

English 175: Environmental Destruction An Introduction to the Environmental Humanities

What can the humanities teach us about our current environmental crisis? This question is at the heart of the “environmental humanities,” which consider the ways that humans are entangled in a world with plants, animals, and other “things” that are imagined as “natural resources.” The environmental humanities respond to a rapidly intensifying awareness of human precarity, which is rooted in our clear dependence on “nature.” They also call for increased attention to the ways that attention to the non-human world forces us to think differently about ontology, epistemology, ethics, and justice.

“Environmental Destruction” will focus on the ideological causes, palpable effects, and imagined futures linked to the destruction of our environments. We will begin with the concept of “Manifest Destiny,” or the idea that Americans were divinely ordained to move West, along with a series of serious problems that were inextricable from this idea of the landscape as an inviting blank slate. (Native Americans, for example, already inhabited this supposed promised land). Our consideration of this human-centered, possessive approach to the environment will help us understand the logic that set the stage for the clear crisis of our moment.

In subsequent sections of the course we will turn towards the ways that twentieth-century authors began to describe the slow annihilation of the natural world, along with traditions that were rooted in it. We will consider initial responses to nostalgia about environmental loss, registered by the development of national parks, natural history museums, lists of endangered species, the environmental movement, and, ultimately, discussions of the Anthropocene, or an epoch when human activities are seen as having a substantial impact on the planet, its ecosystems, and its atmosphere. (Here you will develop research presentations on different attempts at conservation). We will conclude not with this slow process of extinction—and attempts at conservation—but with the ecological disasters that transform built and “natural” environments in quick, overwhelming moments. Here we will take on two case studies: Hurricane Katrina and Deepwater Horizon. Guest lectures and field trips will be built into this course.

Course Texts

Emerson and Thoreau, *Nature* and "Walking" (978-0807014196)

Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (978-0393930900)

John Muir, *Essential Muir: A Selection of John Muir's Best Writings* (978-1597140270)

William Faulkner, *Go Down, Moses* (978-0679732174)

Alan Weisman, *The World Without Us* (978-0312427900)

Natasha Trethewey, *Beyond Katrina: A Meditation on the Mississippi Gulf Coast* (978-0820349022)

Stephanie LeMenager, *Living Oil: Petroleum Culture in the American Century* (978-0190461973)

* Additional readings are linked to the digital version of this syllabus.

* *You should also be prepared to print about 100 pages during the course of the semester.*

Schedule of Readings & Assignments

Week 1: Introductions

January 17: In class: Introductions

In class: Syllabus and Assignments

Week 2: Ralph Waldo Emerson

January 22: Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature*, 3-31

Assignment: Set up [Reading Journals](#)

Assignment: Information Sheet (posted under “Assignments” on Sakai)

January 24: Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature*, 32-40, 53-57, 66-67; also reread 3-9

Ralph Waldo Emerson; [Natural History of the Intellect](#)

Week 3: Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way

January 29: Henry David Thoreau, "Walking," 71-122

In Class: George Berkeley, "[On the Prospect of Planting Arts and Learning in America](#)"

January 31: Ralph Waldo Emerson; "[The Young American](#)"

Frederick Jackson Turner, "[The Significance of the Frontier in American History](#)"

"[U.S. Expansion and its Consequences](#)," *Oxford Handbook of American Indian History*

Week 4: Henry David Thoreau

February 5: Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, "Economy" and "Where I Lived and What I Lived For"

February 7: Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, "Higher Laws," "Conclusion," and book reviews (380-388)

Kathryn Schultz, "[Pond Scum: Henry David Thoreau's moral myopia](#)"

Week 5: John Muir

February 12: John Muir, *Essential Muir*, 3-83

February 14: John Muir, *Essential Muir*, 87-126

Jedidiah Purdy, "[Environmentalism's Racist History](#)"

In class: Revisit Critical Response Assignment

Week 6: William Faulkner

February 19: William Faulkner, *Go Down, Moses*: 155-7, 169, 174-8, 181-240

February 21: William Faulkner, *Go Down, Moses*: 241-315, 319-21, 326, 346-7

Week 7: A Brief Interlude

February 26: In class: paper workshop

Assignment: Paper Drafts Due

February 28: Discuss group projects, research methods, and scholarly sources

March 2: **Assignment: Critical Responses Due by 5 PM**

March 3-11: Spring Break

Week 8 & 9: Conservation

For these two weeks you will be working on your group projects

I'll schedule two meetings with each group during class time between the 12th and 20th.

(I'll be away at a conference March 21st-March 25th).

Week 10: Imagining Extinction

March 26: Group project presentations!

Evening Film Screening: *Avatar*

March 28: Alan Weisman, *The World Without Us*, 1-46, coda, [multimedia](#)

Assignment: Final Paper Topics Due

Week 11: Katrina

April 2: *Beyond Katrina*, 1-123

In Class: *Citizen*, 83-86

April 4: **Assignment: Paper Proposals Due**

Evening Film Screening: [When the Levees Broke](#)

Week 12: Oil

April 9: *Living Oil: Petroleum Culture in the American Century*, 3-19, 102-141.

April 11: "[Oil Stories](#)" from *The Guardian* (start at the bottom of the page)

Week 13 & 14: Final Paper Workshops

April 16: Presentations on work-in-progress

April 18: Presentations on work-in-progress

April 23: No class: I'll be away giving a talk

April 25: Presentations on work-in-progress

Week 14 & 15: Conclusions

April 30: In class: Conclusions and Evaluations

Assignment: Final Paper Drafts Due

May 7: **Assignment: Final Papers Due by 5 PM**

Assignments

- [Participation](#) and [Reading Journals](#) (20%)
- [Close Reading](#) (5%)
- [Critical Response](#) (20%)
- Group Project (20%)
- [Final Paper](#) (30%), [Proposal, and Annotated Bibliography](#) (5%)

* I reserve the right to give reading quizzes, which will be worth 5-10% of your grade.

* Follow links for detailed descriptions of each assignment.

Academic Responsibilities

Attendance: Once you've missed class three times, I reserve the right to lower your final grade by one-third of a grade for each class that you miss (i.e. A- to B+). If you miss six classes, then I reserve the right to assign you a failing grade. If something minor comes up and you need to miss class, *there's no need to send me an email*. That's why you have a three-absence buffer. Just contact a classmate to find out what you missed. But if something truly significant comes up, please talk to me before you miss multiple classes—or have someone contact me, your advisor, or a Dean—so that we can develop a workable plan. Finally, if you are late on a regular basis, I reserve the right to mark you absent. I also reserve the right to count an “absence” if you skip office hours or an appointment more than once. ***Please do not come to class or office hours if you are sick and contagious!***

Disabilities: If you have a disability that may require an accommodation, please notify me as soon as possible. I also strongly recommend that you contact the [Learning Assistance Center](#). They're very dedicated, and I will be happy to work with them to develop appropriate alternatives.

Email: Email is a good way to be in touch about simple things (i.e. asking a quick question or scheduling a meeting). But if you would like to discuss a more serious matter (i.e. paper drafts, grades, or accommodations), please come to office hours or email to schedule a face-to-face conversation.

Office hours: You'll be required to attend office hours at least once during the semester, as you work on your group projects. But you're also always welcome to stop in to ask questions, to work through ideas, or to explore your intellectual interests. My office hours are on Thursdays from 2-4 PM in Tribble C5-H and on Mondays from 3:30-4 PM in room 1505 at Wake Downtown. But these are subject to change, as meetings are scheduled or if a majority of you have clear conflicts (like labs on both afternoons). I'll also add additional office hours during busy times in the semester, before papers and paper proposals are due.

You'll know when they are because you'll [sign up for a time slot](#), which seems to be efficient and which limits the number of people lined up in the small hallway outside my office. If you are unable to meet during my office hours because of a reasonable conflict (i.e. class or lab), we can try to find an alternate time. Finally, if you only need a few minutes, then we can usually touch base before or after class.

Phones, computers, etc. Don't text in class. Don't surf the web. Don't shop online.

If you do create a distraction with technology, then *I will count you absent for the day*. Really.

Laptops: Sometimes you may have a pressing reason to check email: just be quick and respectful.

I'd like to make it possible for you to use laptops to take notes or look up material related to class! But if they become a distraction, they will be banned from seminar for the rest of the semester.

Phones: If your phone rings, turn it off. Don't look around and pretend it's someone else while we're serenaded by an awkward mp3. Don't try to be subtle. Just do it. If you're in the midst of a crisis and might genuinely need to take a call, just let me know before class starts.

Plagiarism: The Honor Code applies to all of the work you do for this course. *Do not cheat, and do not plagiarize*. Failure to document the words or ideas of others will result in a zero on the assignment—and, potentially, an “F” in the course. ZSR Library offers [resources on this topic](#), and the English department recommends [this plagiarism tutorial](#). If you ever have questions, just *ask before there's a problem!*

Writing Center: I strongly recommend that you consider visiting the [Writing Center](#) to get feedback on your work (<http://college.wfu.edu/writingcenter/>). It's a terrific resource for writers of all levels, and it's helpful for far more than learning to recognize and then correct surface errors. Trained tutors will also talk through you work and help you develop your ideas! A number of students make use of this opportunity every semester, and almost all of them report that it's well worth the effort. (Pro tip: sign up before the end of the semester! Times go quickly!)