

NYU XE: Experimental Humanities & Social Engagement
Course # CEH-GA 1018.003 / Spring 2021

EXPERIMENTAL MEDIA FOR RADICAL ECOLOGIES
SYLLABUS AS OF 2021-FEB20

INSTRUCTOR

Prof. Elaine Gan, PhD
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SEMINARS

Wednesdays 5-7:30pm
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COURSE DESCRIPTION

This seminar engages students in multimodal methods to study the American chestnut tree (*Castanea dentata*), the beloved "queen of forests" in the Eastern United States—until the nineteenth century. Billions of chestnut trees succumbed to blight disease when plant nurseries in New York began importing trees from Asia, which happened to carry a ravenous hitchhiker, the bright orange fungus (*Cryphonectria parasitica*). The death of chestnut trees over the last two centuries has changed multiple lives and landscapes. Today, foresters and geneticists are testing "restoration trees" to bring into being a redesigned version of the American chestnut. There is more to the story which this seminar will seek to unpack.

How might we trace the *historical*, *ecological*, and *ethical* significance of these events from various more-than-human perspectives? How might we craft a multispecies story of life and death that renders differential ontologies through close attention to matter and media? This seminar introduces students to multispecies/cyborg ethnography, science/media studies, and experimental documentary through a pragmatic and collaborative approach: learning through making, making as theorizing with-for-within more-than-human worlds.

Students will participate in a range of activities: interviews, archival research, film screenings, readings, field audio/video recordings, creative brainstorming, and storyboarding, with guest speakers from cinema, sound, mycology, forestry, and anthropology. (Please note that due to the pandemic, in-person group activities will be limited.)

OBJECTIVES AND EVALUATION CRITERIA

This graduate seminar is part of *Radical Ecologies*, an interdisciplinary research and teaching initiative sponsored by the Bennett-Polonsky Humanities Labs (H-Labs) of NYU Center for the Humanities. The key objective is to introduce students to multimodal methods for addressing and engaging with pressing issues of climate change, extinction, and environmental uncertainty that require transdisciplinary collaboration and public engagement. Special thanks to Tega Brain and Elizabeth Henaff (Tandon School of Engineering), Karen Holmberg (Gallatin School of Individualized Study), and Molly Rogers (Center for Humanities).

Students will be evaluated based on the following criteria:

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| 1. Attendance and Engagement | 30% |
| 2. Discussion Leads (2 x 10%) | 20% |
| 3. Short Essays, 1000 words (2 x 10%) on 3/3 and 4/14 | 20% |
| 4. Final Essay, 4000 words or media equivalent | 30% |

1. Attendance and Engagement: 30%

This is a graduate seminar. Punctual attendance and completed readings are the minimum expectation. You will be graded not only for your physical presence but for preparation and active engagement. Indeed, different people have different learning styles and modes of expression. "Active engagement" can mean asking thoughtful questions, offering alternate perspectives, relating a reading to a current event, or sharing a close reading of a particular passage, aesthetic choice, or media operation. Please consider the seminar as a unique place to cultivate your own voice—and your peers'—through generous and responsible conversation.

2. Discussion Leads: 20% (2 x 10%)

During our first meeting, you will sign up to co-lead two discussions of your choice. Please prepare an outline/slide show for a 20-minute presentation that is a close reading and analysis of the assigned reading. In your presentation, please (1) specify key figures and keywords, (2) draw out main arguments, (3) map out connections to the course, and (4) pose 2-3 questions for the class to discuss further. Submit your outline/slide show to the class forum by noon on class day.

3. Short Essays, 1000 words: 20% (2 x 10%)

Due on March 3 and April 14: 1000 words per essay, typed, double-spaced, with academic citations. Describe your research process, sources, and findings to date. Submit your essay to the class forum by noon on class day.

4. Final Essay, 4000 words or media equivalent: 30%

Due on May 19 at 5PM: 4000 words, typed, double-spaced, with academic citations. Your paper should develop your research findings and class learnings throughout the term into an argument about the American Chestnut and its companions as a Radical Ecology. We will discuss in class. Please discuss with me if you are considering a media project instead of a written text.

WEEKLY SCHEDULE

2/3 **Introductions and Course Overview**

Popkin, Gabriel. "Can Genetic Engineering Bring Back the American Chestnut?" *New York Times*, April 30, 2020.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/30/magazine/american-chestnut.html>.

Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird, Wallace Stevens
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45236/thirteen-ways-of-looking-at-a-blackbird>

2/10 **Multispecies Ethnography**

read Gan, Elaine, and Anna L. Tsing. "How Things Hold: A Diagram of Coordination in a Satoyama Forest." *Social Analysis* 62, no. 4 (Winter 2018): 102–45. <https://doi.org/10.3167/sa.2018.620406>.

read Van Dooren, Thom, Eben Kirksey, and Ursula Münster. "Multispecies Studies: Cultivating Arts of Attentiveness." *Environmental Humanities* 8, no. 1 (2016): 1–23. <https://doi.org/10.1215/22011919-3527695>.

in-class 5-6pm discussion

in-class 6-7:30pm guest speaker: Pawel Wojtasik, filmmaker

2/17 **Entangled Lives of Trees and Fungi**

read Sheldrake, Merlin. *Entangled Life: How Fungi Make Our Worlds, Change Our Minds, and Shape Our Futures*. New York: Random House, 2020.

watch Merlin Sheldrake book talk with Helen Macdonald
<https://www.facebook.com/SpiritualEcology/videos/261001048480946/>

in-class 5-6pm discussion

in-class 6-7:30pm guest speaker: Sigrid Jacob, mycologist, New York Mycological Society

2/24 **How Chestnut Trees Make History: Queen of Forests**

read Freinkel, Susan. *American Chestnut: The Life, Death, and Rebirth of a Perfect Tree*. Berkeley: UC Press, 2007.

in-class 5-6pm discussion

in-class 6-8:30pm guest speaker: Stephen Vitiello, sound artist
 Please note extended class time to allow for working with sound.

3/3 **How Fungi Unmake History: Decomposers & Ghosts**

- read Mathews, Andrew. "Landscapes and Throuscapes in Italian Forest Worlds: Thinking Dramatically About the Anthropocene."
<https://journal.culanth.org/index.php/ca/article/view/ca33.3.05/91>
- read Mathews, Andrew. "Ghostly Forms and Forest Histories." In *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Ghosts and Monsters of the Anthropocene*, G145-156. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2017
pdf is on NYU Classes > resources
- read Sizek, Julia. "Methods for Many Anthropocenes with Andrew S. Mathews"
<https://culanth.org/fieldsights/methods-for-many-anthropocenes-with-andrew-s-mathews>
- in-class 5-6pm guest speaker: Andrew Mathews, anthropologist UC Santa Cruz
 6-7:30pm short essay 1: presentations of research and media
SUBMIT ESSAY 1 TO CLASS FORUM

3/10 ***no class meeting / time for research and individual meetings***

- watch Lynne Boddy, microbial ecologist, Cardiff University
 Mycelia, trees, climate change <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rkn1Q7hwhfYY>
 Field methods <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mPGUIE9LKB0>

fieldwork site 1

research on Parsons Nursery, Kissena Park / Roland Wade, Kissena Park Conservancy
 recordings at Kissena Park, Queens (EG, TV, PW)

3/17 **The Making of a Nation**

- read Rutkow, Eric. *American Canopy: Trees, Forests, and the Making of a Nation*. New York: Scribner, 2012
- in-class 6-7:30pm guest speaker: Neil Patterson, SUNY ESF/Center for Native People and the Environment
- in-class 5-6pm discussion

3/25 **Giving Voice / Sounding A City As Archive**

THU 5-7pm guest speaker: Ernst Karel, sonic ethnographer

fieldwork site 2

research on SUNY ESF, American Chestnut Foundation (Chestnut Chats series)
 recordings at Green-Wood Cemetery (EG, TV, PW)

3/31 Natural History of New York

read Sanderson, Eric W., and Markley Boyer. *Mannahatta: Natural History of New York City*. New York: Abrams, 2009.

in-class 5-6pm discussion

in-class 6-7:30pm guest speaker: tba / Elaine Ayers, NYU Museum Studies

4/7 no class meeting / time for research***fieldwork site 3***

research on genetic sequencing methods, biotech policies in NY/US, bioethics recordings at Prospect Park with Bart Chezar/ACF (EG, TV, PW)
recordings at Green-Wood Cemetery with Sigrid Jacob/NYMS

4/14 Futures: Cli-Fi

read Robinson, Kim Stanley. *The Ministry for the Future*. New York: Orbit, 2020.

in-class 5-6pm discussion

6-7:30pm short essay 2: presentations of research and media

SUBMIT ESSAY 2 TO CLASS FORUM

4/20 NOTE: This is a guest speaker on TUESDAY at 6PM.

TUE Eben Kirksey, multispecies ethnographer and author of *The Mutant Project: Inside the Global Race to Genetically Modify Humans*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2020 (for readers in a hurry: prologue; ch1-3; ch12-15; ch20-epilogue)

4/21 no class meeting / time for research***fieldwork site 4***

research on environmental ethics, environmental activisms
recordings at NYBG (EG, TV, PW)

4/28 Futures: Camille/Chestnut Stories

read Haraway, Donna J. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016.

in-class 5-6pm discussion

in-class 6-7:30pm storyboarding

5/5 Workshop / Storyboarding / Web Design

fieldwork site 5

recordings at SUNY Syracuse with Bill Powell Lab (EG, TV, PW)

5/12 Workshop / Editing / Web Design

5/19 FINAL ESSAYS/PROJECTS ARE DUE BY 5PM
SUBMIT FINAL ESSAY TO CLASS FORUM

summer!

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

In creating new knowledge, scholars in all fields receive, adapt, and build on the ideas and findings of others. Responsible scholarship demands that we study, discuss, and master the work of our intellectual forbearers; it also demands that we fully acknowledge their contributions in our own scholarship.

As a student in the Graduate School of Arts and Science (GSAS) at New York University, you have become part of a longstanding community of significant research and learning. The University understands and expects that you pursue your studies and research in ways that conform to the standards of scholarly practice both at NYU and in the greater academic community.

Plagiarism – representing the work of others as one’s own – is a very serious violation of the intellectual trust that forms the basis of this scholarship.

All members of our academic community are expected to cite fully and appropriately in their own work the ideas, findings, and words of others. We are all expected to report truthfully the results of our research. And we are expected to be honest in the preparation and grading of all papers, assignments, and examinations.

GSAS and the Faculty of Arts and Science (FAS) do not tolerate breaches of these and other widely accepted scholarly standards. Should such a breach occur, a student or faculty member with knowledge of the facts is obligated to file a complaint with the relevant department chair or program director. A meeting with the student will be held in the department or program in which the student is enrolled and, if a violation has occurred, a sanction, ranging from censure to termination, will be issued. Should the student not agree with the determined sanction, the case will then be referred to the FAS Committee on Discipline for consideration. A repeat offense will result in termination from the Graduate School.

The full policy on issues of academic misconduct may be found in Section 8 of the [GSAS Policies and Procedures Manual](#).