

The Long Contemporary 2019-2020

**Designed by
Dr Zara Dinnen and Dr Sam McBean**

This module focuses on developing critical purchase on the contemporary. It will ask, what is the contemporary? What language, theories, and frameworks do we have for thinking the contemporary? This module is not a survey of 20th and 21st century literature or a historical narrative of literary form; rather, it asks what political, social, and cultural forms are particular to the present. To interrogate this, we take a long view on the present, looking back through the post-war period, to see how the contemporary emerges. In this module, you will read critical theory and cultural history, as well as consider how literary and visual culture (including film, TV, comics, art) speak to the conditions of the present.

Week 1: Welcome to the Contemporary

Block I: The Anthropocene

Week 2: Welcome to the Anthropocene

Claire Colebrook, 'Framing the End of the Species: Images without Bodies', *sympløke*, 21.1-2 (2013), 51-63 [in module pack]

Nicola Davison, 'The Anthropocene epoch: have we entered a new phase of planetary history?', *The Guardian*, 30 May 2019,

<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/may/30/anthropocene-epoch-have-we-entered-a-new-phase-of-planetary-history> [in module pack]

Questions for discussion:

- How might we think about the present as a geological period?
- How can we talk about a world without 'us' (humans) in it? Why might we want to?
- How important is some sense of 'survival' into a future important for a politics/theory of the present?

Week 3: Beyond the Anthropocene

Briohny Walker, 'Precarious Time: Queer Anthropocene Futures', *Parrhesia: A Journal of Critical Philosophy*, 30 (2019): 137-155 [in MP]

(brief excerpts from) David Scott, 'The Re-Enchantment of Humanism: An Interview with Sylvia Wynter', *Small Axe*, 8, September 2000, 119-207 [in MP]

Questions for discussion:

- Why does it matter when 'the Anthropocene' begins?
- What future imaginaries does the Anthropocene make possible?
- How does the Anthropocene invite us to think about time?

Week 4: Towards the Human, After Man

Nnedi Okorafor, *Lagoon* (2014)

Questions for discussion:

- To what extent are 'humans' a single species?
- Are humans and 'non-humans' always antagonistic?
- How does *Lagoon* tell multiple stories of time and being?

Week 5: Anthropocene Futures

Arrival (dir. by Dennis Villeneuve, 2016)

Lee Edelman, excerpts from 'The Future is Kid Stuff', in *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2004), pp. 1-32 [in MP]

Questions for discussion:

- How does *Arrival* connect themes of apocalypse, definitions of the human/non-human, global politics, and time?
- Why is it important that the main character Louise Banks (Amy Adams) is a humanities scholar? Or, as humanities scholars what is our expertise for thinking about the Anthropocene?
- What are the sexual politics of the 'future' as a political temporality?

Week 6: Assessment prep

Week 7: Reading Week

Block II: Neoliberalism/Late Capitalism

Week 8: Power and Politics

I, Daniel Blake (dir. by Ken Loach, 2016)

Michel Foucault, 'Right of Death and Power Over Life', *The History of Sexuality: Vol. 1*, translated by Robert Hurley (New York: Random House, 1978), pp. 135-159 [in MP]

Wendy Brown, excerpts of 'Undoing the Demos', *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (New York: Zone Books, 2015), pp. 17-46 [in MP]

Questions for discussion:

- How might we think about the present as a political and economic period?
- How does power act on the body? How does power become increasingly individualized?
- What does the term 'neoliberalism' aim to describe/diagnose?

Week 9: The Industrious 'I'

Queer Eye

Katherine Sender, 'Queens for a Day: *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* and the Neoliberal Project', *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 23.2 (2005), 131-151 [in MP]

Stephanie Duguay, 'Queer Eye and the myth of the self-made man':

<https://www.pinknews.co.uk/2018/03/12/queer-eye-and-the-myth-of-the-self-made-man/> [on QMplus]

Questions for discussion:

- How might make-over shows (and their emergence in the late twentieth-century) be a genre of neoliberalism?

- What labour do the 'fab five' perform? What labour do they encourage in the people they make-over? What is this labour's relationship to capitalism/consumption/heteronormativity?
- Do you think that the 'reboot' of the show challenge any of the conclusions in the Katherine Sender piece?

Week 10: Neoliberalism in the Global South (Andrew van der Vlies)

Masande Ntshanga *The Reactive* (London: Jacaranda Books, 2017)

Questions for discussion:

- What conception of the "global" comes with neoliberalism?
- What kind of subject is the neoliberal subject? How is such a subject related to other conceptions of subjectivity, e.g. a citizen-subject?
- What does neoliberalism feel like? What are its affects?

Week 11: Essay workshop

Week 12: Essay tutorials

--

Block III: New Media

Week 1: Media, Mediation

Jussi Parikka, 'Medianatures', in *Posthuman Glossary*, eds. Rosi Braidotti and Maria Hlavajova (London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), pp. 251-252. [in MP]

Donna Haraway, excerpts from *The companion species manifesto: dogs, people, and significant otherness* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003), pp. 11-21. [in MP]

Sarah Kember and Joanna Zylińska, excerpts from *Life After New Media: Mediation as a Vital Process* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2012), pp. 13-18. [in MP]

Selection of art works

Questions for discussion:

- How might we think about the present as a technological period?
- How are nature and technology and the human in relation?
- Were we ever not mediated/mediational?

Week 2: Connectivity

Jennifer Egan, *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010)

Questions for discussion:

- How do media, time and narrative effect each other in the novel?
- How is 'society' imagined here? why do you think this is?
- What strategies does literature have for addressing infrastructure?

Week 3: Networked subjects (Mark Currie)

Bernard Stiegler, 'Memory' in *Critical Terms for Media Studies* ed. W.J.T. Mitchell and Mark B.N. Hansen Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010 pp. 64-87. [in MP]

Questions for discussion:

- What kinds of “I” and “We” are possible with networked technologies?
- How does the “grammatisation” of a subject differ across print and digital media?
- Can we connect Stiegler’s thinking on subjectivity with other contemporary ways of thinking “the subject” we have encountered so far on the module?

Week 4: Connectivity II

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Americanah* (2013)

Questions for discussion:

- How can we think of this novel as being about networked “selves” and networked intimacies?
- What are the material conditions of writing in this novel?
- How does/doesn’t this novel feel contemporary?

Week 5: Presentation preparations

Week 6: Presentations

Week 7: Reading Week

Week 8: Sexual Politics

Michel Foucault, ‘We Other Victorians’, *The History of Sexuality: Vol. 1*, translated by Robert Hurley (New York: Random House, 1978), pp. 1-17. [in MP]

Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, ‘Sex in Public’, *Critical Inquiry*, 24.2 (1998), 547-566. [in MP]

Questions for discussion:

- How might we consider the contemporary via a focus on sexual politics?
- What does it mean to ‘historicize’ sexuality? Sexual identity?
- What kinds of sexual politics feel ‘emergent’? Or ‘new’? What tools do we have to think through them?

Week 9: Desiring Politics

Maggie Nelson, *The Argonauts* (2015)

Questions for discussion:

- How does Nelson understand/write about desire?
- How does she bring together feminist politics, trans politics, and queer politics?
- How does she balance telling ‘her’ story with telling a broader story that exceeds her particular desires? Or, how does she understand herself in relation to broader (political, cultural, social) forces?

Week 10: Terrorism, marriage, and global sexualities

Jasbir Puar, excerpts from 'The Sexuality of Terrorism', in *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism and Biopolitics* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2007). [in MP]

Dean Spade and Craig Willsie, 'Marriage Will Never Set Us Free', *Organizing Upgrade*, 6 September 2013: <http://archive.organizingupgrade.com/index.php/modules-menu/beyond-capitalism/item/1002-marriage-will-never-set-us-free> [on QMplus]

Questions for discussion:

- How can we think about 'global sexualities'?
- How does Puar argue that 'other' sexualities are used by Western media/governments? Or, what is the relationship between the supposed acceptance of LGBTQ people in the West and the persecution of racialized Eastern 'others'?
- What might the limits be of a politics of LGBTQ 'acceptance' (as seen in the gay marriage debates, perhaps)?

Week 11: Consent

Kristen Roupenian, 'Cat Person', *The New Yorker*, 11 December 2017:

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/12/11/cat-person>. [in MP]

Ami Srinivasan, 'Does Anyone Have the Right to Sex?', *London Review of Books*, 22 March 2018. [in MP]

Questions for discussion:

- Roupenian's 'Cat Person' became a sensation when it was published. Why do you think the story seemed to affect people so much? What does the story do/achieve/give words to?
- What does it mean to think about individual desires 'politically'?
- What is Srinivasan trying to get at in suggesting that there might be a limitation to 'consent' as the defining way of thinking about the politics of desire in the present?

Week 12: Essay consultations