

# Feminist & Queer Ethnographies: Dystopia, Catastrophe, Extinction

WGSS S308E / ANTH S308E | Summer 2024, Session B

Tuesdays 9am – 12:15pm

Thursdays 9am – 12:15pm

Zoom: URL to be announced later

## Instructor

Eda Pepi (she/her/hers)  
Women's, Gender & Sexuality Studies  
Modern Middle East Studies  
Anthropology (*secondary*)  
[eda.pepi@yale.edu](mailto:eda.pepi@yale.edu)

## Office Hours

Tuesdays and Thursday 12:20pm – 1pm  
Sign up: URL to be announced later  
Location: URL to be announced later

## Course Overview

This seminar directly tackles the urgent crises of our times—reproductive policing, climate change, pandemics, artificial intelligence, and systemic violence—through the lens of feminist and queer perspectives in ethnography. It's an intellectual journey into existing worlds and speculative futures. *Dystopia, Catastrophe, and Extinction* seeks to unravel the intricate web of relationships between humans and the world, examining the consequences of various "ends of the world" portrayals of humanity as the world's proprietor. A dynamic selection of groundbreaking and current literature lays bare dystopias forged by slavery, the pitfalls of liberalism, and the stark realities of reproductive control, poverty, and nuclear proliferation. Students are encouraged to interrogate the formations of crises and catastrophes by resisting the narrative of exceptionalism in our era. This course is about learning historical and contemporary conditions of political possibility. Anchored in Saidiya Hartman's notion of a "radical hope for living otherwise," it is also about expanding intellectual horizons and building the tools to dream of, and work towards, the world(s) to come.

## Course Requirements

- Attendance is required in all Yale Summer Session courses.
- Participation (20%): Actively participate in our seminar with questions about the readings.
- Two Think Pieces (22% each): Select two classes and write 3-page think pieces based on the respective ethnography. Guidelines for writing think pieces can be found on Canvas. **Think pieces due via email by 5pm the day before class.**
- Final Research Paper or Science Fiction Essay (36 %): Submit a 7- to 10-page final paper at the end of the semester. For the research paper, demonstrate mastery of relevant literature and include original research. For the science fiction essay, draw inspiration from the themes, places, and people explored in class. **Final paper due via email by 5pm on August 6th.**

*Always include your name, the date, class information, and piece title. Please use 12-point Times New Roman font, using double-spacing and one-inch margins on all sides.*

## Writing Resources

Free tutoring services: <https://summer.yale.edu/admitted-students/summer-session-tutoring>

## Academic Integrity

The university imposes severe sanctions on any student who submits a paper containing plagiarized material. These penalties commonly involve suspension from the university, but offenders may also face reduced or failing grades and potential expulsion.

## Course Materials

All required readings are available under 'Files' or 'Course Reserves' on our Canvas course page.

# SCHEDULE

## *Week 1 – Tuesday: Speculative Tales of Grief*

A foundational lecture will offer a comprehensive overview of feminist and queer ethnography. Following a brief break, we will engage in an analysis of the assigned readings.

- Kurzweil, Amy. 2020. “(Me)chanical Reproduction.” In *Tehnnofeelia*, vol 3: <https://thebeliever.net/mechanical-reproduction/>
- Scranton, Roy. 2013. “Learning How to Die in the Anthropocene.” <https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/11/10/learning-how-to-die-in-the-anthropocene/>
- Wells, H. G. 1894. “The Extinction of Man: Some Speculative Thoughts.” <http://www.online-literature.com/wellshg/certain-personal-matters/24/>

Western societies' preoccupation with extinction traces back to the 19th century, marked by Darwin's articulation of natural selection and the proliferation of fossil exhibitions. This opening session explores the multifaceted nature of loss and bereavement, both tangible and abstract, individual and collective. While personal mortality has long haunted human consciousness, the 19th century introduced a demographic angst tied to the notion of all humanity at risk. We contemplate how the dread of a shared demise for humans and other animals—a concept implicit in Darwin's work on our common origins—posed a profound challenge to entrenched Western beliefs about human destiny. For the first time, humanity confronted the possibility of an ultimate, insignificant end—a return to our animal origins within the epistemological structure of natural selection. This shift in existential perspective paved the way for scientific investments into race, gender, and sexuality that continue to shape our worldview today. We introduce feminist and queer ethnography as a counter-disciplinary response to this racialized and gendered ‘invention of man’.

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

- Hurston, Zora Neale. 2018 [1927]. *Barracoon: The Story of the Last “Black Cargo.”* Amistad.

*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 captured and 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 Antiracism***

- Shange, Savannah. 2019. *Progressive Dystopia: Abolition, Antiracism, and Schooling in San Francisco*. Duke University Press: 22-43, 66-91, 123-150.

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 antiracism. 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***

- Scheper-Hughes, Nancy. 1993. *Death Without Weeping: The Violence of Everyday Life in Brazil*. University of California Press: 128-166, 340-399.

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. 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: Matter with No Place to Go***

- Stamatopoulou-Robbins, Sophia. 2019. *Waste Siege: The Life of Infrastructure in Palestine*. Duke University Press.

*Waste Siege* offers an analysis unusual in the study of Palestine: it depicts the environmental, infrastructural, and aesthetic context in which Palestinians are obliged to forge their lives. To speak of waste siege is to describe a series of conditions, from smelling wastes to negotiating military infrastructures, from

biopolitical forms of colonial rule to experiences of governmental abandonment, from obvious targets of resistance to confusion over responsibility for the burdensome objects of daily life. Sophia Stamatopoulou-Robbins focuses on waste as an experience of everyday life that is continuous with, but not a result only of, occupation. Tracing Palestinians' own experiences of wastes over the past decade, she considers how multiple authorities governing the West Bank—including municipalities, the Palestinian Authority, international aid organizations, NGOs, and Israel—rule by waste siege, whether intentionally or not.

### ***Week 3 – Thursday: Biological Citizenship***

- Petryna, Adriana. 2003. *Life Exposed: Biological Citizens after Chernobyl*. Princeton University Press: 1-33, 82-148.

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***

- Sasser, Jade. 2018. *On Infertile Ground: Population Control and Women’s Rights in the Era of Climate Change*. New York University Press: 31-98, 126-158. *Under course reserves.*

*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: Posthuman Labor and the Factory Farm***

- Blanchette, Alex. 2020. *Porkopolis: American Animality, Standardized Life, and the Factory Farm*. Duke University Press: 45-72, 177-202.

In the 1990s a small American town approved the construction of a massive pork complex, where almost 7 million pigs 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. 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. Blanchette uses factory farming to rethink the fraught state of industrial capitalism in the United States today.

***Week 5 – Tuesday: Decolonizing Extinction – Living with Pain and Loss***

- Parreñas, Juno. 2018. *Decolonizing Extinction: The Work of Care in Orangutan Rehabilitation*. Duke University Press: 33-60, 83-104, 131-176.

At a global moment of environmental crises and family separations, Parreñas presents an account of care and hope in the face of extinction. Situated in rehabilitation centers for traumatized and endangered orangutans in Sarawak, Malaysia, *Decolonizing Extinction* calls for creative approaches to bio-cultural scholarship by asking how feminist analyses of violence might offer humane alternatives to the “palliative care” the species currently receives due to deforestation and industrial agriculture. Parreñas’s radically interdisciplinary and heartbreaking ethnography draws on primatology, queer theory, and archival history to argue that a feminist sense of welfare must include the possibility of pain and loss. This ethnography is asking us to imagine the intellectual tools necessary to rethink what it means to be autonomous and dependent, to suffer and to care.

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

- Lloréns, Hilda. 2021. *Making Livable Worlds: Afro-Puerto Rican Women Building Environmental Justice*. Duke University Press: 19-45, 137-183.

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 AUGUST 8<sup>th</sup> by 5pm:**

**FINAL RESEARCH PAPER or SCIENCE FICTION ESSAY**