

Writing at the End of the World

Instructor: Ash Sanders

Contact: as10809@nyu.edu

Schedule: Mon/Wed 4:55-6:10 pm

Overview

This class is a themed experiment. It starts with the premise that we are writing in a time of apocalypse—at the end of *the* (or at least *a*) world. It asks: what does it mean to make art when so much is uncertain and so much is at stake? What does it mean to write when so many of the usual narrative tropes and reliable skills are up for grabs: When endings are more important than beginnings? When the concept of a future—and a future reader—is contested? When the supremacy of a single-species point of view becomes irresponsible, irrelevant, or both? When more and more beings are claiming the right to subjectivity? When the mind-body split has become a fatal wound?

Perhaps writing at the end of the world requires a whole new set of skills. Perhaps it requires simply sharpening the old ones. We'll figure it out together. (Remember: experiment.) Along the way we'll engage in shape-shifting stunts; write from a multi-species point of view; forage in Prospect Park; and create a pocket apocalypse dictionary. We'll flex our animal minds and create feral forms. We'll use weekly exercises to muscle up on instinct. And if it's all a bust and apocalypse writing is no different than writing in any other moment, we'll still have a killer craft quiver to draw on in more quotidian times.

Structure

The first half of the semester will be devoted to reading, discussing, and short, weekly writing exercises—all centered on aspects of craft in a time of apocalypse. (It will not be entirely dreary; I will tell jokes, I swear.) Some of the pieces we read will frame the problem. Some will offer ways through. Some will simply show off.

The second half is for workshopping. Your submissions do not have to be apocalypse-themed—it is enough to draw from the craft skills we've learned in our explorations. The class will culminate in a final portfolio—a climate time capsule of sorts, dedicated to a reader of the far future.

Responsibilities

Weekly Writing Exercises — *due Monday*

Each week, we'll explore a different craft idea or skill for writing at the end of the world. You'll have a week to work on the exercise in the spirit of riffing and experimentation (out, out, perfectionism!). Each week, print a copy of your exercise to submit. I'll pick 1-2 people to share their exercises in class.

Weekly Readings — *due in class Mondays and Wednesdays*

For the first half of the semester, you'll print out the assigned craft readings each week and mark them up with thoughts and comments. You'll also bring a bulleted list of 3-5 points to contribute to the group discussion. The readings will be available on NYU Classes or distributed in person.

Reading and Responding to Workshop Pieces — *due before class*

There's no workshop without you, dear readers. So take your classmate's writing seriously. You'll be expected to read each submission at least twice, making notes and line edits on your copy. You'll also be expected to write a roughly one-page critique responding to the submission in greater detail. We'll go over workshop etiquette in greater depth in class, but your critiques should be a) constructive and b) focused on specific things the writer can do to improve the piece—from the level of words on up. It's not about whether you like it; it's about helping your classmates to write the best work they can.

Workshop Submissions — *see schedule*

Each student will be workshopped three times. You should submit once in each genre—5-15 double-spaced pages for fiction and nonfiction, and three poems for poetry. If you'd like to try another genre (a play, for example, or a form-bending something-or-other) speak to me first. When it's your turn to submit (see the schedule below), print out 13 copies of your piece (don't make me say it: normal-sized font and margins) and bring them to class for the rest of us to mark up. Timeliness is supreme here, folks.

Embedded Activism Ethnography

One of the premises of this class is that you can't think or write well about the end of the world without doing something about it. In that spirit, I'm asking you to pick an environmental justice/climate/animal or nature-themed community organization and attend three of their events, meetings, or other functions over the course of the semester. (I'll provide a list of organizations as a jumping-off point.) You can approach this as an activist or an anthropologist observer. (We'll talk about what this looks like in the Embeddedness section of the syllabus.) Either way, you'll

produce a 4-5 page mini-ethnography of your experience—what you noticed, how people behaved, what you learned, whether you changed your mind about anything—and submit it as part of your final portfolio.

Final Portfolio

When NASA launched the Voyager space probe in 1977, it had special cargo—a 12-inch, gold-plated record filled with sounds and images from earth, a sort of time capsule that could communicate the story of our earth to extraterrestrials in far distant space and time. Elsewhere on earth, a team of anthropologists, scientists and linguists huddled in meetings, trying to figure out how to dispose of nuclear waste safely. Their job: to communicate to whatever beings existed hundreds of thousands of years into the future to not enter radioactive waste storage sites. From this effort, the field of nuclear semiotics was born—filled with questions about how to communicate messages to the deep future, to beings that may or may not be anything like current human beings. Your final portfolio will be an exercise in climate semiotics. It will be a sort of Golden Record of your work, a time capsule of six pieces from class intended for a reader of the deep future. At least three of your pieces can be extensions of the exercises we've done in class, modeling different forms of apocalyptic communication (manifesto, embodied writing, algorithmic poetry, etc). One piece should be a revised version of one of your submissions from this semester, another should be your field notes/ethnography from your embed in an activist organization, and the final piece should be a letter addressed to a deep future reader about the portfolio and the times it was written in. Your portfolio can take any creative form you like (part digital; part video; a physical time capsule, etc). You will present something for your final portfolio on the last day of class.

Extra Credit

During the semester, there will be chances to hone your writing skills for extra credit. I'll be organizing a foraging day in Prospect Park that will hone our attention and survival skills simultaneously, as well as other activities (readings, plant identification walks, etc) that will make us more intimate observers of our environment. I'll announce these opportunities in class, and each student can attend for the sheer love of the game, as well as 5% extra credit on top of their final grade.

Office Hours

By appointment. You are required to meet with me at least once during the semester, and are free to do so as much as you like. Please email to schedule a time. Don't be a stranger.

Grading

Attendance (10%)

Come to class, talk, contribute!

Workshop (50%)

Submit three workshop pieces in each genre and attend class (!!) ready to learn from your peers on the day of your critique.

Reading Responses (10%)

This includes your bullet point responses to craft readings and your one-page responses to your classmates' work.

Writing Exercises (10%)

Your weekly riffs on the different craft forms we discuss in class.

Portfolio (20%)

Gathering, refining and presenting your work is of utmost importance—to you, your peers, and your potential and adoring deep-future readers.

Extra Credit (5%)

Attending events outside of class designed to hone your observation skills and an intimacy with your environment. (I'll announce 2-3 opportunities over the course of the semester.) Creating a field notebook with names, drawings and characteristics of ten new plants or animal species near your home. Attending a reading and submitting a one-page synopsis. Submitting your work to literary magazines.

POLICIES

Plagiarism

Don't do it. If you do, you'll a) fail the class, b) be reported to the department and c) be reported to the Dean for Students.

Electronics

No. Unless we are engaging with digital art pieces, leave phones and computers in your bag and bask in the presence and shine of your IRL peers. (If need accommodations for accessibility reasons, speak with me and we can arrange something.)

Attendance

You will be allowed two unexcused absences. After that, your grade will drop by half letter for each additional absence. Being more than 20 minutes late is considered an absence. Any planned absences (for religious holidays or scheduling conflicts) should be communicated to me in advance.

Attendance is key for getting the most out of this class. However, I understand that you have a life outside of class and extenuating circumstances might come up. In that spirit, you will be allowed one personal health day. This means that if you haven't completed the readings, you may email me in advance and tell me you are taking your personal day. I will still expect you to show up for class, but will know that you are not able to engage with the work that day. If you are struggling with the pace or content of the readings or have extenuating life circumstances that make it difficult to complete assignments, please talk to me (sooner than later) and we can discuss accommodations.

Disability Disclosure Statement & Resources

Academic accommodations are available to any student with a chronic, psychological, visual, mobility, learning disability, or who is deaf or hard of hearing. Please register with the Moses Center for Students with Disabilities at 212-998-4980.

NYU's Henry and Lucy Moses Center for Students with Disabilities
726 Broadway, 2nd Floor, New York, NY 10003-6675
Telephone: 212-998-4980
Voice/TTY Fax: 212-995-4114
Web site: <http://www.nyu.edu/csd>

Student Wellness Policies & Resources

In this class, we'll be sharing fiction and non-fiction work. If you submit fiction, we'll assume the speaker is fictional. If you submit non-fiction, we'll assume, broadly, that the speaker is you. I understand that writing often explores difficult or even disturbing topics. That being said, I'll be alert to content that deals with abuse, violence, self-harm, or extreme mental distress. If your submissions include these themes, please send an email putting your piece in context prior to class. If you would like to talk through how to write about these topics, I am available for office

hours. And if you need support in any way, please reach out and I can connect you to the NYU Wellness Center.

Counseling Services: 726 Broadway New York, NY 10003 (212) 998-4780 Wellness Center:
24-hour hotline at (212) 443-9999 Email wellness.exchange@nyu.edu

SCHEDULE (subject to change and whims)

Mon, Jan 24

Hello, hi, and a dictionary for the Anthropocene

Intros, syllabus review, workshop schedule and expectations

(To be read/viewed before the first day of class):

"The Words We Do Not Understand" by Andri Snaer Magnasson

"The Bureau for Linguistical Reality" (website) by Alicia Escott and Heidi Quante

Wed, Jan 26

The problem

Excerpt, "This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate" by Naomi Klein

Excerpt, "Notes From an Apocalypse" by Mark O'Connell

"Did it Ever Occur to You that Maybe You're Falling in Love?" (poem) by Ailish Hopper

"Anthropocene Pastoral" (poem) by Catherine Piece

Mon, Jan 31

The other problem

Apocalypse art. "Generation Anthropocene" by Robert Macfarlane

The unwritable. Excerpt, "The Great Derangement" by Amitav Ghosh

The unimaginable. "The Climate Crisis is Worse Than You Imagined. Here's What Happens if You Try." by Elizabeth Weil

Wed, Feb 1

Embeddedness

"The View From Nowhere" and "Standing in the Rising Water" (podcast) by Lewis Raven Wallace

Excerpt, "Direct Action" by David Graeber

"Come Sunday" (podcast) by Vann R. Newkirk II

"What Does the Earth Say?" (poem) by William E. Stafford

Mon, Feb 7

Embodiment

Writing from inside the event. "The Invitation" by Barry Lopez.

Writing from the dreamscape. Excerpt, "From Where You Dream" by Robert Olen Butler.

Writing from the afterlife. "Learning How to Die in the Anthropocene" by Roy Scranton.

Wed, Feb 9

Prophecy

Excerpt, "Parable of the Sower," by Octavia Butler

"Meet Reverend Billy, Preacher of the Climate Apocalypse" (with video)

Excerpt, "Book of Revelation"

"The Second Coming" (poem) by W.B. Yeats

"On the Fifth Day" (poem) by Jane Hirschfield

Mon, Feb 14

Manifesto

"Dark Mountain Manifesto" by Paul Kingsnorth and Dougald Hine

"Eco-sex manifesto" by Annie Sprinkle and Beth Stephens

Excerpt, "Staying With the Trouble" by Donna Haraway.

"Elegiac Fields Avenue" and "Ars Moriendi" (poems) by Ben Aleshire

"Dead Stars" (poem) by Ada Limon

Wed, Feb 16

Epistle

"Weather" by Jenny Offill

"The Hiding Place," from *Underland* by Robert Macfarlane

"Letters Sent Sometime After the Continents Separated" (art piece) by Alicia Escott

Mon, Feb 21—No class

Wed, Feb 23

Experiments

Waikiki Blackout Poetry Project by No'u Revilla and students

Algorithmic/cut-up poetry (presenter TBA)

Oracular poetry (TBA)

Mon, Feb 28

Oral Histories and

Excerpt, "Gold Flame Citrus" by Claire Vaye Watkins

Excerpt, "Paradise: One Town's Struggle to Survive an American Wildfire" by Lizzie Johnson

"Man on the TV Say" (poem) by Patricia Smith

Wed, March 2

Subjects and Subjectivity

"Learning the Grammar of Animacy," from *Braiding Sweetgrass* by Robin Wall Kimmerer

Excerpt, "How to Be Animal" by Melanie Challenger

"A Journey into the Animal Mind" by Ross Anderson

"Characteristics of Life" (poem) by Camille T. Dungy

Mon, March 7

Write Like an Animal

The Infamous Bengal Ming by Rajesh Parameswaran

Excerpt, "*The Overstory*" by Richard Powers

Excerpt, "Becoming Animal," by David Abram

"Becoming a Horse" (poem) by Ross Gay

Wed, March 9

Stunts

Excerpt, "*How to Be a Beast*" by Charles Foster

"Heaven or High Water" by Sarah Miller

"Grandpa" episode from *High Maintenance* (tv) by Ben Sinclair and Katja Blichfeld

"Water Makes Us Wet" (video) by Annie Sprinkle and Beth Stephens

March 14-20

Spring break, no class

Mon, Mar 21

Elegy

"Loving a Vanishing World" by Emily Johnston

"Endlings" by Harriet Riley

"Zoo of Extinct Animals" Snapchat AR experience by Sebastian Kosedá

"For a Coming Extinction" (poem) by W.S. Merwin

"All I Cannot Save" (poem) by Adrienne Rich

Wed, Mar 23

(Anti?) Redemption

Excerpt, "Carbon Ideologies" by William T. Vollman

Excerpt, "The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins" by Anna Tsing

"The Big Picture" (poem) by Ellen Bass

Group 1 and 2 submission

Mon, Mar 28

Group 1 workshop

Group 3 submission

Wed, Mar 30

Group 2 workshop

Group 4 submission

Mon, Apr 4

Group 3 workshop
Group 1 submission

Wed, Apr 6

Group 4 workshop
Group 2 submission

Mon, Apr 11

Group 1 workshop
Group 3 submission

Wed, Apr 13

Group 2 workshop
Group 4 submission

Mon, Apr 18

Group 3 workshop
Group 1 submission

Wed, Apr 20

Group 4 workshop
Group 2 submission

Mon, Apr 25

Group 1 workshop
Group 3 submission

Wed, Apr 27

Group 2 workshop
Group 4 submission

Mon, May 2

Group 3 workshop

Wed, May 4

Group 4 workshop

Mon, May 9—last day of class.

Climate semiotics/golden record presentations.