

Theorizing Environmental Subjectivity

Centre for the Study of Theory & Criticism
Fall 2020: Western University, London, ON.



“Recollection (Zoodram 4 after “Sleeping Muse” by Constantin Brancusi)” featuring a live marine ecosystem. Credit...Guillaume Zicarelli/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Instructor: Dr. David Janzen

Email Address: david.janzen@uwaterloo.ca

Class meeting: Online (Zoom); Thursday, 11:00-2:00.

Office Hours: Online by appointment

Course Overview

This course analyzes the relationship between subjectivity and environmental change. We examine how environmental crisis, defined by concepts including “the Anthropocene,” ungrounds modern conceptions of subjectivity, providing impetus for rethinking both the subject and environment—and the relationship between the two.

Broadly, our analysis consists of three components. First, a historicist component identifies dominant historical forms of subjectivity and knowledge; re-reading key philosophical texts (Descartes, Kant, Hegel, and others) we critically analyze how modern conceptions of the subject organize relationships among human and non-human dimensions of the environment.

The second component examines subjectivity in light of environmental crisis. The Anthropocene, a ubiquitous but contested concept, frames the human species as primary agents of geological change and environmental destruction. Anthropocene science demonstrates that our current trajectory is unsustainable, it fails to answer a broader question: who or what is the *Anthro-* of the *Anthropocene*? Is it geological? Biological? Or is it something else altogether? Answering these questions forces us to revisit basic assumptions about the distinction between humans and nature.

The third component explores possibilities for rethinking subjectivity and environmental change. If the Anthropocene is the end of modern subjectivity, what comes next? We look at a range of critical perspectives, including ecofeminism (Stacey Alaimo), Black and Indigenous theory (Tiffany Lethabo King, Elizabeth Povinelli), and posthumanism. Lectures and discussion will also engage artistic practices (art, poetry, new media and performance) that envision ecological futures.

Delivery methods:

This is a remotely delivered course. Our “in class” time (3 hrs/week) will consist of:

1. **A pre-recorded lecture** (~ 45 mins) will be uploaded to OWL by Tuesday at noon.
2. **An online meeting:** Each Thursday at 11:00 am we will meet via ZOOM (2-2.5 hrs). Meetings will focus on student-led presentations and discussion.

NOTE: Students *must* complete the reading and online lecture *prior* to the online meeting.

Materials:

Alaimo, Stacy. *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self*. Illustrated edition, Indiana University Press, 2010.

OR Alaimo, Stacy. *Exposed: Environmental Politics and Pleasures in Posthuman Times*. University of Minnesota Press, 2016.

King, Tiffany Lethabo. *The Black Shoals: Offshore Formations of Black and Native Studies*. Duke University Press Books, 2019.

Latour, Bruno. *We Have Never Been Modern*. Harvard University Press, 2012.

Povinelli, Elizabeth A. *Geontologies: A Requiem to Late Liberalism*. Duke University Press, 2016.

Articles: *Digital access available: see schedule*.

NOTE: I strongly recommend acquiring hard copies of all readings.

Grading & Assignments

Evaluation:

Weekly engagement (written response & participation): 25%

Presentation: 25%

Final assignment: 50% (proposal: 5%; final submission: 45%)

Assignment descriptions:

Weekly engagement (written response & participation): 25%

Each week, you will submit a short piece (<1 page, double spaced) of writing that responds to the reading, normally one of the following: definition of a key term, response to a prompt, or a short reflection. Submissions should be organized and coherent, but do not need to be polished; the purpose is to enhance students' engagement with the text, and to provide a foundation for your research paper.

Notes: Graded on a Pass/Fail basis. Submit through Dropbox only (*not by email*).

Instructions/prompts will be included with the recorded lecture.

Presentation and discussion: 25%

Beginning in week 4, each class meeting will open with student-led presentations that will include the following:

A presentation of key ideas (max 20 mins, timed): Each presenter will present a short analysis of the week's text. should aim to do the following:

1. Outline key aspects of the text (or texts) (~15 mins);

2. Contextualize (briefly!) the argument (What's the historical context? What debates, authors, and disciplines does the text respond to?) (2-3 mins)
3. Describe how the text engages with the central concerns of the course (2-3 mins).

A guided discussion (~30 minutes): Each presenter will actively guide classmates through key questions arising from the text. Be prepared with questions, discussion points, and quotations from the text.

Notes: See below (page 8) for grading overview. You will sign up for presentations in week 2. In weeks with more than one presenter, presenters should discuss how to divide up the text to avoid overlap.

Final assignment:

For the final assignment, you will produce a full-length research article. The topic is open, but must engage with themes and questions from the class, and must draw on at least three assigned texts. You are required to submit a graded proposal and to participate in a peer-review workshop. See below (page 7) for grading overview.

Policies & Links

Contact Policy:

Zoom: I am happy to meet with you via zoom to discuss the course and your work. I do not have regularly scheduled office hours; please email me to request a meeting.

Email: Please use my Waterloo address (david.janzen@uwaterloo.ca) for quickest response. Identify the course in your email subject headings. I aim to respond to emails within two business days (excludes weekends and holidays).

Scholastic Offences:

Scholastic offences, such as plagiarism, are taken seriously and students are directed to read the appropriate policy, specifically, the definition of what constitutes a Scholastic Offence, as found at:

http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic_policies/appeals/scholastic_discipline_undergrad.pdf

Turnitin:

All required papers may be subject to submission for textual similarity review to the commercial plagiarism detection software under license to the University for the detection of plagiarism. All papers submitted for such checking will be included as source documents in the reference database for the purpose of detecting plagiarism of papers subsequently submitted to the system.

Use of the service is subject to the licensing agreement, currently between The University of Western Ontario and Turnitin.com, <http://turnitin.uwo.ca/> .

Reading Schedule

1 Sep 8 Introduction

SECTION I: Man vs Nature: Inventing the Modern Subject

- 2 Sep 14 Inventing the Subject Descartes, René. "Meditation II," in *Self and Subjectivity*: 12-18.
Kant, Immanuel. Critique of Pure Reason, "Paralogisms of Pure Reason (A)" (first, second, and third paralogisms): in *Self and Subjectivity*: 52-59.
- 3 Sep 21 Subject & power G.W. F. Hegel: Phenomenology of Spirit, "Self-consciousness: Lordship and Bondage," in *Self and Subjectivity*: 65-70.
Marx, Karl. "Idealism and Materialism," from *The German Ideology*:
<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/german-ideology/ch01a.htm>
- 4 Sep 28 Have we ever been modern? Latour, Bruno. *We Have Never Been Modern* (Harvard UP, 1993): 1-145

SECTION II: Environmental and Subjective Crises

- 5 Oct 5 The Anthropocene Steffen, et al., "The Anthropocene: Conceptual and historical perspectives" (*Philosophical Transactions*, 2011).
Röckstrom, et al., "A safe operating space for humanity" (*Nature*, 2009).
Steffen, et al., "The Anthropocene: From Global Change to Planetary Stewardship" (*AMBIO*, 2011).
- 6 Oct 12 Environmental crisis and/as Subjective crisis Chakrabarty, Dipesh. "The Climate of History: Four Theses," *Critical Inquiry* 35.2 (Winter 2009). (Available online through library)
Malabou, Catherine. "The Brain of History, Or, the Mentality of the Anthropocene," *South Atlantic Quarterly* (2017) 116 (1): 39–53. (Available online)
Video: Haraway, Donna. "[Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Cthulucene.](#)"

- | | | | |
|---|---------|--|---|
| 7 | Oct 19 | What is living? Life, Death & Non-life | Povinelli. <i>Geontologies: A Requiem to Late Liberalism</i> (Duke UP, 2016): 1-91. |
| 8 | Oct 26 | The End of Subjectivity? | Povinelli: 92-178 |
| 9 | Nov 2-8 | READING BREAK | |

SECTION III: New Formations of Environmental Subjectivity

- | | | | |
|----|--------|--------------------------------------|---|
| 10 | Nov 9 | Transcorporeality; or What's a body? | First half of: Alaimo, Stacy. <i>Bodily Natures</i> (2010) and/or <i>Exposed</i> (2016). |
| 11 | Nov 16 | Feminism and ecological agencies | Second half of: Alaimo, Stacy. <i>Bodily Natures</i> (2010) and/or <i>Exposed</i> (2016). |
| 12 | Nov 23 | Black & Indigenous formations I | King, Tiffany Lethabo. <i>Black Shoals: Offshore formations of Black and Native Studies</i> (Duke UP: 2020).

Recommended: <i>Daughters of the Dust</i> (film). |
| 13 | Nov 30 | Black & Indigenous formations II | King (cont.) |

Recommendations & guidelines for success

Read all assigned texts (more than once): You cannot succeed in this course—or in the field of theory and criticism—without a rigorous reading practice. This does not mean you need to fully understand everything right away. Be persistent, read to the end, then re-read; annotate, make notes, and pose questions as you read. I strongly recommend reading Paul N. Edwards, “How to Read a Book”: <https://pne.people.si.umich.edu/PDF/howtoread.pdf>

Listen and read generously. Begin by engaging authors and speakers on their own terms (What is the author/speaker’s argument? How it is developed? What is the context of the text? Who is the intended audience?) Once you’ve thought through these questions, engage more critically (What are the limitations? Does it ask the right questions? Is the logic of the argument coherent? Does the analysis have unacknowledged consequences?)

Cultivate care: Theoretical inquiry is best undertaken as a collective practice. Listen generously. Respond to your classmates in good faith. Be open to disagreement. Do not shy away from difficult questions, but be aware of how discourse may adversely and unequally affect your classmates. Graduate school is a unique space for building intellectual solidarity; take advantage of it.

Equally, you will be a more effective critical theorist if you take care of yourself. Graduate study is demanding, and research shows that mental and emotional distress is fairly common. If you are experiencing significant distress and are unsure where to turn, feel free to contact me. I recommend all students familiarize themselves with the resources available through Mental Health @ Western, accessible at: https://www.uwo.ca/health/mental_wellbeing/ Grading Rubrics

Final Assignment¹

A+ Exceptional. Essay is original and innovative, and adds to the scholarly discussion on the topic(s) at hand. It also shows considerable command of critical and other secondary material. *Papers receiving an A+ are considered publishable in academic journals specific to the field.*

A Very strong graduate work. Essay is original and strongly written, contributes to scholarly discussion, and shows considerable command of critical and other secondary material. Synthesizes and organizes ideas in support of a compelling conclusion. *Papers receiving an A are publishable in a graduate-level journal or, with significant revision, in an academic journal specific to the field.*

A- Above average graduate work. Well written and researched; demonstrates proficiency with key ideas, including primary material and the scholarly discussion thereof. Synthesizes and organizes ideas in support of a compelling conclusion.

B+ Promising graduate work. Demonstrates proficiency with key ideas, but shows weaknesses in one or more areas of research, argumentation or writing.

B Satisfactory graduate work. Research and thought are evident, but essay contains substantial flaws in one or more areas of: research, argumentation or writing. May indicate difficulty in moving beyond undergraduate-level work.

B- Essays in this range are minimally passable graduate work, showing considerable weaknesses or errors in research, argumentation, and writing. These essays demonstrate difficulty in moving beyond undergraduate-level work.

¹ Rubric is adapted from similar models developed by the Dalhousie Department of Political Science Graduate Committee and the UBC English Department.

Presentation²

5 Points	4 Points	3 Points	2 Points	1 Point	0 Points	/5
Presentation						
<p>Content is complete, relevant & accurate. Exceptional command & depth of the material.</p> <p>Presented in a logical & organized manner. Exceptional critical thinking and thinking.</p> <p>Outstanding oral presentation skills and engagement of class.</p>	<p>Content is complete, relevant & accurate. Strong command & depth of the material.</p> <p>Presented in a logical & organized manner. Strong critical thinking or an original perspective.</p> <p>Very good oral presentation skills and engagement of class.</p>	<p>Content is appropriate. Adequate command of the material is demonstrated (may overlook/misinterpret relevant ideas).</p> <p>Content may not be demonstrated in a way that maintains focus and may be disorganized.</p> <p>Content shows that the person thought about the information.</p> <p>Adequate oral presentation skills and engagement of class.</p>	<p>Marginally adequate command of the material is demonstrated. Important pieces of information are missing, or irrelevant material included.</p> <p>Content is disorganized and is not presented in a way that maintains focus.</p> <p>Weak oral presentation skills and engagement of class.</p>	<p>Content is weak because material is omitted, inaccurate or marginally relevant. Demonstrates limited understanding of the material and/or limited ability to apply the material.</p> <p>Organization is a problem. Major deficiencies in oral presentation skills.</p>	Lecture component absent.	5
Class Discussion						
<p>Preparation, understanding of content, discussion methods, and communication skills are outstanding.</p> <p>Discussion produces significant insight into course themes.</p>	<p>Preparation, understanding of content, discussion methods, and communication skills are very good.</p> <p>Discussion produces insight into course themes.</p>	<p>Preparation, understanding of content, discussion methods, and communication skills are adequate.</p> <p>Discussion produces insight into course themes.</p>	<p>Preparation, understanding of content, discussion methods, and communication skills are weak.</p>	<p>Preparation, understanding of content, discussion methods, and communication skills have major deficiencies.</p>	Class discussion component absent.	5

² Rubric is adapted from similar models developed by the Dalhousie Department of Political Science Graduate Committee.