ENGL 76: After the Apocalypse: Speculative Fictional Narratives at the Turn of the 21st Century

Instructors: Paula Moya and Jonathan Leal
3-unit seminar
MW 2:30-3:50 p.m.

Course Description

What happens after the world, as we know it, has ended? Or rather, what do literary representations of religious, economic, and climatological end-times reveal about how humans confront the intractable societal contradictions and challenges they face? In this course, we read a variety of apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic narratives to examine the resources such narratives offer for coping with real and imagined existential terror. In the process, we pose several related questions: Where does the idea of the apocalypse originate? Who is the apocalyptic narrator and for what purposes does he or she tell the tale? Does apocalypse have a temporality? Is it always in the future, or might it already have occurred? Using the tools of close reading and historical criticism, the course builds an archive of knowledge about the narrative, visual, and aural features of the literary apocalypse, and the strategies humans imagine for coping with the aftermath of devastation.

Rather than writing standard college essays, students will be guided through the creation of a multimedia portfolio over the course of the quarter, which will be presented in a poster session at the end. There will be no written midterm or final exam, and no prior experience with creative writing, graphic design, or sound design is required.

Course Goals

The course is anchored in four main goals. We want to:

- Investigate what apocalyptic narratives might reveal about how humans cope with existential threat.
- Sharpen the analytic and interpretive skills humans use when reading literature and interpreting social worlds.
- Diversify modes of critical engagement and expression.
- Generate visions of a common future that are commensurate with our shared present and the disparate pasts of a diverse population.

In service of these goals, the course readings survey a broad spectrum of human experiences, taking into account how race, ethnicity, and gender not only shape individuals' lives, but also have they have organized and continue to organize societies in ways that are palpable, lasting, and troubling. Over the course of ten weeks, we survey a varied range of apocalyptic narratives
and scenarios. We open with St. John’s Revelation to garner historical context and to examine images of apocalypse that have long shaped European and American literary and religious imaginaries. We then turn to Junot Diaz’s essay “Apocalypse” as a meditation on the legacies of colonialism in Haiti, and the ongoing negative effects of globalization on that country. We read HG Wells’ “War of the Worlds” to explore a literary representation of the terror that accompanies invasion during what appears to be the end of the world. Anderson & Dibb’s translation of the Aztec account of the Spanish conquest of Mexico then allows us to examine a historical account of the end of a civilization occasioned by the European colonization of the Americas. The account provides a poignant contrast to the fictional account of invasion by Wells, and provokes a discussion about the resources of the literary imagination versus the inescapability of the historical record.

Subsequent texts provide further opportunities to examine the way race and gender affects the distribution of scarce resources in a disintegrating society—Octavia Butler’s Parable of the Sower is a prime example. And Margaret Atwood’s The Handmaid’s Tale examines the resource of human sexual reproduction in a society where new human life is scarce, and shows how that scarcity negatively affects biological women. Each of these speculative fictional narratives provides an opportunity to hone the highly transferrable skill of close reading and to reflect on how large systems—social, natural, scientific, or otherwise—interact with smaller units of human and non-human life.

Our shared conviction is that each text presents a literary hypothesis for a possible future; there is no account of an apocalypse that is not also an argument for how the world should ideally be organized. By engaging each text as an aesthetic object and a social-environmental hypothesis, students will sharpen the analytical and interpretive skills vital for reflective participation across a range of intellectual ventures. And by synthesizing critical and creative energies through a portfolio—through a unique vision of the future that draws as much on generic convention, class participation, attentive reading, and personal expertise—course participants will cultivate a mode of critical activity that is, at every turn, constructive.

Schedule of Readings and Assignments

**Week One: Apocalypse**
Readings: St. John, “Revelation” and Junot Diaz, “Apocalypse”
In-class exercise: Worksheet focusing on constitutive parts of apocalyptic narratives including, visual imagery and aural representations.

**Week Two: Invasion**
Reading: HG Wells, The War of the Worlds
In-class exercise: Worksheet featuring guided small-group close reading exercises focusing on symbols, characters, figural language.
Week Three: Conquest
Reading: Anderson & Dibble, *The War of Conquest: How It Was Waged Here in Mexico*
Assignment One: **World Building**
Guiding questions: What apocalypse created this world? How is this post-apocalyptic world organized? What is this world’s central conflict? What problems does this apocalypse solve? What problems does it create?
Task: Write brief responses to these five questions as informed by your readings and our class discussions.

Week Four: Pandemic
Reading: Colson Whitehead, *Zone One*
Assignment Two: **Populating**
Guiding questions: Who are your protagonists? Who are your antagonists? Who are the minor characters? How do the different characters navigate the post-apocalyptic world? How are the different characters positioned vis a vis each other? Why and how has each group survived?
Task: Write brief responses to these six questions informed by your readings and our class discussions.

Week Five: Tyranny
Reading: Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale*
Assignment Three: **Storyboarding**
Questions: What main event precipitates the catastrophe? What events occur that bring your characters into focus?
Task: Create a narrative arc that mobilizes your characters within the world you’ve created. The arc should contain at least three major plot points: the catastrophe, the encounter, etc. Include with your storyboard a 1-2 page explanation of your creative decisions.

Week Six: Disintegration
Reading: Octavia Butler, *Parable of the Sower*

Week Seven: Economy
Reading: Lionel Shriver, *The Mandibles*
Assignment Four: **Visualizing**
Questions: What are the architectural features of your world? What vegetation does it have? What are its primary colors? Why?
Task: Create up to three representative images that capture the cosmos you’ve invented; these can correspond to your three major plot points. These can be drawings, computer-designed images, magazine collages—any visual form that documents your post-apocalyptic world. Include with your images a 1-2 page explanation of your creative decisions.

Week Eight: Scarcity
Reading: Paolo Bacigalupi, *The Water Knife*
Assignment Five: **Scoring**
Questions: What does your world sound like? Why?
Task: Create or curate sounds that texture your world. (Original material is welcome, but *not* necessary; a thought-out Spotify playlist will work just as well.) Include with your sounds a 1-2 page explanation of your creative decisions.

**Week Nine: Darkness**
Reading: Junot Diaz, “Monstro”

**Week 10: Contact**
Final presentations and Wrap-Up

**Evaluation**

**Portfolio**
Over ten weeks, students will assemble a multimedia portfolio that not only documents meaningful engagement with each text’s forms, themes, and arguments, but also encourages innovation through opportunities to design a post-apocalyptic world.

Each assignment will demonstrate students’ attentive readings of course texts, including a focus on the broader arguments offered by each novel, as well as an attention to the strategies authors employ to bring their aesthetic visions to life. Students should come to class prepared to discuss the week’s reading as well as to present a one-minute check-in about progress on their portfolios.

**Grading & Evaluation**

- Course attendance (1 pt per class) 20%
- World Building 12%
- Populating 12%
- Story-boarding 12%
- Visualizing 12%
- Scoring 12%
- Final analysis 20%

Assignments will be evaluated according to the following criteria:

- On-time submission of materials throughout the quarter on designated dates. Late submissions will be penalized, as a broader aim of this portfolio is to construct a world over a substantial period of time.
- An engagement with each assignment’s primary questions. (This will be demonstrated in part by the brief explanations of creative decisions.)
In the final two weeks, students will present their portfolios in a poster session, using them to address the course’s driving questions. This “poster” can take a variety of forms: web-based document, physical board, etc.

Finally, following the poster session, students will submit a 2-3 page summative analysis of their apocalypse that draws on colleagues’ critical, in-class responses.

**Students with Documented Disabilities:** Students who may need an academic accommodation based on the impact of a disability must initiate the request with the Student Disability Resource Center (SDRC) located within the Office of Accessible Education (OAE). SDRC staff will evaluate the request with required documentation, recommend reasonable accommodations, and prepare an Accommodation Letter for faculty dated in the current quarter in which the request is being made. Students should contact the SDRC as soon as possible since timely notice is needed to coordinate accommodations.

**Honor Code and Fundamental Standard:** Students are expected to abide by the university’s honor code and to adhere to the fundamental standard. For more information, please see: [https://communitystandards.stanford.edu/student-conduct-process/honor-code-and-fundamental-standard](https://communitystandards.stanford.edu/student-conduct-process/honor-code-and-fundamental-standard)