

Eco-Collapse in Transatlantic Perspective

Course coordinator: Michael Boyden, Radboud University Nijmegen

Fall 2022

1. Course Premise

Disasters – whether or not man-made – often catalyze the emergence of a sense of national self-consciousness. In the Netherlands, for instance, ingenuity and resilience in the face of successive floods constitute central ingredients of the Batavian myth around which a Dutch national imaginary took shape. But the Batavian myth also displays remarkable parallels with other narratives of historical self-legitimation, particularly those of settler or pioneer cultures in the United States and elsewhere. In reconfigured form, such localized tropes of national self-fashioning now resurface in speculative and science fiction about planetary collapse as well as Indigenous counter-epistemologies. An understanding of the cultural work that such eco-collapse narratives do, and how they reverberate and are recycled, is an essential step toward meeting the challenges of a warming planet today. This course specifically considers how stories that depict the impact of eco-disasters on the identity and mentalities of a given group of people take shape in relation to similar narratives circulating elsewhere. Mobilizing critical insights from recent scholarship in ecocriticism and Anthropocene Studies, we will explore such multidirectional borrowings in selected examples of eco-collapse narratives and other cultural expressions.

2. Learning Outcomes

At the end of the course, students are expected to have acquired a critical ability:

- To analyze the historical genealogy of eco-collapse narratives in comparative perspective;
- To read narratives, images, and arguments about eco-collapse and their function in society, drawing on the vocabulary of recent scholarship in the Environmental Humanities;
- To differentiate between the alarmist rhetoric of eco-collapse and real environmental issues;
- To identify and reflect on the importance of art and culture in imagining pathways toward a more sustainable future.

3. Teaching format

The course is structured as follows:

- A total of 6 seminars running over the fall term.
- You are expected to come prepared and to take active part in the discussions.
- Occasional extra readings of secondary texts may be assigned in addition to the texts listed.

4. Study Load

Study load (in hours) divided by course component:

Component	Amount	Duration	Hours
Attendance of the seminars	6	2	12
Readings	6	10	60
Preparing your presentation			3
The research proposal			10
Feedback on research proposal			5
Researching the final paper			30
Writing the final paper			20
Total			140

5. Assessment

- **Presentation in class.** Each week, a group of students act as seminar leaders. They contextualize the readers for their fellow students and submit a minimum of three discussion questions at least 2 days before the start of the seminar.
- **Research proposal** for your final paper. (20%)
- **Feedback** to the research proposals of several of your fellow students. (pass/fail)
- **Final paper.** Submission deadline: January 9 at noon (80%)

Component	Deadline	Weight	Minimum grade	Resit
Presentation		Pass	NA	NA
Research proposal	December 12 at noon	20%	5,6	NA
Feedback on research proposals		Pass	NA	NA
Final paper	January 9 at noon	80%	5,6	YES

6. Classroom safety

During this course, you will discuss socio-cultural issues with your peers. Some of those issues may be controversial and/or sensitive. Mutual respect and considerate language are vital for these discussions. This is an academic course, and disagreement and debate are obviously central to what we do, but please be mindful of the fact that people may be positioned differently in terms of identity, experience, and emotional response.

While the course program has content notifications for some of the texts (based on the instructor's perspective), these are not necessarily exhaustive. It is therefore your own responsibility to make sure you study the course schedule in advance so you know what to expect in terms of content and to further inform yourself about the texts we study.

7. Primary Literature

The students should purchase or otherwise acquire the following texts:

- Madeleine Watts, *The Inland Sea*. London: Pushkin ONE, 2020. ISBN 978-1911590255.
- John Steinbeck, *To a God Unknown*. Penguin, 2000. ISBN 978-0141185507
- Richard Wright, *Down by the Riverside*. In: *Uncle Tom's Children*. Harper, 2008. ISBN 978-0061450204

- Paul Auster, *In the Country of Last Things*. Faber and Faber, 1992. ISBN 978-0571227303

The other readings will be made available via Perusall.

8. Scholarship on Eco-collapse

The following non-exhaustive list might help you to glean theoretical insights on the topic of the course:

- Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending* (Oxford University Press, 2000)
- Frederick Buell, *From Apocalypse to Way of Life: Environmental Crisis in the American Century* (Routledge, 2014)
- Kate Rigby, *Dancing with Disaster: Histories, Narratives, and Ethics for Perilous Time*, (University of Virginia Press, 2015)
- Rebecca Solnit, *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities that Arise in Disaster* (Penguin, 2020)
- Sarah E. McFarland, *Ecocollapse Fiction and Cultures of Human Extinction* (Bloomsbury, 2021)
- Mark Bould, *The Anthropocene Unconscious: Climate Catastrophe Culture* (Verso, 2021)
- Timothy Sweet, *Extinction and the Human: Four American Encounters* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021)

9. Course Schedule and Reading Assignments

Week 1: Introduction to the course

Wednesday 5 October, 13-15

Room E 2.21

Zoom link (only for remote students):

<https://radbouduniversity.zoom.us/j/9451279444?pwd=S2t4SGhhdDFmbE1RcGdPUUJVNjVUT09>

The first seminar will introduce students to theoretical models for analyzing cultural representations of eco-collapse. We will consider the societal functions of such representations, their reliance on given narrative templates and topoi, and how they speak to historically specific understandings of risk.

Readings

- François Hartog, "Apocalypticism: A Philosophy of History?" *Esprit* 6 (2014): 22-32.
- Lotte Jensen et al., "Appropriating Disasters: A Framework for Cultural Historical Research on Catastrophes in Europe, 1500-1900" *Journal of Historical Geography* 76 (2022): 34-41.
- Sarah E. McFarland, "Embracing Extinction" *Women's Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 50.8 (2021): 837-842.

Week 2: Antipodean Eco-Collapse (guest lecture Chris Cusack)

Wednesday 19 October, 13-15

Room E 2.21

Zoom link:

<https://radbouduniversity.zoom.us/j/9451279444?pwd=S2t4SGhhdDFmbE1RcGdPUUJVNjVUT09>

In Madeleine Watts' *The Inland Sea*, personal crisis is plotted against the many emergencies, great and small, of a society struggling with climate crisis and its intersections with the legacies of colonialism. Unlike many works of climate fiction, *The Inland Sea* is set in the terrifying present, "the hottest year on record, although they've said that about every year since," not in a cautionary future: Australia as depicted in the novel is in the throes of the climate emergency, beset by rampant wildfires and equally devastating floods. The novel's protagonist is a recent university graduate in Sydney haunted by the ghosts of both the recent and the distant past. Trying to find her bearings, she has to negotiate the shifting parameters of the quotidian in the face of personal and climatic breakdown. Hovering over the narrative is the ghost of her colonial ancestor, who travelled deep into Australia's interior in search of a mythic inland sea said to contain a vast supply of the continent's most valuable commodity, i.e. fresh water. During this seminar, we will think about generationality, the connections between settler colonialism and climate change, and the ways trauma maps onto the inescapable consequences of the climate crisis.

Reading

- Madeleine Watts, *The Inland Sea*. London: Pushkin ONE, 2020. ISBN 978-1911590255.

Week 3: Oil (guest lecture Kenneth Nsah)

Wednesday 9 November, 13-15

Room E 2.21

Zoom link:

<https://radbouduniversity.zoom.us/j/9451279444?pwd=S2t4SGhhdDFmbE1RcGdPUUJVNjVUT09>

In this seminar, we shall examine the implications of the neocolonial quest for African commons or natural resources on indigenous livelihoods. With particular reference to selected writings of popular Nigerian environmental martyr Ken Saro-Wiwa, we shall discuss different aspects and manifestations of eco-collapse as orchestrated by various neocolonial resource-thirsty stakeholders (Western oil companies like Shell BP and Chevron, corrupt Nigerian governments, etc.) in the oil-rich Niger Delta. We will analyse the ways in which oil drilling has brought catastrophe and collapse to the cultural, indigenous, and economic livelihoods of the Ogoni and other indigenous ethnicities in the Niger Delta. We shall also briefly discuss how Ken Saro-Wiwa's environmental activism resonates across timescapes and landscapes, including across the Atlantic, with its potential influence on some of the environmental movements in South America, and how eco-collapse takes on transnational implications for humanity and the more-than-human world in the 21st century.

Required Readings:

- Ken Saro-Wiwa, *Genocide in Nigeria* (1992) - Introduction and other excerpts

- Ken Saro-Wiwa, “Home, Sweet Home” and “Night Ride” in *A Forest of Flowers* (1986) - short fiction
- Tanure Ojaide & Enajite Eseoghene Ojaruega (ed.), *The Literature and Arts of the Niger Delta* (2021) – Introduction
- Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011) - Introduction

Suggested Readings:

- Adewale Maja-Pearce, *Remembering Ken Saro-Wiwa and Other Essays* (2011) - Introduction
- Ogaga Okuyade, 2013, *Eco-Critical Literature: Regreening African Landscapes*, African Heritage Press.
- Nol Alembong, Oscar C. Labang and Eunice F. Fombebe (eds.), 2015, *Ecocultural Perspectives: Literature and Language*, Ken Scholars Publishing
- Cajetan Iheka, 2017, *Naturalizing Africa: Ecological Violence, Agency, and Postcolonial Resistance in African Literature*, Cambridge University Press.
- Salma Monani & Joni Adamson (eds.), *Ecocriticism and Indigenous Studies: Conversations from Earth to Cosmos* (2017)
- Sule E. Egya, *Nature, Environment, and Activism in Nigerian Literature* (2020)
- Kenneth Toah Nsah, *Can Literature Save the Congo Basin? Postcolonial Ecocriticism and Environmental Literary Activism* (PhD Thesis, 2021)

Week 4: Droughts

Wednesday 23 November, 13-15

Room E 2.21

Zoom link:

<https://radbouduniversity.zoom.us/j/9451279444?pwd=S2t4SGhhdDFmbE1RcGdPUUJVNjJvUT09>

This seminar will consider the impact of droughts on the American environmental imagination, with special attention to John Steinbeck’s writings on the West. We will also draw analogies with recent developments, such as the fear of megadroughts in the Great Plains region as a result of the depletion of the Ogallala Aquifer, and disaster displacement following droughts more generally.

Readings

- John Steinbeck, *To a God Unknown*. Penguin, 2000. ISBN 978-0141185507

Suggested browsing

- Dorothea Lange photographs of the Dust Bowl:
<https://dorothealange.museumca.org/section/the-dust-bowl/>

Week 5: Floods

Wednesday 7 December, 13-15

Room E 2.21

Zoom link:

<https://radbouduniversity.zoom.us/j/9451279444?pwd=S2t4SGhhdDFmbE1RcGdPUUJVNjJvUT09>

This seminar considers the cultural representations of floods in transcultural perspective. We will analyze the aesthetic resources at our disposal to make sense of such events (sublime catastrophe, slow violence) and whether flood narratives can play a role in averting future eco-collapse.

Required reading

- Richard Wright, *Down by the Riverside*. In: *Uncle Tom's Children*. Harper, 2008. ISBN 978-0061450204

Suggested reading

- Émile Zola, *L'Inondation (The Flood)*. English translation available online at Project Gutenberg: <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/7011/7011-h/7011-h.htm>
- Walter Benjamin, *Die Mississippi-Überschwemmung 1927 (The Mississippi Flood of 1927)*. English version available in *Radio Benjamin*

Students are encouraged to attend the presentation by Thomas Turnbull and Carline Rossée of the project *Mississippi: Anthropocene River* on December 6.

This presentation is hosted by the Radboud Center for Sustainability Challenges and will take place online.

Week 6: Waste (guest lecture Lisa Doeland); conclusions

Wednesday 21 December, 13-16

Room E 2.06 (Attention: different location!)

Zoom link:

<https://radbouduniversity.zoom.us/j/9451279444?pwd=S2t4SGhhdDFmbE1RcGdPUUJVNjJvUT09>

We like our collapses clean and neat. A clear before and an after, an us and a them. However, living through an eco-collapse requires “we” do not wait for a bang, but get attuned to the slow unraveling of things and, following anthropologist Anna Tsing, learn to live in the ruins. Species are disappearing, soil is eroding, biodiversity is lost. With Paul Auster's *In the Country of Last Things* as our guide we try to get a feel for worlds ending. As the novel's protagonist remarks: “what strikes me as odd is not that everything is falling apart, but that so much continues to be there. It takes a long time for a world to vanish, much longer than you would think.”

During the final hour of the seminar, we take stock of what we have covered during the series and elaborate on key concepts and ideas. We will also give each other feedback on the research proposals for the final paper. By way of conclusion, we will consider how we can be hopeful in the face of global eco-collapse.

Readings:

- Paul Auster, *In the Country of Last Things*. Faber and Faber, 1992. ISBN 978-0571227303
- Véronique Bragard, "Sparing Words in the Wasted Land: Garbage, Texture, and Ecriture Blanche in Auster's *In the Country of Last Things* and McCarthy's *The Road*." *ISLE* 20.3 (2013), 479-493.

Recommended listening/reading:

- Amanda Gorman, "Earthrise": available online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xwOvBv8RLmo>