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## **COMM 476, Crisis and Culture: The Anthropocene**

### **4 units**

**Fall 2023 – TR – 11AM – 12:20PM**

**Section: 20691R**

**Location: ASC 328**

**Instructor: Professor Visperas (she/her)**

**Office: ASC 326E**

**Office Hours: Schedule for Zoom meeting**

**Contact Info: mejavis@usc.edu**

We acknowledge that the territory on which we gather is the occupied land of the Tongva/Gabrielino peoples. We recognize the ongoing history of settler-colonialism in this place, and that we must strive to ensure that our learning, teaching, and building of knowledge and community honors the struggles, resilience, and vital wisdom of the Tongva/Gabrielino peoples. To learn more about the Indigenous history of our region go to <https://native-land.ca/> and <https://mila.ss.ucla.edu/>. To connect to on-campus resources and programs for indigenous or interested students go to the Native American Student Union: <https://nasu.usc.edu/>.

### **Course Description**

This class deploys a cultural studies approach to the study of medicine and the life sciences, centering four particularly major and interconnected phenomena related to the Anthropocene: pandemic, climate change, mass extinction, and reproduction. The Anthropocene has been defined as the geological age in which humans constitute the dominant force behind ecological, geological, and climate change. Centering power and politics, this course will contextualize our understanding of the Anthropocene by deploying various concepts and theories from feminism, political economy, disability studies, critical theories of race, and more. It will apply these concepts and theories to distinct units/subfields of study, including infectious disease emergence, clinical research, climate tipping points, ecological collapse, pollution, and reproductive justice. In each case, students will build scientific and medical literacy adequate to a cultural analysis of objects at multiple scales: the cell, the body, the population, the society, the ecosystem.

A critical understanding of the Anthropocene assumes greater urgency in a context of growing public distrust in expertise. Current public and policy debates about the sciences frequently proceed through binaries, wherein experts are either to be trusted uncritically or rejected as agents of powerful interests. Departing from these perspectives, this class offers a different language or framework for understanding scientific and medical knowledge, training students in how to critically examine expertise without dismissing its social role. This will strengthen students' capacity to engage with and intervene in scientific and medical discourses, avoiding interpretive traps that position non-experts as mere bystanders either championing or repudiating science and medicine from the sidelines. This important skill empowers students to communicate existential crisis in informed, sensitive, and impactful ways.

### **Student Learning Objectives**

This course equips students with strategies of argumentation in the analysis of scientific and medical knowledge, past and present. They will develop interpretive skills in discourse and visual analysis, demonstrating them through essays, presentations, and class discussions exploring the social construction of the Anthropocene. Engaging with contemporary and historical examples of knowledge production in the life and medical sciences, students will learn how to make and support sound claims through the language of course texts, which cultivate a complicated understanding of the social, cultural, and political forces that shape expert practice and knowledge as well as our relationship to the natural world.

**Recommended Preparation:** COMM 206 Communication and Culture; COMM 309 Communication and Technology

### **Course Notes**

Students will always have access to the course syllabus on Blackboard. **All class readings are also available on Blackboard.** Lecture slides will be provided to students with OSAS letters indicating the accommodation.

**All lecture content is considered intellectual property, and the privacy of students is guaranteed by Federal law, FERPA (The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act).**

*Per SCampus. Section 11.12(B): Distribution or use of notes or recordings based on university classes or lectures without the express permission of the instructor for purposes other than individual or group study. This includes, but is not limited to, providing materials for distribution by services publishing class notes. This restriction on unauthorized use also applies to all information, which had been distributed to students or in any way had been displayed for use in relationship to the class, whether obtained in class, via email, on the Internet or via any other media. (See Section C.1 Class Notes Policy).*

### **Course Expectations/Policies**

#### Care, at its best, is reciprocity

In this class, instructors and students alike should strive to create a vibrant and respectful place for learning. This means recognizing differences; affirming discomfort as a place for reflection; and maintaining the high standards of rigor that education demands. These constitute ways that we can care for each other in the classroom. Thus, unlike social media, the classroom is not a platform for dehumanizing speech or misinformation.

The Covid pandemic has both introduced and exacerbated tremendous learning challenges. The professor in this course will endeavor to be responsive to student needs during this difficult time. However, at its best, care is reciprocity. The (often gendered) emotional and caring labor of instructors is understandably much higher during this time, and thus runs the risk of becoming care fatigue. Hence, students can also perform care for their instructors by meeting instructors half-way: please let me know as soon as possible of any accommodations needed, so that I can prepare ahead of time.

#### Attendance

Attendance in lecture is important: there is significant material covered in lecture that is not in the reading. In addition, there will be screenings in lecture for which you will be responsible. Students who miss more than three lectures unexcused will have their grades reduced. Attendance will be taken during class, and you will lose half a letter grade from the final grade for every unexcused absence. This means that if your final grade is an A and you miss four lectures, your final grade will drop to an A-. An excused absence is one where you inform the professor beforehand that you will not be able to make it to class for a valid and documented medical or legal/religious reason. Contact your instructors/professors at the very beginning of the semester in order to inform them of your needed accommodations for religious observances. If you have an unforeseen emergency that prevents you from attending class, inform the professor as soon as possible and provide written evidence of the reason of the emergency (e.g. doctor's note). Unexcused absences are not retroactive, and so it is very important that the professor is notified as soon as possible if a student requires an excused absence beyond the three allowable unexcused absences.

In the event that you find yourself experiencing COVID-19 related symptoms, in keeping with university recommendations, you should:

- o Stay home! This is the best way to prevent spreading COVID-19 as supported by scientific evidence; Please do not come to an in-person class if you are feeling ill, particularly if you are experiencing symptoms of COVID-19. Nothing we do in our class is worth risking your health, my health, or the health of your peers.
- o Contact your professor to identify options available for keeping up with course requirements and content.

Office hours are for clarifying questions concerning assignments, grades, and lecture/section materials, and not for repeating any lectures/sections that a student may have missed.

#### Accommodations

If you require testing and learning accommodations for this course, please provide the instructor with your OSAS letter as soon as you are able.

#### Late work

The class schedule below indicates important due dates. No late work is accepted except in cases of emergency. Extensions are provided only in cases of emergency and/or if the professor is notified at least 48 hours in advance of the due date. **Extensions are not retroactive.** Therefore, it is important that the professor is notified **as soon as possible** and before the due date if a student requires an extension.

#### Communication

Please do not hesitate to contact the instructor about your questions or concerns. I will respond in a timely manner to all emails, which means within three business days. The instructor is not expected to respond to emails during the weekend or after 5PM and before 8AM on weekdays.

### **Required Readings and Supplementary Materials**

All readings are on Blackboard.

### **Description and Assessment of Assignments**

#### Class Discussion – 10%

Each student will help direct two class sessions this semester (each session contributes 5% to the course grade). They must choose one to two (1-2) readings (depending on length of reading) about which they will facilitate discussion. **The discussion is held on the day the reading is due.** In the event that a student is not be able to direct discussion on the day they chose, they will be assigned a new day/reading.

The student should:

1. Provide three (3) questions about the readings. These will be graded according to their complexity or capacity to generate class discussion.
2. Connect to a recent example/issue outside of the reading(s), or provide a short media example of the reading's lessons
3. Upload or submit the questions and (media) example to Blackboard **prior** to the class meeting.

Please sign up for presentations here: [Sign-up sheet \(link TBD\)](#)

**Students have two weeks at the beginning of the semester to choose their discussion day.** The schedule will be permanently set after that, and students must notify the professor of any changes.

#### Media Assignment – 20%

This assignment requires you to create a PSA in (multi)media format: infographics, short video, short audio, photographic series, illustrations or art work. The goal of the assignment is to use course lessons to create public-facing, consciousness-raising objects addressing a topic addressed from weeks 10-13. The media assignment requires outside/external research to complete, and will be evaluated based on extensiveness of information

presented as well as on design choices. The details of the assignment will be given in a prompt approximately a week and a half before it is due. Speak to the professor for details and approval before submitting.

Participation – 15%

Participation is a major component of this class. The participation grade will be determined by contributions to class discussions in the form of questions, comments, and/or critique, as well as by office hours attendance. The participation grade is broken down into three parts, 5% for participation during each of the following time frames: Weeks 1-5; Weeks 6-10; Weeks 11-15.

Midterm Exam – 20%

There is one (1) in-class exam in this course: a midterm, which is composed of long- and short-answer questions. Make-up exams are allowed only in cases of religious observance or if students can provide written documentation of illness or emergency. The exam is worth 20% of your total course grade.

Address to the United Nations Assignment – 20%

This is a paper assignment submitted via Turitin on Blackboard. The goal of this assignment is to write a letter/speech to the UN from the perspective of a pathogen. It should be 6-8 pages long, checked for grammar and spelling, with proper citation practices. The details of the assignment will be given in a prompt approximately a week and a half before it is due. The paper is worth 20% of your total course grade.

Reflection Assignment – 15%

This writing assignment requires you to use class readings on emotions and story-telling to reflect on one of the four core themes addressed in the course: pandemics, climate change, mass extinction, and reproductive justice. The details of the assignment will be given in a prompt approximately two weeks before it is due. It should be 5-7 pages long, checked for grammar and spelling, with proper citation practices. This assignment is worth 15% of your total course grade, and must be submitted via Turitin on Blackboard.

**Breakdown of Grade**

Assignment	Points	% of Grade
Reflection Assignment	100	15%
Midterm Exam	100	20%
Directed Discussion	100	10%
Media Assignment	100	20%
Address to the United Nations	100	20%
Participation	100	15%
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>100%</b>

**Grading Scale**

94 to 100%: A	80% to 83%: B-	67% to 69%: D+
90% to 93%: A-	77% to 79%: C+	64% to 66%: D

87% to 89%: B+	74% to 76%: C	60% to 63%: D-
84% to 86%: B	70% to 73%: C-	0% to 59%: F

## Grading Standards

Letter Grade	Description
<b>A</b>	<b>Excellent; demonstrates extraordinarily high achievement; comprehensive knowledge and understanding of subject matter; all expectations met and exceeded.</b>
<b>B</b>	<b>Good; moderately broad knowledge and understanding of subject matter; explicitly or implicitly demonstrates good, if not thorough understanding; only minor substantive shortcomings.</b>
<b>C</b>	<b>Satisfactory/Fair; reasonable knowledge and understanding of subject matter; most expectations are met; despite any shortcomings, demonstrates basic level of understanding.</b>
<b>D</b>	<b>Marginal; minimal knowledge and understanding of subject matter; more than one significant shortcoming; deficiencies indicate only the most rudimentary level of understanding.</b>
<b>F</b>	<b>Failing; unacceptably low level of knowledge and understanding of subject matter; deficiencies indicate lack of understanding.</b>

## Grading Timeline

For effective learning, students should receive timely feedback on assignments and exams. Therefore, every attempt will be made to grade assignments and post grades within two weeks. Scores for all assignments are regularly updated on Blackboard.

If you have concerns regarding a grade on a given assignment, you must first wait 24 hours (cooling off period) before appealing it in writing (approximately 1 page), stating the reasons why you feel the grade is inaccurate, taking specific written comments into consideration. All concerns should be addressed within 7 days of receiving the graded assignment. After that, no appeals will be accepted for review and the grade will be considered final.

## Assignment Submission Policy

The class schedule below indicates important due dates, and prompts indicate how each assignment is to be submitted. Extensions are provided only in cases of emergency and/or if the professor is notified at least 48 hours in advance of the due date. **Extensions are not retroactive.** Therefore, it is important that the professor is notified **as soon as possible** and before the due date if a student requires an extension.

All assignments are due on the dates specified. Lacking prior discussion and agreement with the instructor, late assignments will risk a grade reduction: For every 24 hours that the assignment is late, half a grade will be deducted. That means that if an assignment receives a letter grade of A, but is submitted within 24 hours after the due date, then it will receive a final grade of A-. If it is submitted within 48 hours after the due date, then it will receive a final grade of B+.

## Course Schedule: A Weekly Breakdown

**Important note to students:** Be advised that this syllabus is subject to change - and probably will change - based on the progress of the class, events, and/or guest speaker availability. Students should consult the University [Registration Calendar](#) for dates associated with add/drop deadlines, fees, and grading options.

Each week will require ~60 pages of reading. All readings will be provided on Blackboard.

	Topics/Daily Activities	Readings/Homework
<b>Week 1</b>		
Tue. 8/22	Introductions	No Readings
Thu. 8/24	Biosphere	Stefano Mancuso, excerpt from <i>The Nation of Plants</i>
<b>Week 2</b>		
Tue. 8/29	Outbreaks	Priscilla Wald, excerpt from <i>Contagious: Cultures, Carriers, and the Outbreak Narrative</i>
Thu. 8/31	Epidemics	Paula Treichler, "AIDS, Homophobia, and Biomedical Discourse: An Epidemic of Signification"
<b>Week 3</b>		
Tue. 9/5	Pandemics	Arundhati Roy, 2021, " <u>'We are witnessing a crime against humanity': Arundhati Roy on India's Covid catastrophe</u> Ava Kofman, 2021, <i>ProPublica</i> , " <u>The Broken Frontline</u> "
Thu. 9/7	Epidemiology	Dorothy Roberts, "Embodying Race" The People's CDC, 2022, <i>The Guardian</i> , " <u>The CDC is beholden to corporations and lost our trust. We need to start our own</u> "
<b>Week 4</b>		
Tue. 9/12	Clinical research: Test subjects	Steve Epstein, excerpt from <i>Inclusion: The Politics of Difference in Medical Research</i>
Thu. 9/14	Clinical research: History	Harriet Washington, 2006, "The American Janus of Medicine and Race," from <i>Medical Apartheid</i>
<b>Week 5</b>		
Tue. 9/19	Scientific racism: Theories	Stephen J. Gould, excerpt from <i>The Mismeasure of Man</i>
Thu. 9/21	Bioethics	Ruha Benjamin, "Informed Refusal: Toward a Justice-Based Bioethics"
<b>Week 6</b>		
Tue. 9/26	Capitalism	Andreas Malm, "Fossil Capital: The Energy Basis of Bourgeois Property Relations," from <i>Fossil Capital: The Rise of Steam Power and the Roots of Global Warming</i>  <b><u>SUBMIT ADDRESS TO THE UNITED NATIONS VIA TURNITIN BY 11:59 PM</u></b>
Thu. 9/28	Nature: Representation	Nancy Leys Stepan, excerpt from <i>Picturing Tropical Nature</i>
<b>Week 7</b>		
Tue. 10/3	Nature: Conservation	Donna Haraway, "Teddy Bear Patriarchy: Taxidermy in the Garden of Eden, New York City, 1908-1936," from <i>Primate Visions: Gender, Race, and Nature in Modern Science</i>

Thu. 10/5	Reproduction & Extinction	Juno Salazar Parreñas, excerpt from <i>Decolonizing Extinction: The Work of Orangutan Rehabilitation</i> <b>Warning: Discussions of rape and descriptions of forced copulation/breeding</b>
<b>Week 8</b>		
Tue. 10/10	Reproduction & Personhood	Rosalind Pollak Petchesky, "Fetal Images: The Power of Visual Culture in the Politics of Reproduction"
<b>Thu. 10/12</b>	<b>FALL RECESS</b>	<b>NO CLASS</b>
<b>Week 9</b>		
Tue. 10/17	Reproduction & Choice	Sarah Zhang, 2020, <i>The Atlantic</i> , " <u>The Last Children of Down Syndrome</u> "
Thu. 10/19	Ecofascism	Alexandra Mina Stern, excerpt from <i>Eugenic Nation: Faults and Frontiers of Better Breeding in America</i> Banu Subramaniam, excerpt from <i>Ghost Stories for Darwin: The Science of Variation and the Politics of Diversity</i>
<b>Week 10</b>		
Tue. 10/24	Conflict & Security	Christian Parenti, excerpt from <i>Tropic of Chaos: Climate Change and the New Geography of Violence</i>
Thu. 10/26	<b>NO READINGS</b>	<b>MIDTERM EXAM</b>
<b>Week 11</b>		
Tue. 10/31	Direct Action	Nick Estes, excerpt from <i>Our History is the Future</i> <b>FILM SCREENING: "This Changes Everything"</b>
Thu. 11/2	The Red Deal	The Red Nation, "The Red Deal, Part 1"
<b>Week 12</b>		
Tue. 11/7	Sustainability: The Green New Deal	H. Res. 109 (Green New Deal) Kate Aronoff et al., excerpt from <i>A Planet to Win: Why We Need a Green New Deal</i>
Thu. 11/9	Sustainability: Labor	Anne Helen Peterson, 2020, "Do What You Love and You'll Still Work Everyday for the Rest of Your Life," from <i>Can't Even: How Millennials became the Burnout Generation</i>
<b>Week 13</b>		
Tue. 11/14	Toxic Waste	S. Lochlann Jain, 2013, "Fallout: Minuets in the Key of Fear," from <i>Malignant: How Cancer Becomes Us</i>
Thu. 11/16	Pollution	Harriet Washington, 2020, excerpt from <i>A Terrible Thing to Waste: Environmental Racism and its Assault on the American Mind</i>
<b>Week 14</b>		
Tue. 11/21	Doom & Gloom VS Optimism	Sarah Jaquette Ray, "Move Beyond Hope, Ditch Guilt, and Laugh More," from <i>A Field Guide to Climate Anxiety</i> Barbara Ehrenreich, excerpt from <i>Bright-Sided: How Positive Thinking is Undermining America</i>
<b>Thu. 11/23</b>	<b>HOLIDAY</b>	<b>NO CLASS</b>
<b>Week 15</b>		

Tue. 11/28	Storytelling	Rob Nixon, excerpt from <i>Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor</i> <b><u>MEDIA ASSIGNMENT DUE BY 11:59PM VIA BLACKBOARD</u></b>
Thu. 11. 30	Survival	Charles Thorpe, excerpt from <i>Necroculture</i> Barbara Ehrenreich, 2019, <i>The Baffler</i> , <a href="#">"The Humanoid Stain"</a>
<b>FINAL</b>		
<b><u>TUE. 12/12</u></b>	<b><u>FINAL ASSIGNMENT DUE</u></b>	<b><u>SUBMIT REFLECTION PAPER VIA TURNITIN BY 11:59 PM</u></b>

## Statement on Academic Conduct and Support Systems

### a. Academic Conduct

#### Plagiarism

Plagiarism – presenting someone else’s ideas as your own, either verbatim or recast in your own words – is a serious academic offense with serious consequences. Please familiarize yourself with the discussion of plagiarism in [SCampus](#) in Part B, Section 11, “[Behavior Violating University Standards.](#)” Other forms of academic dishonesty are equally unacceptable. See additional information in *SCampus* and university policies on scientific misconduct, [policy.usc.edu/scientific-misconduct](http://policy.usc.edu/scientific-misconduct).

The School of Communication maintains a commitment to the highest standards of ethical conduct and academic excellence. Any student found responsible for plagiarism, fabrication, cheating on examinations, or purchasing papers or other assignments will be reported to the Office of Student Judicial Affairs and Community Standards and may be dismissed from the School of Communication. There are no exceptions to the school’s policy.

In addition, it is assumed that the work you submit for this course is work you have produced entirely by yourself, and has not been previously produced by you for submission in another course, without approval of the instructor.

### b. Support Systems

*Counseling and Mental Health - (213) 740-9355 – 24/7 on call*

[studenthealth.usc.edu/counseling](http://studenthealth.usc.edu/counseling)

Free and confidential mental health treatment for students, including short-term psychotherapy, group counseling, stress fitness workshops, and crisis intervention.

*National Suicide Prevention Lifeline - 1 (800) 273-8255 – 24/7 on call*

[suicidepreventionlifeline.org](http://suicidepreventionlifeline.org)

Free and confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

*Relationship and Sexual Violence Prevention and Services (RSVP) - (213) 740-9355(WELL), press “0” after hours – 24/7 on call*

[studenthealth.usc.edu/sexual-assault](http://studenthealth.usc.edu/sexual-assault)

Free and confidential therapy services, workshops, and training for situations related to gender-based harm.

*Office of Equity and Diversity (OED)- (213) 740-5086 | Title IX – (213) 821-8298*

[equity.usc.edu](http://equity.usc.edu), [titleix.usc.edu](http://titleix.usc.edu)

Information about how to get help or help someone affected by harassment or discrimination, rights of protected classes, reporting options, and additional resources for students, faculty, staff, visitors, and applicants. The university prohibits discrimination or harassment based on the following *protected characteristics*: race, color,



national origin, ancestry, religion, sex, gender, gender identity, gender expression, sexual orientation, age, physical disability, medical condition, mental disability, marital status, pregnancy, veteran status, genetic information, and any other characteristic which may be specified in applicable laws and governmental regulations. The university also prohibits sexual assault, non-consensual sexual contact, sexual misconduct, intimate partner violence, stalking, malicious dissuasion, retaliation, and violation of interim measures.

*Reporting Incidents of Bias or Harassment - (213) 740-5086 or (213) 821-8298*

[usc-advocate.symplicity.com/care\\_report](https://usc-advocate.symplicity.com/care_report)

Avenue to report incidents of bias, hate crimes, and microaggressions to the Office of Equity and Diversity | Title IX for appropriate investigation, supportive measures, and response.

*The Office of Student Accessibility Services - (213) 740-0776*

[osas.usc.edu/](https://osas.usc.edu/)

Support and accommodations for students with disabilities. Services include assistance in providing readers/notetakers/interpreters, special accommodations for test taking needs, assistance with architectural barriers, assistive technology, and support for individual needs.

*USC Support and Advocacy - (213) 821-4710*

[uscsa.usc.edu](https://uscsa.usc.edu)

Assists students and families in resolving complex personal, financial, and academic issues adversely affecting their success as a student.

*Diversity at USC - (213) 740-2101*

[diversity.usc.edu](https://diversity.usc.edu)

Information on events, programs and training, the Provost's Diversity and Inclusion Council, Diversity Liaisons for each academic school, chronology, participation, and various resources for students.

*USC Emergency - UPC: (213) 740-4321, HSC: (323) 442-1000 – 24/7 on call*

[dps.usc.edu](https://dps.usc.edu), [emergency.usc.edu](https://emergency.usc.edu)

Emergency assistance and avenue to report a crime. Latest updates regarding safety, including ways in which instruction will be continued if an officially declared emergency makes travel to campus infeasible.

*USC Department of Public Safety - UPC: (213) 740-6000, HSC: (323) 442-120 – 24/7 on call*

[dps.usc.edu](https://dps.usc.edu)

Non-emergency assistance or information.

*Annenberg Student Success Fund*

<https://annenberg.usc.edu/current-students/resources/annenberg-scholarships-and-awards>

The Annenberg Student Success Fund is a donor-funded financial aid account available to USC Annenberg undergraduate and graduate students for non-tuition expenses related to extra- and co-curricular programs and opportunities.