

**THE POLITICS OF LIFE
CHID 390**

**Tuesdays and Thursdays
12:30-2:20**

MEB 250

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To 'de-passion' knowledge does not give us a more objective world, it just gives us a world 'without us'; and therefore, without 'them' – lines are traced so fast. And as long as this world appears as a world 'we don't care for', it also becomes an impoverished world, a world of minds without bodies, of bodies without minds, bodies without hearts, expectations, interests.

--Vinciane Despret

COURSE DESCRIPTION

Welcome to CHID 390. The CHID colloquium is a reading and discussion course that has traditionally focused on theoretical and practical problems of interpretation and knowledge production. In this course, we will examine ethnographic, philosophical, and historical accounts, as well as theoretical essays and literary texts that demonstrate a range of cross-cultural interpretive strategies. Throughout the quarter we will also explore the "politics of interpretation and representation": the ways in which different perspectives and practices are tied to intellectual, political, social and economic power.

Our readings and discussions this winter will focus on the broad theme of "life." More specifically, we will expand discussions of "life" to include non-human others; we will expand our thinking about love, loss, and grief; we will consider the politics of vulnerability; who lives at the margins; who lives in conditions of "slow death" as Lauren Berlant might put it. Other questions we will consider: what happens when we consider the possibility that "rocks listen" and "earth-beings" (such as rivers and glaciers) speak? Are spiders and snails self-aware? Can robots suffer? Are plants intelligent? It is my hope that our rigorous examination of these and other issues will serve as windows through which we can view the workings of alterity and marginalization as well as survey pathways to alternative and better futures.

This course employs three interconnected critical practices: *reading, talking, and writing*. The first objective of the course is to expose students to a wide range of readings that deal, explicitly or implicitly, with problems of interpretation and

representation. Some of these texts are quite intellectually challenging, and all of them will require careful, thoughtful, and detailed reading. The second critical practice is engaging in verbal discussion, which serves to create and sustain a learning community. One of the things I hope you will gain from this class is an enhanced ability to carry on a conversation about your own, and others', ideas. This is also a perfect context in which to "think out loud" and develop your thoughts and ideas through productive and supportive discussions. Finally, you will write regularly in response to the readings. Writing is a crucial component of academic thinking, and is a practice we will spend much time developing.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Try to love the questions themselves as if they were locked rooms or books written in a very foreign language. Don't search for the answers, which could not be given to you now, because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now.

–Rainer Maria Rilke

Class Participation. Your vigorous participation in class is perhaps the most significant component of the seminar. I will assume that you have read and examined readings carefully and critically. My job as the course instructor is not to give you all the answers but to help you ask better questions. To that end, I will guide discussion and try to provoke thoughtful and respectful conversation, but much of the success of the seminar depends on your curiosity, energy, and work. Seminars are important opportunities for thinking out loud and listening actively; they are important spaces for us to learn together. In short, you are expected to read all texts with care, attend class sessions regularly, and contribute to discussions in a lively manner. **50% of your grade will be determined by your active participation in class.** In addition to completing reading assignments and being present in seminar, there are two other components of your in-class participation:

- **Weekly critical essay:** Once each week you will write a 1-page (single-spaced) critical essay addressing the major points raised in the readings and films that week. These short essays should not summarize readings, but rather raise intriguing questions, address interesting connections, or challenge the texts for that week. The point of these papers is for you to think critically about the topics for discussion *before* our class meetings, so responses should not address texts or films we have already discussed in class. These should be posted on Canvas on Tuesday or Thursday by 5am (I will explain this further in class). You will turn in your first response paper on the second week of the quarter.
- **Peer feedback:** Throughout the quarter you will be expected to engage with your peers in a thoughtful, detailed, and constructive manner. Each week, in addition to posting your own reading reflection, you will also respond to one of your peer's critical essays via Canvas. These comments should be posted (as a reply to your peer) on Canvas no later than Fridays at midnight.

Additional Assignments. This quarter you will work on two written/creative assignments.

- **Essay on Ann Hamilton's the common S E N S E:** The first assignment will be a critical engagement with Ann Hamilton's exhibit, currently at the Henry Art Gallery. Our class will meet at the Henry on Thursday February 26, but I highly encourage you to visit the gallery prior to this class meeting. The exhibit is designed to be interactive, so do engage with the exhibit on your own and/or with a partner, both online and at the gallery. Read reviews, talk with friends, and think carefully, deeply, and creatively about this work. Think of reading the exhibit and the Henry as texts themselves. Then, write a 4-6 page (double-spaced) critical essay on the exhibit. You can choose to write about anything related to the exhibit. **The essay is due Friday March 6. Please post to Canvas by midnight.**
- **Project/essay on life beyond the human:** This assignment can either be a written essay (5-7 pages, double-spaced) or a creative project. The idea is for you to reflect on the significance of thinking about life beyond the human; of the entanglements and intersections of humans and other lives. What work does this kind of thinking do? How do we think in more expansive ways about life? Why should we? As you develop your project, you should be sure to find ways to engage directly with **at least two concepts and at least two thinkers** we have encountered in class this quarter. Those of you thinking about creative projects, consider a digital platform, a podcast, a video, or a photographic essay. If you do choose a creative option, please note that I will also expect a brief written reflection about the project (think of it as an artist statement). The assignment is deliberately broad and open, but we will talk more about it in class. You might use the essays from the *New York Times* Menagerie series as inspiration (we will read several in class) as you think about your project. The essay or project is **due Tuesday March 17**. Email your work to me directly anytime on 3/17.

Disability Policy

If you would like to request academic accommodation due to learning differences, please contact Disability Student Services, 448 Schmitz, 543-8924. If you have a letter from Disability Student Services indicating a learning difference that requires academic accommodations, please present the letter to the professor so accommodations you might need for class can be discussed.

Grades:

- Class participation (includes weekly responses and interventions in class): 50%
- Essay on Ann Hamilton: 20%
- Essay/Creative Project on Life: 30%

REQUIRED TEXTS (Available at the UW Bookstore and on reserve at Odegaard)

I think we ought to read only books that bite and sting us. If the book we are reading doesn't shake us awake like a blow to the skull, why bother reading it in the first place? A book must be the ax for the frozen sea within us.

--Kafka

- Elisabeth Tova Bailey. 2010. *The Sound of a Wild Snail Eating*. Algonquin Books.
- Joao Biehl. 2013. *Vita: Life in a Zone of Social Abandonment*, California.
- Timothy Pachirat. 2013. *Every Twelve Seconds: Industrialized Slaughter and the Politics of Sight*, Yale.
- Additional readings will be made available through Canvas.

Advice from a Caterpillar

Chew your way into a new world.
 Munch leaves. Molt. Rest. Molt
 again. Self-reinvention is *everything*.
 Spin many nests. Cultivate stinging
 bristles. Don't get sentimental
 about your discarded skins. Grow
 quickly. Develop a yen for nettles.
 Alternate crumpling and climbing. Rely
 on your antennae. Sequester poisons
 in your body for use at a later date.
 When threatened, emit foul odors
 in self-defense. Behave cryptically
 to confuse predators: change colors, spit,
 or feign death. If all else fails, taste terrible.

---Amy Gerstler, *Dearest Creature*

CLASS SCHEDULE

She's on the horizon...I go two steps, she moves two steps away. I walk ten steps and the horizon runs ten steps ahead. No matter how much I walk, I'll never reach her. What good is utopia? That's what: it's good for walking.

--Eduardo Galeano

Week 1

Tuesday, 1/6

- Introduction to course and each other
- Rebecca Solnit. 2014. "Bird by Bird: The Problem with Climate-Change Stories." *New York Times*, December 7
- Watch trailer for Midway: <http://www.midwayfilm.com>

Thursday, 1/8

- Jennifer Holland. 2014. "Wild Messengers." From Menagerie, *New York Times*: <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/11/01/wild-messengers/?module=Search&mabReward=relbias%3As>
- James Stanescu. 2012. "Species Trouble: Judith Butler, Mourning, and the Precarious Lives of Animals." *Hypatia*, 27 (3): 567-582.

Week 2

Tuesday, 1/13

- Timothy Pachirat. 2013. *Every Twelve Seconds: Industrialized Slaughter and the Politics of Sight*, Yale. Try to finish the book.
- Watch *Food Inc* (2009, Robert Kenner)
- **Recommended:** Fiona Probyn-Rapsey. 2013. "Stunning Australia." *Humanimalia* 4 (2): Spring 2013: <http://www.depauw.edu/humanimalia/issue%2008/probyn-rapsey.html>; *Fresh* (2009, Ana Sofia Joanes): <http://www.freshthemovie.com>

Thursday, 1/15

- Finish Pachirat, *Every Twelve Seconds*
- Sarah Gerard. 2014. "Earthlings, Anarchists, and Other Animals." From Menagerie, *New York Times*: <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/07/27/earthlings-anarchists-and-other-animals/>
- Take a look at Will Potter's blog, *Green is the New Red*: <http://www.greenisthenewred.com/blog/>
- **In class: Skype session with Professor Timothy Pachirat** (UMASS, Amherst)

Week 3

Tuesday, 1/20

- Chloe Taylor. 2013. "Foucault and Critical Animal Studies: Genealogies of Agricultural Power." *Philosophy Compass* 8/6 (2013): 539-551.
- Krithika Srinivasan. 2012. "The biopolitics of animal being and welfare: dog control and care in the UK and India." *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 38: 106-119.
- James Suzman. 2014. "Sympathy for a Desert Dog." From Menagerie, *New York Times*: <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/08/31/sympathy-for-a-desert-dog/?module=Search&mabReward=relbias%3As>

Thursday, 1/22

- Naisargi Dave. 2014. "Witness: Humans, Animals, and the Politics of Becoming." *Cultural Anthropology* 29 (3).
- Naisargi Dave. 2013. "Nothing: Or, the Matter of the Maggot." Paper delivered at the University of Washington.
- Anica Mrose Rissi. 2014. "A Gander at Love." From Menagerie, *New York Times*: <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/11/23/a-gander-at-love/>

Week 4

Tuesday, 1/27

- Kathryn Gillespie. 2013. "Sexualized violence and the gendered commodification of the animal body in Pacific Northwestern US dairy production." *Gender, Place and Culture*, OnlineFirst.
- María Elena García. "Loving Guinea Pigs in Peru: Life, Death, and the (Im)possibilities of Collaborative Multispecies Ethnography." Under review at *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*. Part of Special Issue on Anthropology and Life Itself.
- In class: Katie Gillespie will join us to discuss her work and the readings.

Thursday, 1/29

- David Foster Wallace. 2004. "Consider the Lobster." *Gourmet*.
- Jake Kosek. 2010. "Ecologies of Empire: On the New Uses of the Honeybee." *Cultural Anthropology*, 25 (4): 650-678.
- Julie Metz. 2014. "My Daughter, Her Rat." From Menagerie, *New York Times*: <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/08/23/my-daughter-her-rat/?module=Search&mabReward=relbias%3As>
- Tim Kreider. 2014. "On Smushing Bugs." From Menagerie, *New York Times*: <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/11/15/on-smushing-bugs/>

Week 5

Tuesday, 2/3

- Elisabeth Tova Bailey. 2010. *The Sound of a Wild Snail Eating*. Algonquin Books.
- Watch *Microcosmos* (1997, Claude Nuridsany and Marie Pérennou)

Thursday, 2/5

- Michael Pollan. 2013. "The Intelligent Plant." *New Yorker*. December 2013.
- Listen to "What the Petunia Knows": <http://onpoint.wbur.org/2014/07/24/science-of-plants-knowledge-memory>
- Watch *If a Tree Falls* (2011, Marshall Curry and Sam Cullman)

Week 6

Tuesday, 2/10

- Jane Bennett. 2010. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham: Duke University Press. Read Preface and chapters 3, 7, and 8.

Thursday, 2/12

- Kim TallBear. 2013. "An Indigenous Approach to Critical Animal Studies, Interspecies Thinking, and the New Materialisms." Talk delivered at the University of Washington.
- Also, see this critique of "the ontological turn": <http://zoeandthecity.wordpress.com/2014/10/24/an-indigenous-feminists-take-on-the-ontological-turn-ontology-is-just-another-word-for-colonialism/>

Week 7

Tuesday, 2/17

- Marisol de la Cadena. 2010. "Indigenous Cosmopolitics in the Andes: Conceptual Reflections Beyond 'Politics'" *Cultural Anthropology* 25 (2): 334-370.
- **Recommended:** Mario Blaser. 2010. *Storytelling Globalization from the Chaco and Beyond*. Durham: Duke University Press. Read Introduction.

Thursday, 2/19

- Donna Haraway. 2008. "Introduction." *When Species Meet*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press.
- Dian Million. 2014. "There is a River In Me: Theory From Life." In *Theorizing Native Studies*, Audra Simpson and Andrea Smith, eds. Durham: Duke University Press.
- **Recommended:** Anna Tsing. 2012. "Unruly Edges: Mushrooms as Companion Species." *Environmental Humanities*, Vol. 1: 141-54; Deborah Rose. 2006. "What if the Angel of History Were a Dog?" *Cultural Studies Review*, 12 (1), March.

Week 8

Tuesday, 2/23

- Steven Feld. 2005. "Places Sensed, Senses Placed: Toward a Sensuous Epistemology of Environments." In *Empire of the Senses: The Sensual Culture Reader*, David Howes, editor. New York: Berg.
- Hugh Raffles. 2002. "Intimate Knowledge." *International Social Science Journal* 54(3): 325-335.
- Wendy Hsu. 2013. "On Digital Ethnography, magnifying the materiality of culture." *Ethnography Matters*: <http://ethnographymatters.net/blog/2013/01/25/on-digital-ethnography-magnifying-the-materiality-of-culture-part-3-of-4/>
- Explore Harvard's Sensory Ethnography Lab: <http://sel.fas.harvard.edu>
- Watch *Leviathan* (2012, Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Verena Paravel)

Thursday, 2/26

- Today we will meet at the Henry Art Gallery and you will explore Ann Hamilton's exhibit, the common S E N S E, with your designated partner: <http://henryart.org/exhibitions/ann-hamilton-the-common-sense>
- Constance Classen. 2012. *The Deepest Sense: A Cylytral History of Touch*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press. Read Introduction and Chapter 5 (Animal Skins).
- Recommended: review of exhibit: "Prey for the Senses" in *Columns*: <http://www.washington.edu/alumni/columns-magazine/september-2014/features/hamilton/>

Week 9

Tuesday, 3/3

- Joao Biehl. 2013. *Vita: Life in a Zone of Social Abandonment*, California.

Thursday, 3/5

- Finish Biehl's *Vita*.

- Recommended: Phillippe Bourgois and Jeffrey Schonberg. 2009. *Righteous Dopefiend*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Essay on Ann Hamilton due Friday, 3/6. Post to Canvas by midnight.

Week 10

Tuesday, 3/10

- Eduardo Kohn. 2013. *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human*. Berkeley: University of California Press. Read Introduction.
- Mel Chen. 2012. *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect*. Durham: Duke University Press. Read Introduction.
- Skype conversation with Professor Kohn.

Thursday, 3/12: wrap-up, evaluations.

Week 11: Essay/project on life beyond the human **due Tuesday March 17**. Email your essays to me directly anytime on 3/17 (meg71@uw.edu).