

The University of Western Ontario
London Canada
Department of Gender, Sexuality, and Women's Studies
GSWS 4462G Alternative Futures: Speculative Imagining and Transformative Action

Term: Winter 2025

Instructor: Peyton Campbell

Email: pcampb26@uwo.ca

Time and Location: Friday 11:30-1:30pm

Office Hours: TBA

Prerequisites: GSWS 2220E, or department permission

Course Description

This course will explore how marginalized groups have imagined alternative futures outside of dominant constructions of time. Drawing from feminist, queer, Indigenous, Black, and disability scholarship and speculative fiction, students will explore how oppressed groups excluded from, or imagined outside of, dominant constructions of the future have imagined, reimaged, and brought into being alternative futures. Taking the ongoing climate crisis as a focus, students will examine how conceptions of the future are neither predestined or singular, but embedded within existing power systems that may obfuscate alternative knowledge and ways of living and being within the world. Students will consider, how are dominant understandings of 'the future' both embedded in, and in service of, dominant power structures? How does the exclusion of oppressed groups from dominant constructions of the future maintain oppressive systems, and how can speculative fiction challenge this exclusion? What is the value of speculative fiction in creating more just worlds?

Through this course, students will gain an understanding of alternative ways of thinking and living that challenge the prevailing understanding of what is to come, in order to imagine what else is possible. Each week will provide students with an eclectic mix of scholarship and speculative fiction that engages new ways of thinking about the future and its relationship to issues of power, oppression, justice, and social change, with a focus on climate change as a focal point for organizing the course.

Learning Objectives

Through this course, students will:

- Critique the dominant constructions of 'the future' as it is understood within prevailing climate change discourse
- Examine how dominant narratives of anthropogenic climate change exclude the potential of plurality and alternative ways of understanding climate change, other ways of living, time and temporalities, and the future
- Explain how climate change is imbricated within systems of colonialism, systemic racism, and heteropatriarchy which constrict potential solutions to human caused climate change

- Demonstrate an understanding of alternative ways of constructing climate change narratives which may be more beneficial in addressing the multifaceted issues facing the environment
- Critically engage with imaginative worldbuilding as a tool for creating alternative futures within climate change
- Demonstrate an understanding of the relationship between imaginative worldbuilding and actions that generate social change

Course Texts

All nonfiction texts are accessible via Western Libraries online database, or will be posted on Brightspace. Students will be required to have their own access to most of the speculative fiction texts, many of which are available through Western's on campus library or the London Public Library. Students that are unable to access required texts are encouraged to reach out to the instructor who may be able to provide a copy for use.

Student Evaluation/ Methods of Assessment

- Participation – 15%
- Critical Response Papers – 2x10%=20%
- Student-Led Group Discussion – 15%
- Alternative Futures Presentation – 15%
- Final Essay (8-10 pages)– 35%

Participation

This is a seminar class and students are expected to arrive having completed the readings and prepared to engage in group discussion and class activities. Participation marks will be divided between attendance and active engagement during class time. Each week will include both academic readings on course content and speculative fiction, and students are expected to have completed both in order to fully engage in discussion.

Student-Led Group Discussion

Beginning in week 3, students will be assigned one week each in which they will lead group discussion, drawing from both the articles and speculative fiction readings. Students are expected to prepare a minimum 20-minute presentation and group discussion questions. Presentations should introduce the speculative fiction of that week, provide any relevant background information, discuss the key concepts and main ideas of the readings of that week, and consider how the speculative fiction of their week contributes to alternative conceptions of the future. Group discussion questions should encourage students to think critically about the course material, make connections between the non-fiction articles and speculative fiction texts, make connections to previous weeks, and/or what their week can contribute to understandings of futurity, climate change, etc.

Students are encouraged to incorporate outside materials such as pictures, art, videos, quotes, worksheets, etc. that help students expand, challenge, or otherwise engage with that week's

readings. A Powerpoint presentation is not required but is allowed. However, students are also encouraged to think creatively/untraditionally about how they want to present the material for their chosen week.

Critical Response Paper

Students will write two 3–4-page critical response papers, each paper on a speculative fiction of their choosing, to be handed in before class on the day their chosen speculative fiction is scheduled to be discussed. Students will be asked to critically examine how their selected speculative fiction engages with course concepts. Questions will be provided to help guide students in crafting their reflection. At least one Critical Response Paper must be submitted by Week 6.

Alternative Futures in Action

Drawing from the themes of the course, students will identify an example of an *Alternative Future in Action*: ways of living in the present that challenge, subvert, or go against dominant understandings of the here and now to create more equitable and livable futures. Students will identify how their alternative in action engages with embodying, creating, or imagining new and different ways of living in the here and now that challenge, subvert, confront, reimagine, or otherwise go against hegemonic ways of conceiving of the future and/or living in the present. Students are encouraged to think broadly about what it means to imagine or enact alternative futures in the here and now.

On the last day of class, students will present their Alternatives to the class. Students may work alone or in pairs.

Essay Proposal and Annotated Bibliography

Students will submit a proposal for their final essay that includes a brief outline of their proposal and annotated bibliography. In no more than 2-pages, students will explain their proposal for either the research essay or speculative fiction story and reflection. Students must identify and explain how their proposed essay or speculative fiction engages with the themes of the course. Annotated bibliography must include 1 course readings and 4 outside scholarly sources. Students may use APA or MLA citation style.

Final Essay

Students will have two options for their final paper. Both options require students to provide a bibliography that includes at least one course reading and at least 4-5 outside scholarly sources. Students will be evaluated on their understanding and application of course concepts, ability to think critically about the course concepts and speculative fiction, and creativity in applying what you have learned throughout the course. Students may use APA or MLA citation style.

Option 1: Write a research essay that engages with the themes, concepts, and critiques that you have explored during the course. You may use this essay to discuss a topic or concept covered within the course in greater depth, or branch out and explore a concept or futurism not covered within the course. Students may also chose to critically examine speculative fiction(s) not

discussed in class using course concepts. Students must include at least 1 course concept and 5 outside academic sources, and essays must follow proper essay formatting rules. (Essay 8-12 pages).

Option 2: Drawing from what you have learned throughout this class, students will craft a short story that incorporates, challenges, or otherwise engages with the themes, topics, and issues explored in the course. Then, students will write a formal reflection/response paper discussing how your short story engages with the themes and lessons from the course. You may choose to use your short story to explore a course concept further, or to imagine what an alternative future looks like to you, or to explore a futurism not explored in detail. Students are encouraged to be creative with their speculative fiction, and may use nontraditional forms of storytelling or mediums to present their story with instructor permission. Response papers must be formatted and written as a formal response and should follow proper essay formatting rules. Responses must incorporate at least 1 course texts and 4 outside academic sources. (Response 5-8 pages).

All assignments are due at 11:59 pm on Brightspace on the due date unless otherwise specified.

Weekly Course Readings

Week 1 Introduction to the Course: Whose Future?

Speculative Fiction:

- T. Kingfisher. (2022) A Different Aftermath.
https://www.reddit.com/r/solarpunk/comments/xdmhqa/a_different_aftermath_by_tkingfisher/

Week 2 Future Imaginaries and Climate Change Narratives

Speculative Fiction:

- Ursula K. Le Guin. (1986). The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction.
- Carson, R. (1962). A Fable for Tomorrow. In *Silent Spring*.

Week 3 Indigenous Futurism and Environmental Activism

Speculative Fiction:

- Amanda Strong. (2019). *Biidaaban (The Dawn Comes)*. Short film.
- Vowel, C. (2019) kitaskînow 2350. In *This Place: 150 Years Retold*. HighWater Press.

Week 4 Afrofuturism, Africanfuturism, and Decolonising Future Imaginaries

Speculative Fiction:

- Okorafor, N. (2014). *Lagoon*. Hodder & Stoughton.

Week 5 Imagining Disability Futures

Speculative Fiction:

- Octavia Butler. (1993). *Parable of the Sower*. Grand Central Publishing.

Week 6 Alternative Futures in Action:

No speculative fiction this week!

Week 7 Queerness, Utopia, and the Possibility of the Future

Speculative Fiction:

- Lai. (2018). *The Tiger Flu*. Arsenal Pulp Press.

Week 8 The Apocalypse Imaginary and Feminist Counter-apocalypse

Speculative Fiction:

- Gumbs, Alexis Pauline. (2018). *M Archive: After the End of the World*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Week 9 Memory, History, and Utopia

Speculative Fiction:

- Solomon, R., Diggs, D., Hutson, W., & Snipes, J. (2020). *The deep*. Saga Press.

Week 10 Shared Futures with More Than Human Worlds

Speculative Fiction:

- Vandana Singh. *Entanglement*.
- Vandana Singh. *Requiem*.

Week 11 Solarpunk

Speculative Fiction:

- D.K. Mok. (2018). *The Spider and the Stars*. *Glass and Gardens: Solarpunk Summers*. World Weaver Press.
- Caroline M. Yoachim (2021). *A Rabbit Egg for Flora*. *Multispecies Cities*. World Weaver Press.

Week 12 – Course Wrap Up

Course Polices

Assignment Submission

All Written Assignments are to be submitted on Brightspace as a word document (.docx) with any extra materials (videos, pictures, etc.) either included in the word document or attached as a separate file.

The file name of assignments will be as follows: Lasname, Firstname – GSWS 4462G Assignment. For example: Campbell, Peyton – GSWS 4462G Final Essay.

Email Policy

Please allow 48 hours for the Instructor to respond to emails. Please note that emails sent anytime after 7pm will likely not receive a response until at least the following day. Students are expected to email their instructor professionally and should include “GSWS 4462G” in the email subject heading.

Late Policy

Students are encouraged to reach out before assignments are due to request extensions for assignment due dates. **If a student is unable to present their week of the Student-Led Group Discussion they must let the instructor know as soon as possible to arrange for an alternative week.**

Students are automatically given a 3-day grace period where no late penalty will be taken from the assignment grade. After this grace period, assignments will be penalized 1% per day that the assignment is not submitted to the instructor.

Generated Artificial Intelligence Policy

This course requires students to think critically and creatively about climate change, futurity, etc. making the use of AI inappropriate for this course. As such, students are not permitted to use AI programs to write, in whole or in part, any of their assignments for this course. However, students may use AI only as a writing aid (such as asking AI how to format an annotated bibliography). Students may seek special permission from the instructor to use AI in specific circumstances, but this must be approved by the instructor prior to use. If students use AI to write any part of their assignment and do not disclose that they have done so, they have committed academic dishonesty. Please see Western’s official policy on AI for more information: <https://ai.uwo.ca/Guidance/Policy.html>

Students should also be aware of the environmental costs of using AI:
<https://oecd.ai/en/wonk/understand-environmental-costs>

Academic Accommodations

Students are not required to provide the instructor with formal documentation of disability, extenuating circumstances, etc. to receive accommodations: **accommodations that can be provided to students within the scope and ability of the course will be provided**, and students are encouraged to reach out to the instructor to discuss any accommodations that would be beneficial to them. Students may also seek formal disability accommodations through

Accessible Education:

https://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic_policies/appeals/Academic%20Accommodation_disabilities.pdf