Beyond Nature Writing

Eco-Critical Readings of Race, Gender, and Landscape

In this class, we use a variety of materials including advertisements, novels, non-fiction essays, and real landscapes around us to prompt discussions about what nature is. We will explore how our ideas about race, gender, and class inflect the way we imagine and understand the landscapes around us.

This class serves as an introduction to eco-criticism. Eco-criticism is a way of reading literature that foregrounds the role of nature in the text. For example, how do particular authors understand nature? How do those authors’ ideas about nature influence their ideas about social justice?

In this class, we expand our application of eco-criticism beyond traditional nature writing (such as Thoreau) to three contemporary novels by women writers. We also apply the lessons of eco-criticism to explore how nature is understood in culture more generally, such as how it is depicted in social movements and advertisements. The class is structured around three contemporary ways that we approach or understand nature: wilderness, environmental justice, and globalization.

Course Requirements:

Participation: 10%
Mini-Assignments: 15%
Paper 1 (1500 words): 20%
Paper 2 (1500 words): 20%
Revision of Paper 1 or 2: 10%
Final Project (Choice of Creative or Academic Writing: 1500 words): 25%

Note: Students should expect to spend 4-6 hours per week outside of class completing reading and writing assignments. Approximately 20 pages of writing will be due over the course of the semester, not including one paper revision.

Required Texts: Available at Brown Bookstore & on reserve at the Rock

Recommended Texts:
Section I: Approaching Nature Critically

Week I: Introduction to Course
Key Questions: What are the Goals & Objectives of the Course? What is American Studies? What is the relationship between Eco-Criticism and American Studies? What does it mean to think about nature critically?

W, 9/8: Aims & Objectives of Course; Class Expectations; Syllabus Overview

Week II: Eco-Critical Theory
Key Questions: What is nature? What is Eco-Criticism? What is nature-writing? What are some of the major debates in eco-criticism? What techniques do eco-critics use?

M, 9/12: What is Nature? What is Nature Writing?
Built Environment Tour of Campus (In-Class)

W, 9/14: Defining & Applying Eco-Criticism
+Select definitions on Eco-Criticism

Mini-Assgignment 1: 1-2 page Eco-Critical Reading of Houston’s “Crossing Boundaries.” Is “Crossing Boundaries” an “environmental text” according to Lawrence Buell’s suggested guidelines? How does Houston depict the relationship between Japanese Americans and nature? How does she depict the relationship between Native Americans and nature? Do you think she successfully links the histories of Japanese Americans and Native Americans?

Week III: Race, Gender, Nature
Key Questions: How is nature gendered and racialized? How do we use eco-critical techniques to talk about depictions of race and gender in literature? How do authors respond to or reclaim the racialized and gendered landscape in their writings?
M. 9/19: Gendering the Land

Mini-Assignment 2: Write 1 Paragraph Synopsis of one of today’s articles (Evans, or Kolodny). Think about how you would apply this article to the creative pieces by McCombs, Williams, or Mora.

W, 9/21: Race & Landscape
Selection from Michael Moore’s Bowling for Columbine (in class).

Section II: Re-Thinking Wilderness

Week IV: The Wilderness Landscape
Key Questions: What is meant by Wilderness? How are our ideas about Wilderness related to our ideas about the American West? What assumptions do we create by linking wilderness and western landscapes?

M, 9/26: Defining Wilderness
Roderick Nash. Excerpts from Wilderness & the American Mind.

Mini-Assignment 3: Please bring one item (be creative) to class that fits the description of Americans’ response to wilderness during the time period of your assigned chapter. Be prepared to explain in 2-5 minutes what it is that Nash argues/describes/explains in your chapter, how your found object is representative of that, and what you think are the most significant issues raised by Nash in your chapter.

W, 9/28: Critiquing Wilderness
+1964 Wilderness Act
DISCUSSION: Paper Expectations (in class)
+“How to Write Academic Papers”

**Week V: The Trouble with Wilderness:**

*Key Questions:* What is meant by saying Wilderness is a “human artifact”? How do wilderness landscapes and representations of wilderness expose ways of thinking about race, gender and nature?

M, 10/3: Constructing Wilderness

W, 10/5: Housekeeping
Marilynne Robinson. *Housekeeping*. Chapters 1-5.

**Week VI: Housekeeping in the Wilderness:**

*Key Questions:* How do we apply eco-critical techniques and analysis of Wilderness landscapes to a critical reading of Housekeeping? Does Robinson embrace or critique Wilderness landscapes? Does Robinson’s novel embrace or challenge the collapse of “Wilderness” and “The West”?

M, 10/10: No class.

W, 10/12: Housekeeping.

**Assignment 1:** 4-6 Page Paper Responding to Guide Questions on *Housekeeping*.

**Section III: The Struggle for Environmental Justice**

**Week VII: The Environmental Justice Movement**

*Key Questions:* How does the Environmental Justice (EJ) Movement define nature? How does it define environment? How do we compare the definitions of environment and nature, and particularly the place of humans, in the EJ movement, to the definitions of environment and nature found in the discourse of wilderness?

M, 10/17: Defining the Environmental Justice Movement
Wionna LaDuke. *Recovering the Sacred*. Introduction, What is Sacred?

**Mini-Assignment 4:** Write a paragraph synopsis of Di Chiro’s, LaDuke’s or Bullard’s piece.

W, 10/19: Environmental Justice Testimonials

**Week VIII: Labor & Landscape**

*Key Questions: How do the authors this week understand the relationship between humanity and nature? Is all labor environmentally destructive? When we privilege some forms of labor as less environmentally destructive than others (doctor versus logger for example) what conceptions of humanity’s relationship to nature are we appealing to?

M, 10/24: Narratives of Environmental Justice

**Mini-Assignment 5:** Write a 1 -2 page response using either the work by Gonzalez or by Young. How does the author think about the relationship between humanity and nature? How do they define environment?

W, 10/26: Working Landscapes

**Week IX: Agricultural/Pastoral Landscapes**

*Key Questions: This week we will compare/contrast three visions of Agricultural landscapes: the yeoman farmer, the factory in the field, and the machine in the garden. How is the relationship between humans, labor, and landscape represented in each? How do race and gender affect each vision of agriculture?

M, 10/31: Racing the Pastoral
* Wendell Berry. Excerpts from the The Hidden Wound. Pages: 1-3, 94-121,
+Pastoral Poetry & Pastoral Comedy http://cla.calpoly.edu/~dschwart/engl339/pastoral.html

**Mini-Assignment 6:** One paragraph describing something thing you would like to work on/improve in your next paper. +Read “Steps in Paper Editing.”

W, 11/2: Industrialized Agriculture
**Week X: Under the Feet of Jesus**

M, 11/7: Environmental Justice Movement  
Helena Maria Viramontes. *Under the Feet of Jesus*.

Helena Maria Viramontes. *Under the Feet of Jesus*.

**Assignment 2**: 4-6 page paper applying articles from Week VII, VIII or IX to *Under the Feet of Jesus*. You have two topics to choose from. 1) How do you compare the depictions of nature in the Environmental Justice Movement to depictions of nature in *Under the Feet of Jesus*? Is *Under the Feet of Jesus* a novel of Environmental Justice? Why, or Why not? 2) How does Viramontes represent the relationship between labor and landscape?

**Section IV: Nature in the Global City**

**Week XI: Nature in the Global Economy**

*Key Questions*: How do we approach advertisements as a primary source? When we buy products that are sold through nature, what are we buying? What is the relationship between consumption and production of nature?

M, 11/14: Buying Nature  

W, 11/16: Selling Nature  
Read Making Sense of Advertisements: [http://historymatters.gmu.edu/mse/Ads/](http://historymatters.gmu.edu/mse/Ads/)

**Mini-Assignment 7**: Bring in an advertisement that uses nature. What ideas about nature (and nature’s relationship to humanity) are embedded in the advertisement? What ideas about race, gender, and labor are present in this advertisement? How does this advertisement conceptualize the relationship between production and consumption? What is this advertisement actually selling? Be prepared to present your eco-critical reading of the advertisement to the class (5 minutes).

**Week XII: Immigration & Globalization**

*Key Questions*: What are the ecological issues around border, immigration, and population? What is the role of “the nation” and “borders” in environmentalist discourse? How do we approach globalization and the global justice movement from an eco-critical perspective?

F, 11/18: Population, Immigration and Border Ecologies  
+Selected Documents from Sierra Club Immigration Referendum  
+Selected Documents Environmental Justice at the Border
M, 11/21: Globalization
+Susan George. *Another World is Possible If...* Chapter 1, pages 3-28. Selections from *The Miami Model* (in class, approx 30 minutes)

**Week XIII: Tropic of Orange**

M, 11/28: Tropic of Orange


**Mini-Assignment 8:** Each student will be assigned one image or character in the novel to think about in terms of the ideas we have thought about in class this semester. At the beginning of each class day spent on the novel (11/28, 11/30 and 12/5) – a 150-200 word eco-critical reflection on that character or image from that section of the novel is due.

**WEEK XIIII: Tropic of Orange & Conclusion**

M, 12/5: Tropic of Orange

*Julie Sze, ”From Environmental Justice Literature to the Literature of Environmental Justice.”*  *The Environmental Justice Reader*. Pages: 163-180.

F, 12/9: Revision of Paper 1 or 2 Due.

M, 12/12: Final Project Due.