

Beyond Catastrophe: Feminist Approaches to Environmental Transformation

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Course Description

The news is filled with vivid images of “natural” disasters and catastrophe, including floods, earthquakes, drying lakes and rivers, and hurricanes. While unified in their sense of doom, these images obscure power dynamics, lived realities, and opportunities for resistance and transformative futures. This interdisciplinary course asks students to think critically and question the often simplistic depictions of “natural disasters” in the news, in other words to see beyond catastrophe. To question simple stories of “catastrophe” we will study feminist approaches and tools that call attention to power, question inequality, privilege lived experiences and local knowledge, and focus on imagining and creating more hopeful futures. We will explore topics including the creation of vulnerability, adaptation labor dynamics, loss and damage, care and carework, and women in/and development. This is a project-based course where students will work in groups to apply course learnings to a “natural disaster” or “catastrophe” of their choice.

Learning Objectives

- Understand feminist approaches and methods and be able to explain their value to a grandparent (or other older relative).
- Critically analyze and unpack simple stories of catastrophe and disaster.
- Develop groupwork skills for project management, research, analysis, writing and presentation.

Course Philosophy

I use a feminist approach in teaching, meaning that my goal is that you all are co-creators in this class, learn just as much from each other as from me. I strive to make my classes a place where all types of knowledge and perspectives (not just typical academic ones) are valued, and where students feel valued because of their diverse experiences and perspectives. While academia is an inherently hierarchical institution, my hope is to flatten this, to the extent possible, in our class.

Course Requirements

Grades on this course will be based on several components:

Engagement (15% of final grade)

Much of course learning will occur via active student engagement. Not surprisingly, individual attendance and active participation are essential to your achievement and to the overall success of the class. At a minimum, students are expected to attend class regularly, actively engage in discussions and learning activities, and treat classmates and the instructor with respect.

Weekly reading responses (15% of final grade)

You will complete a short reading response every week. Instructions for each week will be posted on Canvas.

Leading discussion (10% of final grade, 5% each)

You will be responsible for leading our discussion twice during the semester. This includes doing some research on the background and positionality of the authors for the session and creating a set of discussion questions. This is not meant to be an intimidating assignment, but rather to change who gets to ask the questions in our class. Additional details will be posted on Canvas.

Peer Reviews (10% of final grade, 5% each)

You will write two 1-2-page single spaced peer-reviews. One will be for the rough draft of the project and one will be for the presentation. Additional details for the reviews will be posted on Canvas.

Research Project (35% of final grade)

One goal of this class is “storytelling as community service” (Maria Taylor). For your final project, you will select a “natural” disaster or catastrophe that is of interest to your group. You will examine a variety of sources for your research. Based on your research you will design a project. This could include a podcast, storymap, video, photo essay, etc. – basically anything but a standard research paper. I encourage you to be creative with your project. If your project does not take a paper format, you will need to submit a written element (e.g., podcast script) with bibliography. Your group will need to meet with me in office hours in Week 2 or 3 to discuss your topic, and again at some other point during the semester. A project proposal is due February 2. Your first draft is due on March 19 and your final project is due during the final exam time. You will complete a group self-evaluation at the end of the semester. Guidelines will be posted on Canvas. Final projects will be posted to the website beyondcatastrophe.com to contribute to re-storying disaster/catastrophe.

Research Presentation (15% of final grade)

Your group will be giving a presentation about your research project at the end of the semester. Your presentation should be 25-30 minutes with 10 minutes for questions. You are welcome to be creative in your presentation, and you do not need to use power point. In this assignment it is essential that you make your presentation accessible to *all* class members.

Required Texts

There is no required book for this course. Readings and course materials (e.g., podcasts, articles) will be available through Canvas.

Schedule of Topics and Assignments
(subject to change)

Day	Topic	Read/Watch/Listen before class Assignments
1.1	Introduction to the class	Please read through this syllabus
2.1	Why feminism and the environment?	<p>Read: Selections of Lorde, Audre. 1984. <i>Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches</i>. The Crossing Press Feminist Series. Freedom, Calif: Crossing Press.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poetry Is Not a Luxury • The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action • The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House
2.2		<p>Read: Brownworth, Victoria. 2019. "Climate Change Is a Feminist Issue." <i>Dame Magazine</i>, April 2, 2019. https://www.damemagazine.com/2019/04/02/climate-change-is-a-feminist-issue/.</p> <p>Listen: Reser, Anna, Leila McNeill, and Rebecca Ortenberg. "Episode 21: How Women Built the Environmental Movement." Lady Science. Accessed November 4, 2019. https://www.ladyscience.com/podcast/how-women-built-the-environmental-movement.</p>
3.1	History: the creation of vulnerability	<p>Read: Jacobs, Fayola. 2019. "Black Feminism and Radical Planning: New Directions for Disaster Planning Research." <i>Planning Theory</i> 18 (1): 24–39. https://doi.org/10.1177/1473095218763221.</p> <p>Read: Kersch, Belinda. 2022. "This North Memphis Resident Reflects on Decades of Environmental Injustices — and Seeks Solutions." High Ground, October 26, 2022. https://www.highgroundnews.com/features/Environmental-Justice-4.aspx.</p>
3.2		<p>Read: Ribot, Jesse. 2010. "Vulnerability Does Not Fall from the Sky: Toward Multiscale, pro-Poor Climate Policy." <i>Social Dimensions of Climate Change: Equity and Vulnerability in a Warming World</i>, January, 47–74. [<i>note: I would probably chose a different text next time</i>]</p>
4.1	Home: the personal is political	<p>Read: Stawkowski, Magdalena E. 2016. "‘I Am a Radioactive Mutant’: Emergent Biological Subjectivities at Kazakhstan’s Semipalatinsk Nuclear Test Site: ‘I Am a Radioactive Mutant.’" <i>American Ethnologist</i> 43 (1): 144–57. https://doi.org/10.1111/amet.12269.</p>

Day	Topic	Read/Watch/Listen before class Assignments
		<p>Read: Dreyer, Jacob. 2023. “A Giant Inland Sea Is Now a Desert, and a Warning for Humanity.” The New York Times, November 28, 2023, sec. Opinion. https://www.nytimes.com/2023/11/28/opinion/climate-uzbekistan-water-aral.html.</p> <p>Read: Brite, Elizabeth, Kate Shields, and Sarah Cameron. 2023. “Reply to A Giant Inland Sea Is Now a Desert, and a Warning for Humanity.” The New York Times, December 19, 2023, sec. Opinion. https://www.nytimes.com/2023/12/19/opinion/letters/defining-antisemitism-anti-zionism.html#link-23706378</p>
4.2		<p>Read: Hayman, Eleanor in collaboration with Mark Wedge/<i>Aan Goosbú</i> and Colleen James/<i>Gooch Tláa</i>. 2015. “Storytelling water north of the future Héen Kas’él’ti Xoo (among the ragged lakes).” In <i>A Political Ecology of Women, Water, and Global Environmental Change</i>, edited by Stephanie Buechler and Anne-Marie Hanson. Routledge.</p>
5.1	Feminist approaches to the environment	<p>Read: Rocheleau, Dianne, Barbara Thomas-Slayter, and Esther Wangari. 1996. “Gender and Environment.” In <i>Feminist Political Ecology: Global Issues and Local Experience</i>, edited by Rocheleau, Dianne, Barbara Thomas-Slayter, and Esther Wangari, 3-23. London: Routledge.</p> <p>Read: Elmhirst, Rebecca. 2011. “Introducing New Feminist Political Ecologies.” <i>Geoforum</i> 42 (2): 129–32.</p>
5.2		<p>Read: Gaard, Greta. 2011. “Ecofeminism Revisited: Rejecting Essentialism and Re-Placing Species in a Material Feminist Environmentalism.” <i>Feminist Formations</i> 23 (2): 26–53.</p> <p>Read: Agarwal, Bina. 1992. “The Gender and Environment Debate: Lessons from India.” <i>Feminist Studies</i> 18 (1):119-158</p>
6.1	Why feminist theory?	<p>Read: Haraway, Donna. 1988. “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective.” <i>Feminist Studies</i> 14 (3): 575.</p> <p>Project proposal due Tuesday 2/13 by 1pm to Kate by email</p>
6.2		<p>Read: hooks, bell. 1991. “Theory as Liberatory Practice.” <i>Yale Journal of Law and Feminism</i> 4: 13.</p>
7.1	Ways of knowing	<p>Read: D’Ignazio, Catherine, and Lauren Klein. 2018. “Introduction.” In <i>Data Feminism</i>. MIT Press Open. https://mitpressonpubpub.mitpress.mit.edu/pub/dgv16l22/release/6.</p> <p>Watch: USC Annenberg, dir. 2018. Algorithms of Oppression: Safiya Umoja Noble. https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=2&v=6KLTpoTpkXo&feature=emb_logo.</p> <p>Pick one:</p>

Day	Topic	Read/Watch/Listen before class Assignments
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enria, Luisa. 2016. “Co-Producing Knowledge through Participatory Theatre: Reflections on Ethnography, Empathy and Power.” <i>Qualitative Research</i> 16 (3): 319–29. • Leeuw, Sarah de, Margot W. Parkes, Vanessa Sloan Morgan, Julia Christensen, Nicole Lindsay, Kendra Mitchell-Foster, and Julia Russell Jozkow. 2017. “Going Unscripted: A Call to Critically Engage Storytelling Methods and Methodologies in Geography and the Medical-Health Sciences.” <i>The Canadian Geographer / Le Géographe Canadien</i> 61 (2): 152–64. • Mcintyre, Alice. 2003. “Through the Eyes of Women: Photovoice and Participatory Research as Tools for Reimagining Place.” <i>Gender, Place & Culture</i> 10 (1): 47–66. • McLees, Leslie. 2013. “A Postcolonial Approach to Urban Studies: Interviews, Mental Maps, and Photo Voices on the Urban Farms of Dar Es Salaam, Tanzania: Interviews, Mental Maps, and Photo Voices on the Urban Farms of Dar Es Salaam, Tanzania.” <i>The Professional Geographer</i> 65 (2): 283–95. • Wright, Sarah, Kate Lloyd, Sandie Suchet-Pearson, Laklak Burarrwanga, Matalena Tofa, and Bawaka Country. 2012. “Telling Stories in, through and with Country: Engaging with Indigenous and More-than-Human Methodologies at Bawaka, NE Australia.” <i>Journal of Cultural Geography</i> 29 (1): 39–60.
7.2		<p>Read: Nightingale, Andrea. 2003. “A Feminist in the Forest: Situated Knowledges and Mixing Methods in Natural Resource Management.” <i>ACME: An International E-Journal for Critical Geographies</i> 2 (1): 77-9.</p> <p>Read: Shields, Katherine F. Under review. Off the map and in the shadow: Water, salt, fish and gardens in the Amu Darya Delta in Uzbekistan. <i>Regional Environmental Change</i>.</p>
8.1		<p>Read: Tsing, Anna L. 2012. “On Nonscalability: The Living World Is Not Amenable to Precision-Nested Scales.” <i>Common Knowledge</i> 18 (3): 505–24. https://doi.org/10.1215/0961754X-1630424.</p>
8.2	Connection: scale and non-scalability	<p>Read: Plumwood, Val. 2008. “Shadow Places and the Politics of Dwelling.” <i>Australian Humanities Review</i> 44 (2): 139–50.</p> <p>Read: Potter, Emily, Fiona Miller, Eva Lövbrand, Donna Houston, Jessica McLean, Emily O’Gorman, Clifton Evers, and Gina Ziervogel. 2022. “A Manifesto for Shadow Places: Re-Imagining and Co-Producing Connections for Justice in an Era of Climate Change.” <i>Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space</i> 5 (1): 272–92. https://doi.org/10.1177/2514848620977022.</p>
9.1		<p>Read: Gibson-Graham, J.K. 2008. “Diverse Economies: Performative Practices for ‘other Worlds?’” <i>Progress in Human Geography</i> 32 (5): 613–32. https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132508090821.</p>

Day	Topic	Read/Watch/Listen before class Assignments
9.2	Imaginations: performing new worlds	Watch: Lewis, Avi, dir. 2020. A Message From the Future II: The Years of Repair. https://theintercept.com/2020/10/01/naomi-klein-message-from-future-covid/ . Read: Selections from Imarisha, Walidah, and adrienne maree brown, eds. 2015. Octavia’s Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements. First Edition. Oakland, CA: AK Press.
10.1	Spring break – no class	
10.2		
11.1	Intersectionality meets the environment:	First draft of feature article 1 due by Tuesday 3/19 at 11:59pm Read: Mollett, Sharlene, and Caroline Faria. 2013. “Messing with Gender in Feminist Political Ecology.” <i>Geoforum</i> 45 (March): 116–25. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2012.10.009 .
11.2	privilege and oppression	Read: Braun, Yvonne A. 2011. “Left High and Dry: An Intersectional Analysis of Gender, Dams and Development in Lesotho.” <i>International Feminist Journal of Politics</i> 13 (2): 141–62. https://doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2011.560037 .
12.1	Peer review workshop #1 Feature article 1	Peer review due on Canvas by 2pm. Please bring a paper copy to class. Read: Fey, Tina. 2011. “Lessons from Late Night.” <i>The New Yorker</i> 87 (4): 24. Available from: https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/03/14/lessons-from-late-night Read: Lamott, Anne. 2014. “Shitty First Drafts.” <i>Writing about Writing: A College Reader</i> 2: 527–31. https://wrd.as.uky.edu/sites/default/files/1-Shitty%20First%20Drafts.pdf
12.2	Easter break – no class	
13.1	Care and care work	Read: Rosenbaum, Susanna. 2021. “ ‘Women’s Work’: How the Devaluation of Care Work Hurts Women and the Economy. ” <i>Ms. Magazine</i> , February 9, 2021. Read: Banks, Nina. 2020. “Black Women in the United States and Unpaid Collective Work: Theorizing the Community as a Site of Production.” <i>The Review of Black Political Economy</i> 47 (4): 343–62. Read a NYT piece about Nina Banks and her work: Nelson, Eshe. 2021. “ The Economist Placing Value on Black Women’s Overlooked Work. ” <i>The New York Times</i> , February 5, 2021, sec. Business.
13.2		Read: Carr, Chantel. 2022. “Repair and Care: Locating the Work of Climate Crisis.” <i>Dialogues in Human Geography</i> , June, 204382062210883. https://doi.org/10.1177/20438206221088381 .

Day	Topic	Read/Watch/Listen before class Assignments
		Read: Johnson, Leigh, Michael Mikulewicz, Patrick Bigger, Ritodhi Chakraborty, Abby Cunniff, P. Joshua Griffin, Vincent Guermond, et al. 2022. “Intervention: The Invisible Labor of Climate Change Adaptation.” SSRN Scholarly Paper. Rochester, NY. https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4416499 .
14.1	Emotion	Read: Ahmed, Sara. 2017. “Conclusion 1: A Killjoy Survival Kit” and “Conclusion 2: A Killjoy Manifesto” in Living a Feminist Life. Duke University Press.
14.2		First draft of feature article 2 due by Friday 4/12 at 11:59pm Read: Willox, Ashlee Cunsolo. 2012. “Climate Change as the Work of Mourning.” Ethics and the Environment 17 (2): 137–64.
15.1	Peer review workshop #2 Feature article 2	Peer review due on Canvas by 2pm. Please bring a paper copy to class.
15.2	Presentations	First draft of two creative components due by Sunday 4/21 at 11:59pm In-class workday
16.1	Peer review workshop #3 Creative components	
16.2		In-class workday and wrap-up
Final exam day		Final project due by 8:30pm [end of final exam period]