survive and thrive. Their life-affirming practices, developed and passed down through generations, offer powerful modes of resistance to gendered and racialized exploitation, ecological ruination, and deepening capitalist extraction. Through solidarity, reciprocity, and an ethics of care, these women create restorative alternatives to dispossession to produce good, meaningful lives for their communities. *Making Livable Worlds* weaves together autobiography, ethnography, interviews, memories, and fieldwork to recast narratives that continuously erase Black Puerto Rican women as agents of social change. In doing so, Lloréns serves as an “ethnographer of home” as she brings to life the powerful histories and testimonies of a marginalized, disavowed community that has been treated as disposable.

**DUE JULY 7th by 5pm:**

**FINAL RESEARCH PAPER or SCIENCE FICTION ESSAY**