

HONR 392B ~ AUTUMN 2019
POLITICAL ECOLOGY OF DEATH IN THE ANTHROPOCENE

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What we will study

Every living organism dies, as do ecosystems and species, thereby perpetuating the “circle of life.” Because life feeds on life, death is indispensable to the healthy functioning of ecosystems and even evolution itself. One species, however, has developed the capacity to anticipate (and therefore dread) death and commandeer other species in service to increasing its numbers and its material consumption. With industrialization, anthropogenic species extinctions and ecosystem collapse, once limited to local and regional scales, became planetary. Humanity is now operating well outside the planetary boundaries that characterized the Holocene, the interglacial “sweet spot” during which civilization emerged. The implications are profound: not only are we facing the end of “nature” as something separate from human culture, we are also facing the prospect of civilizational death.

We will therefore ask ourselves: what are the political and ecological consequences of how individuals and societies approach death? While death is a fact of life, questions of who lives, who dies, who decides, and with what consequences are also political ones. Our discussion will therefore be informed by themes of justice, equity, power and authority, and political agency. At the same time, because mortality is also an intensely personal reality, we will deepen our self-inquiry through poetry, videos, contemplative practices, personal exploration, and political action.

We will explore the following topics:

- Secular, religious, spiritual and indigenous perspectives on death
- Ernst Becker's “denial of death” thesis and more recent terror management theory
- The political and ecological consequences of various “immortality projects”
- The relationship between waste and death
- Linear economics (from resource extraction to production to consumption to waste) vs. regenerative living systems
- Anthropogenic species death and the mass extinction crisis
- How cultural attitudes about ecology and death inform the treatment of animals
- Pesticides, herbicides, antibiotics, and ecocide

- The political ecology of end-of-life care and the treatment of corpses
- Indigenous peoples and the relationship between the death of ecosystems and cultures
- The relationship between democracy and the political ecology of death
- Grief, hope, meaning, and political agency in the face of ecocide

What You Will Learn

If you engage yourself dynamically with this course, including grasping content from lectures and readings, participating actively in class, writing thoughtful papers and blog posts, and creatively contributing to a group action project, I expect that you will improve your depth of understanding and skillfulness in many arenas, most especially the following:

- Analytical and critical thinking skills about some of the most important issues of our day, including climate change, biodiversity
- The capacity to integrate cognitive, emotional, and somatic self-awareness in the face of challenging questions
- Your ability to articulate ideas and feelings about these issues, both in writing and conversation
- Your ability to listen to, understand, empathize and collaborate with others who do not necessarily share your opinions and beliefs
- Reflecting upon your sense of meaning in the face of both personal mortality and ecocide
- Enhancing your sense of citizenship and political agency in the planetary era.

Course requirements

- Intensive reading on the political ecology of death (100-200 pages/week)
- Active participation in discussions and contemplative practices
 - Please bring your **full and engaged presence** to class, having read the associated materials beforehand.
- Contributing to our course blog (three required posts)
- Group action project
 - Weekly meetings with your “study/action group” towards a community service project
 - Your contribution will be evaluated by your peers
 - Short paper on your experience in light of course materials
- A final paper synthesizing your learning

Course Grading	
Participation	20%
Postings to course blog	40%
Weekly question/thought	5%
Action group	
Proposal	5%
Contribution to group (peer reviewed)	5%
Final synthesis paper	25%

Required Texts (in order of usage)

Sheldon Solomon, Jeff Greenberg, and Tom Pyszczynski (2015) *The worm at the core: on the role of death in life*, New York: Random House.

Roy Scranton (2015) *Learning to die in the Anthropocene: reflections on the end of a civilization*, San Francisco, CA: City Lights Books.

Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone (2012) *Active hope: how to face the mess we're in without going crazy*, Novato, Calif.: New World Library.

Recommended: Ernst Becker (1975) *The denial of death*. New York: Free Press.

Selected excerpts from the following (on Canvas)

David Abram (2011). *Becoming Animal: An Earthly Cosmology*. Vintage.

Christopher Bache (2000) *Dark night, early dawn: Steps to a deep ecology of mind*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.

Ben Bradley, et al. (2013) *The Oxford handbook of the philosophy of death*. New York: Oxford University Press.

William Connolly (2017) *Facing the planetary: entangled humanism and the politics of swarming*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Charles Eisenstein (2011) *Sacred economics: money, gift, & society in the age of transition*, Berkeley, Calif.: Evolver Editions.

Amitav Ghosh (2016) *The great derangement: climate change and the unthinkable*, Chicago ; London: The University of Chicago Press.

Gay Hawkins (2006) *The ethics of waste: how we relate to rubbish*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

Thomas Homer-Dixon (2008) *The Upside of Down: Catastrophe, Creativity, and the Renewal of Civilization* Island Press.

Robert Jay Lifton (2017) *The climate swerve: reflections on mind, hope, and survival*, New York, NY: The New Press.

Karen Litfin (2014) *Ecovillages: Lessons for Sustainable Community*. Polity, 2014.

Moore, Kathleen Dean (2016) *Great tide rising: towards clarity and moral courage in a time of planetary change*. Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint.

Simon Nicholson & Sikina Jinnah (2016) *New earth politics: Essays from the Anthropocene*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

Erik Reece (2017) *Practice Resurrection and Other Essays*. Counterpoint Press.

Yalom, Irvin (2008) *Staring at the sun: overcoming the terror of death*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Rebecca Solnit (2004) *Hope in the dark: untold histories, wild possibilities*. New York: Nation Books.

Sheldon Solomon, et al. (2015) *The worm at the core: on the role of death in life*. New York: Random House.

Anna Tsing (2015) *The mushroom at the end of the world: On the possibility of life in capitalist ruins*,

Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Paul Wapner (2013) *Living Through the End of Nature: The Future of American Environmentalism*. MIT Press.

Francis Weller (2015) *The Wild Edge of Sorrow: Rituals of Renewal and the Sacred Work of Grief*. Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books.

Electronic readings on Canvas

Group Action Project

Like service learning, these projects take your in-class learning into the public sphere but they are also different in that they are self-initiated and self-implemented by a group of 4-5 students. They therefore generally entail more creativity, democratic deliberation, and agency. The group's purpose is threefold. First, it will help members assimilate and deepen their connection to the course material in a smaller social setting than in lecture or quiz section. Second, groups may wish to experiment with contemplative practices—either those introduced in class or others. Third, and most importantly, action groups will engage in a community service or educational project that they decide upon and implement collectively.

Projects might be part of an existing endeavor or it might be entirely your group's own creation. Either way, I encourage you to familiarize yourself with existing initiatives that your group might consider supporting. Whether the project is an educational effort, an artistic creation, a contribution to an existing initiative, or a simple act of service, it should have a political dimension. The point of this assignment is to somehow bring your group's concerns to the polis.

Action groups will meet with me before submitting their project proposal at the end of Week 3. The proposal is a group submission but final synthesis papers will be individual submissions.

Late assignments

Late assignments are not accepted without a medical excuse. All requests on these matters must be made through me, preferably before the due date.

About plagiarism

Please do not succumb to the temptation to use another author's words or ideas without proper citation. The same tools that make it easy for students to plagiarize in today's information age also make it easy for instructors to detect plagiarism. And, even if one is not caught, any marginal benefit gained is greatly outweighed by the harm inflicted upon one's own character. In a nutshell, the university's rules on plagiarism will be strictly enforced in this class. Papers will be submitted on Canvas and the Turnitin function will be enabled.

Disabled Student Provisions

If you wish to request academic accommodations due to a disability, please contact Disabled Student Services, 448 Schmitz, 543-8924. If you have letter from DSS indicating that you have a disability that requires special accommodations, please present it to me.

SCHEDULE of READINGS and ASSIGNMENTS

- 9/25 Course overview
No readings
- 9/30 Key concepts: political ecology, death and the Anthropocene
READ: Paul Robbins, 2012. "Political and Apolitical Ecologies," *Political ecology: a critical introduction* 2nd ed., Chichester, UK: Wiley, Chapter 1.
- Richard Heinberg, ["The Big Picture."](#) *Resilience*, December 17, 2018.
- Anthony Burke et al., 2016. "Planet Politics: A Manifesto from the End of IR" *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, Vol. 44(3) 499–523.
- Sara Schley, [Sustainability: Inner and Outer Work](#)
- Optional:** Karen Litfin, 2016. "Person/Planet Politics: Contemplative Pedagogies for a New Earth," in Simon Nicholson and Sikhina Jinnah (eds.), *New Earth Politics: Essays from the Anthropocene*. MIT Press.
- John Richardson, ["When the End of Civilization is Your Day Job"](#)
- Nathaniel Rich, 2018. "Losing Earth" *New York Times Magazine*. August 1.
- McKibben, Global Warming's Terrifying New Math
<http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/news/global-warmings-terrifying-new-math-20120719>
- NPR interview with Elizabeth Kolbert, [In The World's 'Sixth Extinction,' Are Humans The Asteroid?](#)
- 10/2 Foundational concepts: living systems, the adaptive cycle, population dynamics, entropy
WATCH: [Entropy](#), [Adaptive Capacity](#) (20 minutes)
READ: Alok Jha, ["What is the Second Law of Thermodynamics?"](#)
- Thomas Homer-Dixon, 2008. *The Upside of Down: Catastrophe, Creativity, and the Renewal of Civilization*. Chapter 9, "Cycles Within Cycles," pp. 207-34.
- Jacopa Simonetta, ["The other side of the global crisis: entropy and the collapse of civilizations"](#)
- David Roberts, ["The best way to reduce your personal carbon emissions: don't be rich"](#)
- David Roberts, ["I'm an environmental journalist, but I never write about overpopulation. Here's why."](#)
- Jonathon Keeney, ["To Beat Death and Become Immortals, We Must First Defeat Entropy"](#)
- Richard Heinberg, ["President Declares War on Entropy"](#)

Optional: Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen, “Quo Vadis Homo Sapiens Sapiens (1989): A Query”

Stephen Quilley, "[Entropy, the anthroposphere and the ecology of civilization](#)"

Michael Halewood, "[Death, Entropy, Creativity and Perpetual Perishing: Some Thoughts from Whitehead and Stengers](#)"

10/7 Contemplating Extinction: From Nuclear Winter to Losing the Biosphere

READ: Robert Jay Lifton. 2017. *The climate swerve: reflections on mind, hope, and survival*. The New Press. Chapter 3, “Apocalyptic Twins: Nuclear and Climate Threats” (pp. 17-43).

Carl Zimmer, "[The Planet Has Seen Sudden Warming Before. It Wiped Out Almost Everything.](#)”

Brooke Jarvis, "[The Insect Apocalypse is Here](#)”

Elizabeth Kolbert, *The Sixth Extinction* (excerpts)

ENTILE Blog Post, “Learning to Name Them as the Go”

Alfred G. Killelea, 1988. *The Politics of Being Mortal*. University Press of Kentucky. Chapters 8-9, pp. 126-158.

Browse: [The Good Grief Network](#)

In-class movie: [Anthropocene](#)

1/21 FIRST BLOG POST DUE

ACTION GROUP PROPOSAL ASSIGNMENT POSTED

1/22 The Denial of Death and Its Consequences: Terror Management Theory

READ: *The Worm at the Core*, Introduction and Chapters 1-3 (pp. vii-60).

1/24 The Denial of Death and Its Consequences: The Quest for Immortality Through the Ages

READ: *The Worm at the Core*, Part Two: Chapters 4-6.

1/29 Plasticene

READ: Brooks Hays, 2016. "[Scientists Say Anthropocene Epoch is Age of Plastic](#)”

Pam Weintraub, 2015. "[American Petro-topia](#)”

Ben Guarino, "[Experts warned this plastic garbage collector wouldn’t work. The ocean proved them right](#)”

Prachi Patel, 2018. "[Mutant Enzyme Gobbles Up Plastic](#)”

WATCH: Anand Pandian, "[Wine-Dark Sea](#)”

In-class: “Albatross”

1/31 The Denial of Death and Its Consequences: Death in Modernity

READ: *The Worm at the Core*, Part Three: Chapters 7-end (pp. 127-225).

2/2 ACTION GROUP PROPOSAL DUE

2/5 The Heroic Impulse at the Dawn of the Anthropocene

READ: Becker, *The Denial of Death*, Part III, Chapter 11
Roy Scranton (2015) *Learning to die in the Anthropocene: reflections on the end of a civilization*, San Francisco, CA: City Lights Books.

- 2/7 The Authoritarian Impulse at the Dawn of the Anthropocene
READ: Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death*, Chapter 7, “The Spell Cast by Persons—The Nexus of Unfreedom,” pp. 127-58.
Francois Gemenne, “The Anthropocene and Its Victims”
Robinson Meyer, [“Trump is the First Demagogue of the Anthropocene”](#)

2/10 SECOND BLOG POST DUE – RESPOND TO A CLASSMATE

- 2/12 Religious, Secular and Spiritual Perspectives on Death, Ecology and Politics
READ: Karen Litfin, 2010. “The Sacred and the Profane in the Ecological Politics of Sacrifice” in John Meyer and Michael Maniates (eds.) *The Environmental Politics of Sacrifice*. MIT Press, pp. 115-132.

Erik Reece, 2017. “The Circulatory System: A Manifesto” and “Practice Resurrection” from *Practice Resurrection and Other Essays*. Counterpoint.

In-class video: “Journey of the Universe”

- 2/14 Religious, Secular and Spiritual Perspectives on Death, Ecology and Politics

READ: Robert P. Harrison, “Gilgamesh”

Joseph Henderson and Mary Oakes, “Death and Rebirth of the Universe” (four passages)

Paul Tillich, 1956. “Man and Earth” from *The Eternal Now*. Charles Scribner, pp. 68-78.

Jack Turner, 2011. “Whitman, Death, and Democracy” in John Seery, *Whitman: A Political Companion*. Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, pp. 272–295.

Tolle, Eckhart, 2016. *A new earth: awakening to your life's purpose*. New York, Penguin Book. (excerpts)

Abanes, Richard, 2008. *A new earth, an old deception: awakening to the dangers of Eckhart Tolle's #1 bestseller*, Bethany House. (excerpts)

Recommended: Martha Nussbaum, 2011. “Democratic Desire: Walt Whitman” in John Seery, *Whitman: A Political Companion*. Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, pp. 96-129.

The Inner Landscape of the Anthropocene

READ: Janis Dickinson, 2009. “The people paradox: self-esteem striving, immortality ideologies, and human response to climate change. *Ecology and Society* 14(1): 34.
Renee Lertzmann, “Ecological Melancholia”

Animals: Avi Solomon, [“Working Undercover in a Slaughterhouse: an interview with Timothy Pachirat”](#)

[“Grieving Orca Carries Dead Calf for More Than 3 Days: ‘She’s Just Not Letting Go’”](#)

2/7 Capitalocene: Endless Growth on a Finite Planet

READ: Dipesh Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History: Four Theses”
David Loy, “Religion of the Market”
Naomi Klein, *The Changes Everything* (excerpts)
Charles Eisenstein, *Sacred Economics* (excerpts)
Neil Elgee, [“Is a Fear of Death at the Heart of Capitalism?”](#)

SECOND BLOG POST DUE

2/12 The Toilet Assumption: Anatomy of ‘Away’

READ: Gay Hawkins (2006) *The ethics of waste: how we relate to rubbish*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield. Chapter 6, “Worms”

2/14 Burning the Dead: Archaeology of the Past Present through Fossilized Fuels

READ: Thomas Princen, et al. 2017. *Ending the Fossil Fuel Era*. MIT Press. (excerpts)
Anna Tsing 2015. *The mushroom at the end of the world: On the possibility of life in capitalist ruins*, Princeton: Princeton University Press. (excerpts)
Eric Holt-Jimenez. 2017. *Can We Feed the World without Destroying It?* Polity Press. (excerpts)

2/19 Catagenesis: Disaster, Collapse, and Regeneration

READ: Nigel Thrift, “Panicsville: Paul Virilio and the Aesthetics of Disaster” in John Armitage, 2011. *Virilio now : current perspectives in Virilio studies*, Cambridge, UK ; Malden, MA: Polity.

2/21 The Personal is Political

READ: Macy and Johnstone, *Active Hope*, Parts 1-2

2/26 How, then, shall we die?

READ: Taflin Laylin, [“Washington could become the first state to legalize human composting”](#)

John Leland, [“The Death Positive Movement Comes to Life”](#)

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/28/opinion/sunday/resolutions-hope-cancer-god.html>

Rachel Clarke, [“In Life’s Last Moments, Open a Window”](#)

Joan Halifax, 2008. “Being One with Dying: Showing Up for the Great Matter” in *Being with dying: cultivating compassion and fearlessness in the presence of death*. Shambhala.

In-class video: “Griefwalker”

2/28 How, then, shall we live?

READ:
Paul Wapner (2013) *Living Through the End of Nature: The Future of American*

Environmentalism. MIT Press. Chapter Eight, “Decisive Uncertainty and the Future of Environmentalism”

Karen Litfin 2014. *Ecovillages: Lessons for Sustainable Community*. Polity Press, “Community” and “Consciousness,” Chapters 5-6.

3/5 Going Forth: Person/Planet Praxis
READ: *Active Hope*, Part 3

3/7 ACTION GROUP PRESENTATIONS

The point is to help us avoid the alternative scenario, "The Internet of Way Too Many Stupid Things," with its devastating ecological consequences: http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/06/opinion/sunday/allison-arieff-the-internet-of-way-too-many-things.html?_r=0

3/5 THIRD BLOG POST DUE

3/5 Coming to Our Senses
READ: Thomas Homer-Dixon, 2008. *The Upside of Down: Catastrophe, Creativity, and the Renewal of Civilization*. Chapter 11, “Catagenesis,” pp. 265-95).

Moore, Kathleen Dean, 2016. *Great tide rising: towards clarity and moral courage in a time of planetary change*. Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint. (excerpts)

Grief. Francis Weller (2015) *The Wild Edge of Sorrow: Rituals of Renewal and the Sacred Work of* Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books. (excerpts)

3/7 GROUP ACTION PRESENTATIONS IN CLASS

3/12 GROUP ACTION PRESENTATIONS IN CLASS

3/14 Course synthesis

3/15 FINAL PAPERS DUE ON CANVAS

3/18 FINAL BLOG POST DUE