Reading Poetry: Ecopoetry and Environmental Imaginings

“In every part of every living thing / is stuff that once was rock”

Lorine Niedecker, “Lake Superior”

Course Description

While ecopoetry as a subfield of American poetry has only been defined and developed in the past few decades, American poets’ engagement with the environment, both built and natural, is embedded within America’s poetic roots. In this course, we will trace the relationship between environment and poetry, moving from traditional nature poetry to contemporary lyrical conceptions of the interconnectedness of humans and nature in a time of environmental crises. Integrating discourses on environmental criticism and contemporary poetry, our course will consider the emerging field of ecopoetics within nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first century American poetry. Moving chronologically, we will begin with historically canonical poets such as Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman and conclude with contemporary poets grounded in ecocritical conversations, such as Julianna Spahr and Tommy Pico. We will inquire: what constitutes an ecopoem? Must nature always be the subject? How do we account for built or constructed environments? What distinguishes ecopoetics from other fields of poetry? How has climate change impacted the way poets write about the natural world? How might poetry be particularly attuned to human and non-human interactions with the earth? Course goals include introducing students to some of the principal issues and theoretical critiques of ecopoetics while also learning how to close-read poems through a focus on formal techniques, styles, and traditions in American poetry. We will consider ecopoetics in relation
to current movements such as climate justice, ecofeminism, and environmental racism, examining how
ecopoetry confronts understandings of human accountability, nonhuman agents, and environmental
change.

This course carries a writing flag. The writing assignments in this course are arranged procedurally
with a focus on invention, development through instructor and peer feedback, and revision; they will
constitute a major part of the final grade.

Reading

All other reading materials will be made available on Canvas.

Assignments

*Weekly Poem Annotations.* Choose one poem to annotate closely, noting formal characteristics, literary
devices, and marking general observations or patterns. Annotations can also be constructed through
emulation: writing your own poem imitating the formal characteristics and patterns of the poem
chosen. There will be checkpoints throughout the semester and a portfolio will be submitted at the
end of the semester.

*Close Reading Paper.* Choose one poem by a poet we’ve read so far and write a 500 to 750-word analysis
on how the poem’s form and content inform the overall meaning of the poem. No outside sources
required. Revisions optional, to be submitted within four weeks of original deadline.

*Reverse Outline.* Complete a reverse outline of a secondary source that will go towards the bibliography
of your short paper.

*Short Paper + Revision.* Write on a poet either in *The Ecopoetry Anthology* that is not included in the syllabus
or a poet you’ve found on your own. Make an argument for how their work is engaging with nature,
built or natural, or how they fit into the field of ecopoetics at large. Must speak to more than one of
their poems and draw on 1-2 secondary sources. 750-1000 words total. Revisions required.

*Final Research Paper.* Write an argumentative paper on a poet of your choice. You can build upon your
short paper or write on a poet from the syllabus. Be sure to address the three categories that divide
our units—nature, environmental, and ecological—in some capacity. Must draw upon at least 2-3
secondary sources. 1500-2000 words total. Drafts for peer review will be due in advance of the final
deadline and the final submission will include a short paragraph speaking to the changes made during
the peer review process.

Grading

Weekly Poem Annotations 20%
Participation + In-Class Activities 10%
Close Reading Paper 15%
Reverse Outline 5%
Short Paper + Revision 20%
Peer Review 5%
Final Research Paper 25%

Course Policies

Accessibility and Accommodation

All students are welcome in this course including students with learning, emotional, physical, cognitive, and/or hidden disabilities, illnesses, and injuries, regardless of diagnosis. Access is a collective and collaborative project, and we all learn and process information differently. It is my goal to make this course as accessible as possible for everyone. If there is anything I can do to facilitate your learning in this class, please let me know. I welcome any suggestions for how to make the course more inclusive of different learning styles. Please know that it is never too late to have this conversation with me. I understand that bodies, minds, and circumstances change over time and that it can take time to find the language needed to describe your needs; with or without documentation, we can discuss how to improve your access to course materials and explore different possibilities for learning.

Reading Schedule

i. wild things

week 1  8/23. syllabus day.
        8/25. excerpts from preface & introduction to The Ecopoetry Anthology, pages specified in class.

week 2  8/30. Frost, “The Most of it.”
        Stevens, “Anecdote of the Jar.”
        Berry, “The Peace of Wild Things.”
        9/1. Cronon, “The Trouble with Wilderness.”

        Nye, “Negotiations with a Volcano.”
        Moore, “The Fish.”


ii. political pleas


9/22. chapter 4 in Merchant’s The Death of Nature.

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iii. foraging

week 6 9/27. dg nanouk okpik, “She Sang to Me Once”
Harjo, from She Had Some Horses.
dg nanouk okpik, “If Oil is Drilled in Bristol Bay.”


week 7 10/4. Shockley, “weather or not.”
Shockley, “Fukushima Blues.”
Dungy, “On the rocks.”

10/6. hooks, “Touching the Earth.”

Dungy, “Writing Home.”

easy, canvas

week 8 10/11. Rankine, Citizen.

10/13. Rankine, Citizen.

week 9 10/18. Rankine, Citizen.

10/20. Rankine, Citizen.

iii. foraging

reverse outline due.

short paper due.
week 10  10/25. Skinner, “Editor’s Statement” in *ecopoetics no. 1.* essay, 2 pp., canvas


*short paper revisions due.*


11/10. Spahr, *from Gentle Now, Don’t Add to Heartache.* pp. 500

week 13  11/15. Ammons, “Corsons Inlet” pp. 133

Ammons, *from Garbage.* pp. 137


*drafts due for peer review.*

week 14  thanksgiving week.

week 15  11/29. peer reviews.

12/1. concluding thoughts.

*final paper due exam day.*