

History after Humanism
(Or, what does a cyborg have to do with a genetically modified tomato?)
Spring 2016

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HON 298
TuTh 2:00-3:15
226 Warner Hall

Course Description: In an era of global climate change, the increasing automation of human tasks, in which changes in technology promise increased interaction with the non-human in the future, what role should historians fill in explaining the context of these developments? Many decades after the introduction of critiques of anthropocentrism, does history need to disengage from its human-centered origins? Or have science, technology, and the environment always been inextricably tied, for better or worse, to human endeavor, leading us to the conclusion that historians should practice the history of science, technology, and the environment as we always have? This course will attempt to engage students in discovering their own answers to these questions through an examination of the relationship between current historical trends in the fields of science and technology with broader discourses in the humanities and sciences on posthumanism. Topics include: “big history” (the study of history as the study of changes across geologic time); historiography and the critique of anthropocentrism; technology as imperialism in history; the history of hyperobjects as the history of contemporary technology; and the possible contributions of object-oriented ontology to historiography.

Course Objectives: This course aims to:

- Introduce students to advanced historiographical thinking in the areas of historiography and the critique of anthropocentrism; technology as imperialism in history; the history of hyperobjects as the history of contemporary technology; and the possible contributions of object-oriented ontology to historiography.
- Facilitate class that will encourage pre-writing as well as in-class presentations.
- Most importantly, introduce methods for thinking critically about history and culture through writing and public speaking assignments emphasizing the evaluation of arguments and evidence.

Required Readings: *Tentatively, I expect to be using portions of, and/or selections of, some of the following readings:*

- Biggs, David. *Quagmire: Nation-building and Nature in the Mekong Delta*. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2010
- Christian, David, and William O’Neill. *Maps of Time: An Introduction to Big History*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011.
- Cronon, William (ed.). *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1996.
- Derrida, Jacques. *The Animal that Therefore I Am*. Bronx, NY: Fordham University Press, 2007.
- Haraway, Donna. *When Species Meet*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007.
- _____. *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. New York: Routledge, 1990.
- Mitchell, Timothy. *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-politics, Modernity*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002.
- Morton, Timothy. *Hyperobjects*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013.
- Mrazek, Rudolf. *Engineers of Happy Land*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002.
- Singer, Peter. *Animal Liberation*. New York: Random House, 1975.
- Whitehead, Alfred North. *Process and Reality*. New York: Free Press, 1978.
- Wolfe, Cary. *What is Posthumanism?* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009.

A few articles that will be on ERES and are marked on the syllabus with an asterisk (*)

Modes of Inquiry:

This course fulfills the following modes of inquiry:

1. **Textual Analysis:** Part of this course is designed to assist students in developing close readings in key texts, not only from history but also in philosophy, literary theory, and science and technology studies.
2. **Historical, Social, and Cultural Analysis:** The course examines how changes in science and technology have affected the arguments historians make about the past.

Grading and Expectations:

Final grades for this course will be based on the following elements:

1. Discussion participation, including acting as discussion leader (20 percent)
2. Participation on each week’s topic (20 percent)
3. Two three-page preliminary papers (15 percent each)
4. One five-page final paper (30 percent)

More information on these elements can be found at the end of this syllabus.

COURSE SCHEDULE

PART ONE: INTRODUCTION

- January 19: Introduction.
Reading: Syllabus
- January 21: Introduction: The Environment, Science and Technology, and Historical Study
Reading: Cronon, "Introduction: In Search of Nature," in *Uncommon Ground*, 23-68; Christian, *Maps of Time*, 1-16.

PART TWO: BIG HISTORY

- January 26: History in Geologic Time I
Reading: Christian, *Maps of Time*, 1-206.
- January 28: *Discussion:* Should history surveys begin with the big bang?
- February 2: History in Geologic Time II
Reading: Christian, *Maps of Time*, 207-492.
- February 4: *Discussion:* Is human history really not that important, in the grand scheme of things?

PART THREE: HISTORY AND THE CRITIQUE OF ANTHROPOCENTRISM

- February 9: Anthropocentrism and the Problem of Animal Subjugation
Reading: Singer, *Animal Liberation*, 1-24; Derrida, *Animal that Therefore I am*, 1-51 and 119-140
- February 11: *Discussion:* Should historians be ethically obligated to write the history of nonhumans?
- February 16: The discourse of purification, feminism, racism, genetic modification, and cyborgs, all wrapped up into one complete package. ***First three-page paper due.***
Reading: Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*, all; Ghassan Hage, "Environmental Nationalism: Green Parks/White Nation," in *White Nation: Fantasies of White Supremacy in a Multicultural Society* (Annandale, NSW: Pluto Press, 1998): 165-178.

February 18: *Discussion: Are efforts to avoid genetically modified food and clean the environment problematically linked to Social Darwinist assumptions about purification ?*

February 23: Pets, Historical Representation, and the Critique of Anthropocentrism I

Reading: Haraway, When Species Meet, 1-160

February 25: *Discussion: Is discussing pets an essential element in understanding global economic history ?*

March 1: Pets, Historical Representation, and the Critique of Anthropocentrism II.

Reading: Haraway, 161-301.

March 3: *Discussion: Do we need to write as much about the animal past as we do the human past?*

PART FOUR: TECHNOLOGY AND IMPERIALISM

March 8: Pests, Capitalism, and Imperialism I

Reading: Mitchell, Rule of Experts, 1-122

March 10: *Discussion: Can the mosquito speak?*

March 15: Pests, Capitalism, and Imperialism II

Reading: Mitchell, Rule of Experts, 123-305.

March 17: *Discussion: Should the economic history of imperialism be studied primarily in reference to non-human actors?*

March 21-27 Spring Break

March 29: Colonialism and Thinging I

Reading: Mrazek, Engineers of Happy Land, xv-128.

March 31: *Discussion: Did Dutch imperialism in Indonesia operate by changing the relationship of colonial subjects toward objects?*

April 5: Colonialism and Thinging II. **Second three-page paper due.**

Reading: Mrazek, Engineers of Happy Land, 129-234.

- April 7: *Discussion: Is engineering key to the colonial process?*
- April 12: Getting bogged down, literally, in Vietnam I
Reading: Biggs, Quagmire, 3-126.
- April 14: *Discussion: Did the French control Vietnam primarily by controlling the water?*
- April 19: Getting bogged down, literally, in Vietnam II
Reading: Biggs, Quagmire, 127-end.
- April 21: *Discussion: Did the United States not succeed in Vietnam because of their lack of management of natural resources?*

PART FIVE: HISTORY, POSTHUMANISM, AND OBJECT-ORIENTED ONTOLOGY

- April 26: Posthumanism and History
Reading: Wolfe, What is Posthumanism? Xi-126.
- April 28: The Philosophy of Science and Technology
Reading: Whitehead, xi-17, 83-109, 219-235; Morton, Hyperobjects, Part I.
- May 3: Hyperobjects and historical thought
Reading: Morton, Hyperobjects, Part II.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS IN DETAIL

Three-Page Papers (Fifteen percent of your grade each)

You will be required to write two three-page papers in this class, due on **February 16th** and **April 5th**. Your assignment is the same for both papers: to identify an **argument** or **position** taken in any one of the readings in class and systematically **disagree** with that argument or position, using your own analysis and the evidence from other sources in class to provide evidence as to why the argument or position taken by the reading is wrong. The “three page” part of the paper should be viewed as a guideline (no automatic grading down will occur if the paper is 2 ½ pages or 4 pages). The key of this assignment will be providing me with a paper that contains *critical analysis, original and innovative arguments, creative and unusual thought, and readability*. For more guidance, refer to the “standards for grading” handout.

Final Five Page Paper (Thirty percent of your grade)

Your final five-page paper will be due on **May 3rd**. In the final paper, you will **rebut** one of the two three-page papers that you have written, using, among other sources, at least one of the sources that we will read in the last month of the class. Defend the argument of the author that

you disagreed with in your first paper against the arguments you have raised against his/her position.

Class Presentations and General Participation

This course is based predominantly on discussion; thus, a substantial portion of your grade will be based on your participation. I take this very seriously, and make notes in each class as to who is actively participating. “Active participation” means that you have something intelligent to say in class that seems based in and grounded on the readings of that week. The discussion grade will be divided as follows:

Quality of General Participation: 20 percent of your grade

Performance in Oral Presentations: 20 percent of your grade

Each of you will have at least two opportunities to give an oral presentation for the week’s discussion. As discussion leader, you will be responsible for accurately summarizing in no more than three minutes the main points of the previous week’s reading. More information on these assignments can be found on the “Oral Presentation” and “General Participation” handouts, which have been distributed in class and can be found on the website.