Course Description: *Imagining Eco-collapse*

Stories of nature’s total destruction—"eco-collapse"—abound in contemporary culture. Take, for example, the increased proliferation of films about environmental collapse, from *Wall-E*, *Ice Age*, and *Happy Feet* to *The Day After Tomorrow*, *The Road*, and *2010*. These films are emblematic of the dominant narratives and images we use to imagine environmental collapse. Given our particular moment in planetary history, a better understanding of the cultural work that these environmental narratives and images do is central to responsible global citizenship as such narratives and images significantly affect our ethical values, our collective political will, and sometimes even what scientific research we choose to fund. In this course, we will pursue this understanding by investigating the role of “eco-collapse” in U.S. literature and culture. We will do this by reading and writing about texts in a variety of forms and genres, including film, photography, journalistic nonfiction, psychology, and historical analysis. Some underlying questions that will help us with our investigation are: What is new (and not so new) about stories of environmental collapse in contemporary culture? How do fear and the perception of risk inform literary, artistic, and cultural production? What are the respective roles of science, politics, and art in representing and addressing environmental disasters?

In the first unit students will look at various psychological, sociological, and political theories of how and why environmental apocalypse has been represented in U.S. culture. Specifically students will read selections from Frederick Buell’s landmark study *From Apocalypse to Way of Life* and Rebecca Solnit’s *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities that Arise in Disaster*. In the second unit the course will shift to a historical case study of how environmental writers and historians have imagined environmental disasters in the past by comparing Timothy Egan’s work of historical reportage about the 1930’s dust bowl, *The Worst Hard Time: The Untold Story of Those Who Survived the Great American Dust Bowl*, selections from John Steinbeck’s 1939 novel *The Grapes of Wrath*, and Dorothea Lange’s WPA photographs. Finally, in the third unit, students will read Octavia Butler’s 1993 science fiction novel *Parable of the Sower* and examine the recent magical realist film *Beasts of the Southern Wild* as two points of entry for understanding how environmental disasters are imagined and understood in contemporary U.S. literature and culture.