

Course Title: Imagining Better Worlds in Literature

Course Code: LIT 68

Instructor Name and Bio: Brianna Thompson, Visiting Assistant Professor of English, Kenyon College.

Brianna Thompson teaches courses in American women's literature, queer theory, and utopias/Afrofuturism. Her teaching and research trace how women characters in 19th- and 20th-century American literature harness erotic power to build radical new relationships out of loss, ultimately challenging patriarchal kinship structures and imagining new worlds. She has published written work on Octavia Butler and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps. Thompson received an MA from the University of Virginia and a PhD from Cornell.

Class Sessions and Recording

Meeting days and times: Wednesdays, 5 p.m. PST (April 12 to June 7)

Meeting location: Zoom

The class sessions will not be recorded.

Course Features:

- Live session
 - Lecture, discussions, and Q&A
 - Lecture, demonstration, practice time for students
 - Requires interaction and active participation
- Assignments & Coursework
 - Assignments and course materials posted in Canvas
 - Instructor will provide feedback on assignments
- Individual conferences available by request

Course Summary

This is a discussion-based class! Together we will be a community of thinkers in small groups, whole-class, and partner-based discussions. We will also be doing some in-class activities. Course description: What do time travel, utopian communes, genderless aliens, bioengineering, equality between the sexes, critiques of racism, and living in a digital simulation have in common? They all populate 19th-, 20th-, and 21st-century stories of “better” worlds. This course surveys literary texts that imagine improved life, encouraging students to ask how religious, social, and technological mores have offered authors a means of critiquing inequality. A sampling of utopian, speculative, and dystopian fiction, as well as science fiction, this course is implicitly in dialogue with our current moment of social, political, and environmental discord.

Please contact the Stanford Continuing Studies office with any questions
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Our readings, group work, discussions, and in-class writing will give students the tools for analyzing how authors across time periods have proposed solutions to all kinds of structural inequalities. Adapted from Kenyon College's English department, this course will invite students to develop proficiency in reading literary works carefully, with attention to language, content, and form. We will read poetry, essays, novels, and short stories.

**Please see course page for full description and additional details.*

Grade Options and Requirements

- No Grade Requested (NGR)
 - This is the default option. No work will be required; no credit shall be received; no proof of attendance can be provided.
- Credit/No Credit (CR/NC)
 - Students must attend at least [8] class sessions.

**Please Note: If you require proof that you completed a Continuing Studies course for any reason (for example, employer reimbursement), you must choose either the Letter Grade or Credit/No Credit option. Courses taken for NGR will not appear on official transcripts or grade reports.*

Textbooks/Required Materials:

Sutton E. Griggs' novel *Imperium in Imperio* (1899)

Raquel Salas Rivera's collection of poetry *antes que isla es volcan/before island is volcano* (2022)

Octavia Butler's *Dawn* (1987)

Readings

excerpts from Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516)*

E. Corbett's short story "My Visit to Utopia" (1869)*

excerpts from Edward Bellamy's novel *Looking Backward: 2000 to 1887* (1888)*

excerpts from Sutton E. Griggs' novel *Imperium in Imperio* (1899)

W.E.B du Bois' short story "The Comet" (1920)*

Ursula Le Guinn's short story "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" (1973)*

NK Jemisin's short story "The Ones Who Stay and Fight" (2018)*

Raquel Salas Rivera's collection of poetry *antes que isla es volcan/before island is volcano* (2022)

Octavia Butler's *Dawn* (1987)

Texts with an asterisk (*) are provided online

First Assignment

Read “History of the New World” by Adam Garnet Jones as well as “The Colonial Gaze and the Frame of Science Fiction” by Jonathan Rider (provided online)

Tentative Weekly Outline

Week 1, April 12:

Discuss “History of the New World”* and “The Colonial Gaze and the Fame of Science Fiction.”* Setting the stage: Discuss *definitions of “utopia,” “radical,” “progressive,” “conservative.” Think about how Western visions of better worlds have often involved colonial fantasies.*

Week 2, April 19: Discuss excerpts from More’s *Utopia* (1516)*; *imagining better worlds in the context of early modern Britain and enclosure. Individual vs. the collective; critiques of private property and wealth disparity.*

Week 3, April 26: E. Corbett’s short story “My Visit to Utopia” (1869)*; “Human Rights Not Founded on Sex”* Angela Grimke, “On Women’s Rights,”* Lydia Maria Child* excerpts from “Woman in the Nineteenth Century,”* Margaret Fuller*, and “Ain’t I a Woman,” Sojourner Truth*; *Thinking about white, middle-class women in the 19th century and suffrage. The domestic world as a place that could be better.*

Week 4, May 3: excerpts from Edward Bellamy’s novel *Looking Backward: 2000 to 1887* (1888) (chapters 3, 5, 7, 9, 17, 19, 25). * I invite you to read the whole novel if you like, but we’ll be discussing only the excerpted sections posted online. *Economic and social turmoil at the end of the American 19th century; financial panics, unions, and how one author imagines solving those problems by conceiving of the Nation as One Great Consolidated Business. In-class activity: familiarizing and defamiliarizing descriptions of the same scene.*

Week 5, May 10: excerpts from Sutton E. Griggs’ novel *Imperium in Imperio* (1899) (Ch. I, II, XVI, XVIII, XI, XII, XV-XIX). I invite you to read the whole novel if you like, but we’ll be discussing only the excerpted chapters above. *Thinking about Reconstruction, black citizenship, and governance in America. How a black person imagines a better world: a secret black shadow government within America.*

Week 6, May 17: Short stories! As a form, can short stories be more utopian than longer works? W.E.B du Bois’ short story “The Comet”* (1920); Ursula Le Guinn’s short story “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas”* (1973); NK Jemisin’s short story “The Ones Who Stay and Fight” (2018)*. *Thinking about race in the early and late twentieth-century. Internalized racism, Jim Crow racism, and the possibilities latent in apocalypse. What is the role of violence in changing worlds or maintaining equitable ones?*

Week 7, May 24: Raquel Salas Rivera's collection of poetry *antes que isla es volcan/before island is volcano* (2022). *Poetry, poetic form, and speculative vision. The multiverse as a way to imagine better worlds. Puerto Rico as a site of possibility in the fallout of colonial devastation.* In-class activity: translating the same idea from one genre into another. For example, translating a novel's main idea into a poem, a text to a friend, a formal discourse, a short story, and an Amazon review.

Week 8, May 31: Octavia Butler's *Dawn* (1987). *Can humans be genetically engineered out of their violent, hierarchical thinking? Post apocalypse and aliens: the individual or the collective? Genetic engineering, free will, and the human.*

Week 9, June 7: Octavia Butler's *Dawn* (1987) *Can humans be genetically engineered out of their violent, hierarchical thinking? Post apocalypse and aliens: the individual or the collective? Genetic engineering, free will, and the human.* In-class activity: drawing what we can't picture (the Oankali aliens).