

SEM8. Questioning the *anthropos* in Anglophone Anthropocene narratives

8A 11 September h. 11:00-13:00, S6 Moro

8B 12 September h. 14:00-16:00, S6 Moro

Convenors

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Abstract

Since its emergence in 2000, the concept of the Anthropocene – which identifies our epoch as the one in which the human species has become a geological agent – has catalyzed a heated intellectual discussion. In the humanities, the Anthropocene has brought to the forefront crucial challenges such as global climate change, alterations in the water cycle, soil degradation, accelerated loss of biodiversity, and pollution from toxic and non-biodegradable substances. It also raises biopolitical issues, like overpopulation and new forms of authoritarianism. In this light, the contentious interpretations of human responsibilities towards the environment – tackling who is truly responsible for environmental collapse and thus questioning who is the *Anthropos* in ‘Anthropocene’, with its implications of undifferentiated responsibilities – have generated intense debate (Haraway, 2016; Chakrabarty, 2021). Several alternative definitions have been put forward to illuminate the contradictions of the human impact on the planet, such as, among many others, Capitalocene (Moore, 2015) and Plantationocene (Barua, 2024). These contradictions are particularly evident in discussions surrounding the postcolonial Anthropocene (van Amelsvoort, 2024), which seeks to highlight the multifaceted and uneven nature of human impact on the planet. Importantly, and in parallel to these discussions, the proliferation of cli-fi and other cultural expressions that address the new realities brought about by the Anthropocene highlights the growing significance of climate change in today’s cultural landscape: the Anthropocene, in short, can be argued to be the unconscious of the art and literature of our time (Bould, 2021).

Starting from this premise, in this seminar we invite scholars to expand this narrow understanding of the ‘human’ by engaging with the multiple forms of the human impact on the planet as represented in Anglophone literatures and other media (novels, poetry, drama, personal essays, memoirs, films, TV series, and other storytelling practices).

Possible topics include, but are not limited to:

- climate migration
- critiques of sustainability and mainstream environmental discourses
- postcolonialism and ecojustice
- hydrocolonialism
- nuclear cultures
- intersections of gender, class and ethnicity in relation to environmental or climate crises
- the posthuman condition and the future of the human species
- indigenous and/or marginalized ecological discourse; environmentalism of the poor

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SEM8. Papers

8A 11 September h. 11:00-13:00, S6 Moro

- *"Poor Visitor": Jamaica Kincaid on place, belonging and environmental Justice* (Simona Corso, Università degli Studi Roma Tre)
- *The art of not adapting in the Anthropocene: Indigenous perspectives on resilience in Mahasweta Devi's "Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay, and Pirtha" and Cherie Dimaline's Marrow Thieves series* (Lucio De Capitani, Università Ca' Foscari Venezia)
- *Posthuman Dasein: Biopolitics, ontology, and the limits of the human in Kazuo Ishiguro's Never Let Me Go* (Antonino Virga, Università di Catania)

8B 12 September h. 14:00-16:00, S6 Moro

- *Planetary subalterns and nation states: A critique of classical climate justice* (Alessandro Vescovi, Università degli Studi di Milano)
- *Bio-logos. Pondering the Anthropocene through self-narration in Helen Macdonald and Olivia Laing* (Elisa Bolchi, Università degli Studi di Ferrara)
- *More and less than human: Posthuman conditions in Mickey 17 and Companion* (Gaia Zaccaro, Università di Napoli L'Orientale)
- *The natural resource curse: An eco-stylistic analysis of verbal and non-verbal defiance in What Mama Said (2003) by Osonye Tess Onwueme* (Aminat Emma Badmus, Università degli Studi di Modena e Reggio Emilia)

SEM8. Abstracts

The natural resource curse: An eco-stylistic analysis of verbal and non-verbal defiance in *What Mama Said* (2003) by Osonye Tess Onwueme

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This contribution aims to conduct a stylistic analysis of Osonye Tess Onwueme's *What Mama Said* (2003), focusing on how the playwright depicts collective resistance and women's activism through verbal and non-verbal acts that include songs, music, dance performances enacted by the female characters in the play.

Drawing on ecostylistic approaches and leveraging upon existing research that links contemporary neocolonial processes to the deterioration of the natural ecosystem, this analysis will highlight Onwueme's eco-feminist intent. It will demonstrate how the text interrogates the impact of anthropogenic environmental pollution and oil companies' commercial hazards on women and, more generally, the Nigerian community.

Particular attention will be given to the semantic, syntactic and morphological features of Nigerian pidgin English to demonstrate how its use evokes an indigenous worldview rooted in the interconnectedness and interdependence between human beings, animals as well as the natural environment. The study will ultimately highlight how the use of unmarked verbs, interjections, copula, lexical reduplication, together with the inclusion of ethnic terms, contributes to the stylistic distinctiveness of the play.

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Bio-logos. Pondering the Anthropocene through self-narration in Helen Macdonald and Olivia Laing

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The informal term ‘Anthropocene’ as the current geological time interval in which many conditions and processes on Earth are profoundly altered by human impact has already proven highly useful to Earth science research communities (AWG), as well as to the humanities. Living in the Anthropocene, it is thus compelling to read literature from an ecocritical perspective, studying the relationship of the human and the non-human in culture (Garrard, 2012), and Helen Macdonald’s collection of essays *Vesper Flights* is an interesting case in point. Having worked for years as a historian of science, she knows how humans have always viewed the natural world as a mirror of themselves, and she wrote *Vesper Flights* as an exercise “in interrogating such human ascriptions and assumptions” (Macdonald 2020: 2). While admitting that science reveals to us a planet that is insistently not human, and that we need hard sciences to establish the rate and scale of environmental crisis, she claims that “we need literature, too” because it can “teach us the qualitative texture of the world” (3). She thus writes her essays in the form of memoirs, using self-narration to “reflect upon the size of our lives in relation to the vastness of the universe” (2). Moving from Macdonald’s considerations about the need for literature to show us that “we are living in an exquisitely complicated world that is not all about us” (2), I will then read Olivia Laing’s memoir *To the River* through the lens of cultural ecology, which looks at how the living interrelationship between culture and nature are explored, providing a site of “critical self-reflection of modern civilization as well as a source of creative cultural self-renewal” (Zapf, 2016: 3). Using Virginia Woolf as guiding spirit, as is clear from the title paying homage to *To the Lighthouse*, and thanks to her training as a medical herbalist, Laing intertwines her cultural narration with accurate scientific descriptions of the biodiversity she encounters during her 42-mile walk along the river, spanning from the Cretaceous to Woolf’s death. Laing’s one-week walk along the river Ouse from source to sea thus becomes much more than the typical nature writing with the author retreating from humans and city life to indulge in wilderness because, as she writes, “the idea that nature can be prised free from civilisation is, in England’s overpopulated south at least, absurd” (Laing, 2011: 28). Acknowledging that in the Anthropocene human activities have become the dominant force shaping the planet’s environment and geology, leaving a lasting mark on the geological record (Rafferty, 2025), both Macdonald and Laing show how landscape has been shaped by centuries of man’s activities but also how man “has been shaped by the land” (Laing, 2011: 42).

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“Poor Visitor”: Jamaica Kincaid on place, belonging and environmental Justice

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In her novel *Lucy*, Jamaica Kincaid tells the story of a Caribbean girl who goes to the United States to work as an *au pair* with a wealthy family. Mariah, her employer, a kind woman of progressive political views, becomes involved with some friends in campaigning against the ecological degradation of the landscape surrounding her summer house in the Great Lakes region. Lucy wonders why Mariah and her wealthy white friends can’t see “the connection between their comforts and the decline of the world that lay before them”, why Mariah doesn’t realize that “if all the things she wanted to save in the world were saved, she might find herself in reduced circumstances” (54-55). This connection that Mariah, the 40-year-old white, rich, ecologist employer, refuses to make – the connection between the material well-being of those like her and environmental degradation – is a theme very dear to Jamaica Kincaid, who, ahead of the theoretical debate, starts to

investigate it in her books from the 1980s. Drawing on *A Small Place* (1988), *Lucy* (1990), *Among Flowers* (2005), and the theoretical debate about space and ecojustice (Lefebvre, 1974; Heise, 2008; Nixon, 2011; Robbins, 2017) my paper aims at shedding light on the writer's analysis on socioenvironmental justice and some very volatile notions such as "sense of place", "visitor", "tourist", "resident". In Kincaid's oeuvre space is never neutral, but rather a socio-cultural product, created and experienced through social and economic structures, and imbricated in patterns of domination and inequality. Our 'sense of planet', Kincaid suggests, must ultimately rest on a deep historical consciousness — the only foundation for any meaningful activism.

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The art of not adapting in the Anthropocene: Indigenous perspectives on resilience in Mahasweta Devi's "Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay, and Pirtha" and Cherie Dimaline's *Marrow Thieves* series

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The concept of resilience – frequently used to discuss a community's ability to deal with crises, adapt to hazards, and recover – has become widespread in Anthropocene discourse and debates, often framed as a key skill to survive to the era of planetary climate breakdown. Many, however, have stressed its potentially reactionary side, as mainstream understanding of resilience may enforce an idea of adaptation that neatly dovetails with neoliberal subjectification and practices of colonial/capitalist extraction. This is particularly true for Indigenous peoples, who have historically been one of the primary victims of such practices, while being framed, more recently, as quintessential resilient subjects. Therefore, narratives about/by Indigenous peoples are an interesting site to discuss resilience and to reframe the concept in radical terms, if not to replace it with alternative concepts altogether. To do so, in this essay, I juxtapose Mahasweta Devi's novella "Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay, and Pirtha" (1995) and Cherie Dimaline's *Marrow Thieves* series (*The Marrow Thieves* 2017; *Hunting by Stars*, 2021). The former focuses on an Adivasi community in post-Green Revolution India, affected by famine and drought. The latter is a dystopic fiction in which Indigenous peoples in Canada are hunted down to steal their capacity to dream, which settlers have lost after environmental collapse. I compare Devi's and Dimaline's narrative strategies, taking into account the different cultural and historical contexts in which they write and their different positionalities (most notably, Devi is an Indian/Bengali Hindu, and not Indigenous, whereas Dimaline, a member of the Metis Nation of Ontario, is). I show how both texts, through the experiences of their Indigenous protagonists, juxtapose competing understandings of resilience and adaptation, which promote, respectively, forms of environmental justice based on self-determination, or practices of environmental *injustice* requiring assimilation within settler-colonial states.

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Planetary subalterns and nation states: A critique of classical climate justice

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The environmental crisis has created a class of people that one may call planetary subalterns. With this phrase, I want to refer to a group of people whose subaltern conditions are not due to historical, sociological or political issues, but rather to the planetary forces triggered by the environmental crisis. Following Dipesh Chakrabarti (2021), I use the term “planetary” in opposition to “global”, where the latter is a cultural construction, while the former relates to the Earth System. The characteristic of subalterns is that they hardly belong to any given nation. The impact of an unbalanced Earth System on very low-income people makes them “planet subalterns”.

Nation-states are a Western invention and cut up the land according to criteria that are hardly relevant in South Asia. Amitav Ghosh criticised the concept of nation-states in his correspondence with Dipesh Chakrabarti. Likewise, Ghosh, both in his novel *Gun Island* (2019) and his article “The Great Uprooting” (2021), points out that the solidity of nation borders makes sense only to the middle class.

If the idea of the nation-state is inadequate and largely a colonial remains, some tenets of classical climate justice (Agarwal & Narain, 1991) should be revised. I shall consider two of the different forms the concept of Climate Justice may take; synchronic and historical. The former posits that the cost of a conversion to a less energy-intensive economy must be borne by the global north because it would be unfair to make subalterns (who mostly live in the global South) pay its price. The historical argument goes that those countries that resorted to carbon-intensive economies at the dawn of the Industrial Revolution should pay a proportional price (Baer, 2011; Gardiner, 2011; Howarth, 2011; Sankaran, 2022).

Both views take the idea of nation as a natural entity, and imagine that in northern nations live only the descendants of former industrialists, while subalternity is a phenomenon of the global South only. This line of thought is doubly flawed: it takes for granted that subalterns only live in the global South and will continue to do so, which is improbable in the age of great migrations, and it takes for granted that their lot may improve if the global South does not implement measures to reduce their carbon footprint. In fact those who live closer to the poverty line are those who run the higher risk of becoming planetary subalterns.

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Posthuman Dasein: Biopolitics, ontology, and the limits of the human in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*

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The Anthropocene has unveiled not only the planetary ramifications of anthropogenic activity but also the intrinsic fragility and contested nature of the human as a category. In response to critiques of the Anthropocene's homogenising rhetoric (Haraway, 2016; Chakrabarty, 2021), this paper undertakes an analysis of Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* (2005) through the intersecting frameworks of biopolitical critique, posthuman theory, and Heideggerian ontology. The aim is to illuminate how Ishiguro's narrative interrogates the uneven distribution of vulnerability, mortality, and agency in a context of systemic exploitation.

The presentation of this study will be organised in three sections, each corresponding to a distinct analytical axis. The first part will explore the clones as figures of ontological precarity – organisms genetically engineered for servitude, stripped of autonomy, and subjected to meticulously orchestrated life cycles culminating in their predetermined demise.

Interpreted through Heidegger's notion of *Sein-zum-Tode* (being-toward-death), their existence will be shown to epitomise a form of suspended subjectivity in which temporal agency and existential authenticity are precluded in advance.

Subsequently, the paper will address the novel's refusal to grant full human status to these cognitively and emotionally articulate beings, thereby exposing the ethical impasses of liberal humanism and the exclusions on which modern subjectivity rests. In this light, *Never Let Me Go* will be read as an allegory of Anthropocenic biopolitics, wherein certain lives – human or more-than-human – are rendered disposable to uphold the comfort of others.

As a conclusive perspective, the analysis will situate the text within the 'cultural unconscious' (Bould, 2021) of the Anthropocene: a symbolic terrain where ecological trauma, technoscientific domination, and moral disavowal converge. By foregrounding the novel's capacity to unsettle entrenched categories of the human, the presentation will argue for the urgency of reimagining personhood, disposability, and care at the intersection of environmental collapse and ethical responsibility – a task that literary narratives such as Ishiguro's render both imaginable and imperative.

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More and less than human: Posthuman conditions in *Mickey 17* and *Companion*

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In his refusal of the Anthropocene label, McBrien (2016) incisively traces the foundational link between capitalism and humanity, arguing that "we have mistaken who 'we' are [...] for what 'we' perform through capital." This reflection frames the thematic core of two science fiction films released in early 2025: Bong Joon-ho's *Mickey 17* and Drew Hancock's *Companion*. Despite stark differences in budget, tone, and narrative scale – the former a darkly comic space frontier movie, the latter a "final girl" thriller/horror – they both interrogate what it means to be human in the context of late capitalism.

Set in 2054, *Mickey 17* follows the hapless Mickey Barnes from his escape from an ecologically devastated Earth to his enrollment as an "expandable", a disposable clone assigned to lethal missions in the service of a populist authoritarian leader's colonization plan (a grotesque caricature of Trump-like politicians). Conversely, *Companion* focuses on Iris, a young woman who slowly realizes she is actually a companion android, whose "love programming" is hijacked by her manipulative partner to fulfill his greedy schemes.

While neither film introduces radically new tropes to the sci-fi genre, a comparative analysis of these two narratives through a postcolonial, feminist and posthuman lens allows the present study to investigate the topical existential questions prompted by their non-human protagonists. Rather than portraying technological advancement as inherently dangerous, both films expose the ways in which transhumanist dreams (such as the overcoming of death), when shaped by capitalist logics, devolve into nightmares. The antagonists – whether a fascistic leader or an entitled "nice guy" – embody the real anthropos responsible for the appropriation and abuse of non-human life. Alien critters, alongside female and queer androids, serve both as reflections of historical patterns of colonial and gendered exploitation and as grim warnings about ongoing and future forms of violence.

Crucially, in line with Haraway's (2016) idea of *becoming with the other* and Braidotti's (2013) vision of posthumanism as *becoming the other*, both films shift the definition of humanity away from biological essentialism and toward relationality: it is in their striving for connection, in their humane engagement with otherness, that Mickey and Iris articulate a new, posthuman ethics.

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