

## Utopian/Dystopian Visions

Ximena Gallardo C., English

Contemporary American society is based on conspicuous consumption. Countless Americans are not ready to do away with fast-food packaging, disposable diapers, or their gas-guzzling cars; they are not ready to take three-minute showers, to wash dishes by hand, or to return to drying clothes on a clothesline. They're definitely not ready to invest in environmentally-friendly stock (unless it pays off well), to buy "vintage" diamonds from pawn shops or antique stores, or to "give second-hand clothing a chance," as *The Green Book: The Everyday Guide to Saving the Planet One Simple Step at a Time* suggests (73). My point is that when we read and teach *An Inconvenient Truth*, we may forget to stop and think about how much the society that we live in would have to change if we really want to make a difference. Would present-day Americans, spoiled as we are, *want* to live in the future world required by *An Inconvenient Truth*?

These questions—questions of global citizenship and responsibility vs. convenience and comfort could obviously generate some interesting discussions and/or position papers. For the purposes of this lesson, however, I will focus on how students could explore their fear of the ecological crisis as well as their fear of losing the ability to actively participate in the pleasures of consumer culture by generating short pieces of utopian/dystopian fantasy fiction.

One way to begin such an assignment would be to have students read on utopian/dystopian environmental societies, such as those appearing in Ernest Callenbach's *Ecotopia* (Bantam 1990), Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (Fawcett 1985), Kim Stanley Robinson's *Pacific Edge* (Orb 1995), or the anthology edited by Kim Stanley Robinson, *Future Primitive: The New Ecotopias* (Tor 1994). There are also a handful of environmental dystopian films that may stimulate the creative process, from the oldies *Silent Running* (1972) and *Soylent Green* (1973) to the more recent *Waterworld* (1995) and *Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within* (2001). For a scholarly discussion of nature writing, you may wish to assign portions of *Green Culture: Environmental Rhetoric in Contemporary America*, edited by Carl Herndl and Stuart Brown (U of Wisconsin P 1996), particularly Chapter 1, "Millennial Ecology: The Apocalyptic Narrative from Silent Spring to Global Warming."

Another way to prepare for the assignment is for students to learn by attempting to "go green" in some part of their daily lives. Follow some of the simple tips in *The Green Book: The Everyday Guide to Saving the Planet One Simple Step at a Time* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2007) or in "An Inconvenient Truth Links to Help Solve the Climate Crisis" under the area "The Book" of the LaGuardia companion website to *An Inconvenient Truth* : online at <http://www.lagcc.cuny.edu/ait/book.htm> . Then have students record their impressions and extrapolate from their experience.

On the next page I include three simple prompts to start students on this kind of assignment.

**Prompt 1:** You live in 2107. Write a 500-750 word letter to be sent back in time a hundred years, detailing the consequences of some particular human behavior (from those discussed in the readings or in class) that has changed the ecology of the planet irreversibly. What would you tell the people of 2007?

This type of assignment could also be envisioned as the final journal entry of the only individual left on Earth after an ecological disaster has occurred, or as the report of an extraterrestrial who visits our planet in the midst of an environmental emergency.

**Prompt 2:** Imagine a planet Earth where (choose one possibility)

- Individuals have to buy uncontaminated air to breathe.
- There is no running water anymore; all water is purchased in individual containers only.
- New York City has become, like Venice, a city of canals.
- New York City is ten degrees hotter in summer and ten degrees colder in winter.
- There are no personal motor vehicles.
- There is no publicly-produced electricity.
- All paper products cost one hundred times more than they do now.

[Etc.—you get the gist]

Write a 500-750-word narrative describing the adventures of a fictional character during a typical day in this world.

**Prompt 3 (ACT-style):** The Room of the Future

The federal government has made all green makeovers in your house tax-exempt. You decide to give greening a try on a small basis, by re-doing one room. Write a letter to the Assistant Director of the Environmental Office at the Internal Revenue Service explaining what room you will make over, and what main changes you will need to do to make the room 100% environmentally safe. You should base your reasons and examples on facts from *An Inconvenient Truth* and *The Green Book*, but you can also let your imagination run for this particular piece. Begin your letter *Dear Assistant Director of the Environmental Office*.

For more assignments that stimulate students to write about their interaction with the environment, see Sidney I. Dobrin's *Saving Place: An Ecomposition Reader*. Boston: McGraw Hill, 2005.