

The State of the Novel

2019-20

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Week 1: What are we doing with these novels?

Elisabeth S. Anker and Rita Felski, "Introduction", *Critique and Postcritique*, eds. Anker and Felski (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 1-28. [in MP]

Sarah Brouillette, "Neoliberalism and the Demise of the Literary", *Neoliberalism and contemporary literary culture*, eds. Mitchum Huehls and Rachel Greenwald Smith (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2017), 277-290. [in MP]

Notes for this week

This week we will be thinking about different approaches to, and methods for, reading novels in the contemporary moment. Whilst novels are widely read for pleasure, what does that mean, and what are we doing in a module on a Masters in Literature that might be a different kind of reading? What do we read for? How do we read?

Throughout this module we will be particularly attentive the kinds of things writing does in the world, and to the particular status of fiction, narrative, and written communication in contemporary situations—at the end of human life on this planet, in the hyper-constructed reality of the present, within the tension of individual and collective politics. In this first week we will consider what ways of reading we might want to undertake through the module as a whole.

Week 2: *The Flamethrowers*

Rachel Kushner *The Flamethrowers* (2013)

Notes for this week

As a novel about art and politics, the individual and the collective, *The Flamethrowers* seems to both model and worry at some of the issues we discussed last week around critique, reading, commodification and pleasure. In your reading this week pay attention to the way the novel itself critiques aesthetic and cultural production, alongside the particular aesthetic operations you think it stages. This novel is not strictly about the current moment, but does seem to speak to it in a number of ways—consider its representation of history and how that history might be said to be somehow lively, or ongoing. Come to class prepared to discuss a particular passage or section in detail.

Week 3: Writing Pasts, Presents, Futures

Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 1-16. [in MP]

Kara Keeling, *Queer Times, Black Futures* (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 1-16. [in MP]

Notes for this week

This week we are reading two essays that think about the political work of imagination in contemporary situations, and the political work of feelings and affective attachments. Both essays are introductions to longer monographs and so must be read with the understanding that there is more to do, to read and think about, but from these excerpts, what do these essays tell us about the state of fiction, narrative and writing? What do they tell us about the temporality of these acts? How do these essays invite us to think about the contemporary moment as one in history, and as one with its own cultural genres?

Week 4: *Dear Cyborgs*

Eugene Lim, *Dear Cyborgs* (2017)

Notes for this week

This week we will be reading a short novel and working with the essays we read last week. Lim's book appears to be set in the present, in reality, but it plays a lot with how presence and history appear in writing, and how we might experience these situations. In some ways the novel seems more affect than narrative—perhaps in keeping with Berlant's critique—and yet, it is attached to activism and organising as modes of world-making, and so something of Keeling's thinking on imagination is present here too. Come prepared to discuss a particular section of the novel in light of this. Also reflect on language and style, and any difficulties you might find in close reading this novel.

Week 5: *Salvage the Bones*

Jesmyn Ward, *Salvage the Bones* (2011)

Notes for this week

Salvage the Bones is set in a particular historical moment—in the days before Hurricane Katrina hit the Mississippi coastline. It writes these days from the perspective of one family. Ward's prose is often described as 'lyrical' and this is often read as somehow beyond or outside the political. When reading this novel pay attention to the ways in which the prose works on the reader; what are the political and ethical invocations of the novel and how are these literary, poetic? Pay attention also to the kind of social world this novel writes—what sorts of relationships do we encounter, what kinships, what inheritances? Come prepared to discuss a section of the novel that for you encapsulates the mode, or mood, of the novel as a whole.

Week 6: Writing Workshop

Erica R. Edwards, "Sex After the Black Normal", *differences* 26.1 (May 2015): 141–167.
[in MP]

Sinéad Moynih, "From Disposability to Recycling': William Faulkner and the New Politics of Re writing in Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones*", *Studies in the Novel* 47.4 (Winter 2015): 550-567. [in MP]

Notes for this week

This week we will be workshopping writing our own piece of literary criticism.

Instructions:

- The reading comprises two scholarly essays on Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones*. For each read through twice, and then make notes on: the argument the author is making about the novel; the methods they use to get there; particular aspects of the writing and research that do and don't work for you, and why
- You will need to bring these notes to class, along with a passage or brief section from one of the novels we have read so far on the module

In the class we will discuss the essays and write a short piece about our chosen text

Week 7: Reading Week

Week 8: *Drive Your Plow over the Bones of the Dead*

Olga Tokarczuk, *Drive Your Plow over the Bones of the Dead*, trans. Antonia Lloyd-Jones (2018)

Silvia Federici, "The Great Caliban: The struggle against the rebel body", *Capitalism, Nature, Socialism* 15.2 (2004) 7-16. [in MP]

Notes for this week

This week we are picking up with some of the issues of the first half of the module—world-making, disposability, affect, speculation, activism, kinship—but here we encounter these in the context of a murder case and a mediation on aging. When reading the novel pay attention to the ways the narrative and the monologue do and don't come together—do and don't confirm each other. We are reading alongside Tokarczuk's novel an essay by Silvia Federici, an excerpt from her book *Caliban and the Witch*. This is a work of Feminist Marxist history that considers the figure of the witch as a historically contingent subject and one that is vital to patriarchal capitalism, and that might become vital to resistance. What inflection might the Federici essay give to our reading of *Plow*?

Week 9: *Cygnets*

Season Butler, *Cygnets* (2019)

Jenny Diski, "However I Smell", *London Review of Books* 36.9 (May 2014). [in MP]

Notes for this week

The most recently published of the novels we are reading on this module, *Cygnets* is also about aging and precarity and in various ways resonates with all the reading in this module. It is also, like *Dear Cyborgs* perhaps, particularly affective, and like *Salvage the Bones*, especially lyrical. Does this novel feel more recent than others? If so, why? What is this novel about, how does it work? What does it do? There are few reviews and no scholarly criticism of this novel—what do you make of it? We are reading also a book review by Jenny Diski of Lynne Segal's work on aging, *Out of Time* (2014). What is

particular to discourses of aging in the contemporary? And how does aging as a concept resonate across the module?

Week 10: Anthropocene

Kathryn Yusoff, "Geologic Realism: On the Beach of Geologic Time", *Social Text* 138.37 (March 2019): 1-26. [in MP]

Donna Haraway, 'Tentacular Thinking: Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Chthulucene', in *Staying with the Trouble* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 30-57. [in MP]

Notes for this week

This week we are reading two essays on one of the most contemporary situations we find ourselves in: the naming of the geological epoch of human-time. The histories offered in both essays contextualise and complicate much of the fiction on this module, and in various question the efficacy of literature at all. When reading these essays consider also how they think about story-telling, language and narrative, and the ways that literary and poetic writing are imbricated in geological and anthropocenic matters.

Week 11: The Fifth Season

N.K. Jemisin, *The Fifth Season* (2015)

Notes for this week

In *The Fifth Season* NK Jemisin offers us a view of earth unmoored from the contemporary human subject. Working with reading on the Anthropocene we have done over the last few weeks we will discuss what a geological writing/reading might be like, and to what extent Jemisin's novel is this kind of reading/writing. This is the first science fiction novel on the module (though not the first novel interested in science fiction and fantasy)—what kinds of questions does this raise for you, or conversely, is this a novel of 'geologic realism'?

Week 12: Essay Tutorials