

Introduction to the Environmental Humanities: Nature, Place, Biodiversity and Resilience



Anna Atkins, cyanotype, 1853.

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Department of English and Cultural Studies
Office hours: by appointment on zoom and hours TBA

Section A: 3:55 pm - 6:35 pm Thurs.
Section B: 3:30 pm - 6:10 pm Tues.

Both sections meet in Unistructure 247

Syllabus

Why do we think of “nature” as something apart from human “culture”? How have past representations of this disconnect informed our attitudes today? What is the potential agency of the arts and humanities to create and maintain a more resilient and biologically diverse world in our present moment of global ecological crisis? This introduction to ecocriticism in the humanities tackles these questions while raising more about ethical and political concerns for the environment, nonhuman animals, and environmental justice.

Required text: Raj Patel and Jason Moore, [*HISTORY of the World in Seven Cheap Things: A Guide to Capitalism, Nature and the Future of the Planet*](#). University of California Press ISBN: 9780520299931

Course Goals / Students in this introductory interdisciplinary class will:

- Explore key themes in visual art, popular culture, film and literature to make connections between past and present attitudes to human and non- human nature.
- Describe our ecological connections to the world around us through careful and mindful attention.
- Become familiar with and apply a number of distinct ecocritical approaches to visual, literary and cultural studies.
- Engage in interdisciplinary learning through processes of critical analysis, careful looking and deliberate description.
- Apply ecocritical perspectives to the analysis and interpretation of local and global cultural production.
- Synthesize new concepts with prior knowledge of place and environment.
- Question widespread assumptions about the human relationship to “nature.”
- Develop textual analysis and interpretation, and communication skills, both oral and written, for the expression of critical and creative inquiry.
- Develop a formal and critical vocabulary to reflectively place cultural artifacts from America and elsewhere.
- Hone skills of critical reading, visual analysis, critical engagement, and communication, both written and spoken.
- Cultivate empathy for the non-human world.
- Create using artistic, collaborative and conceptual processes.

Learning Outcomes / Upon completion of the course, students will be able to:

Employ a range of critical methods, conceptual models and theoretical approaches to the global environmental humanities.

Articulate an awareness of place through investigation, observation and engagement with local ecologies.

Analyze and compare historical and contemporary ecological thought and its implications in literary and cultural studies.

Reflect upon how texts, images and experiences have affected them as viewers and readers.

Degree Fulfillment: This course is a *200-level* elective in the LCS major, minor and concentration. It can be applied to the Creative and Applied Arts Concentration, it has an International Focus and can serve as a humanities survey or a liberal arts elective.

COVID 19 course format: has been adapted from previous iterations so that students who are in-person, synchronous or asynchronous can participate. We are living in an emotionally exhausting and anxiety-filled moment. It is my hope that your sincere engagement with this course will be a meaningful antidote to the disruption we all face in our daily lives. Every week, I will record short lectures and assign videos that I will ask you to view (in addition to doing the reading for class) and respond to in a written **journal** reflection on Blackboard before we meet for discussion.

All work will be checked for plagiarism. It is crucial that you do your own work.

Attendance / Taking notes/ studying: Students often ask me how they should take notes in my classes. Note-taking is an ideal form of active listening. When you are writing down the ideas you are hearing (especially by hand), you summarize and retain the ideas more than when you let them wash over you and certainly more than when you are distracted.

Attendance and participation is 20% of your grade. When we meet f2f or virtually, there will be options for students to lead the class discussion, focusing on readings, images or artists. Participation will also be counted in your contributions on the class padlet and going beyond stated expectations for journals. When you are in a zoom meeting with me or with the class, I would appreciate it if you keep your camera turned on. Using a virtual background is fine (I may occasionally do this too!) If you have concerns about this, please contact me.

You: I will gladly honor your request to address you by an alternate/preferred **name** or gender **pronoun**. Please advise me of this preference early in the semester so that I may make appropriate changes to my records.

Grading:

Weekly journals	40%
Herbarium project on Padlet	15%
Attendance and active participation in class	20%
Final take-home essays or projects	25%

In spite of the difficulty of our times, there is no tolerance of plagiarism in this class. If you steal / borrow/ appropriate ideas that are not yours, you will receive a zero for the assignment and you might fail this course. If you are having trouble PLEASE contact me.

Grading Scale:

A: 93-100	B-: 80-82	D+: 68-69
A-: 90-92	C+: 78-79	D: 60-67
B+: 88-89	C: 73-77	F: Below 60
B: 83-87	C-: 70-72	

Except for the Patel and Moore text, all readings will be available on Blackboard. Some have direct links in this doc. The list may be modified later in the semester.

You are expected to read the listed texts prior to class and write about them in the journal. The texts complement -- but do not necessarily repeat-- information from the lectures. Working on reading difficult texts is a crucial part of the course: expect to spend at least three hours per week on the reading. Spend time absorbing the argument and bring your questions to class. *Optional readings* in your BB folders are more challenging; journal entries that discuss these in addition to the assigned readings may receive **extra credit**.

Your actions are the key to **success in this class** (aka how to be awesome and get an A)

- 1.) coming to class having completed the assigned readings
- 2.) maintaining a curious and engaged attitude in class
- 3.) taking careful notes in class and from the readings
- 4.) planning ahead and engaging with the process of writing.
- 5.) participation is important and it is in your hands to take the opportunities provided.

Written assignments will be graded on the quality of the writing (including spelling, grammar, citation) and the productive and creative use of course materials.

- **Resources:** Students with documented disabilities have a right to reasonable accommodations that make the learning environment an accessible one. If you believe that you have a disability requiring accommodations, please contact Marie Saddlemire, Assistant Director for Access Services in the Academic Center for Excellence (ACE), by calling 232-6746. If you need to discuss accommodations that are already in place, contact me.

Class Meeting times, Weekly Reading and other Assignments are listed beneath the meeting date of each class. Do the readings **before** you come to class. (This list may be adjusted).

Aug 25/ 27 Week 1: Starting points: Nature Writing, Ecological Intersections and Connections.

Before class, read:

Rachel Carson, "Flood Tide" (1941)

Aldo Leopold "Land Ethic" (1949)

Intro to Moore and Patel, *7 Cheap Things* pp 1-43. Your required text—I put a scan of the intro. on BB in case you do not yet have it.

Watch my recorded introductory lecture.

And watch: 5-minute video: [Freedom to Breathe](#) Ep. 1: Social Justice is Climate Justice

Write your first journal reflection on BB: minimum 500 words:

Q: Ecology is all about interconnection of human, plant and animal life. What attitude toward ecological connection do these pieces share? What key concepts are the most useful to understanding our own moment of crisis?

Your journal is the key to the success of this class. As we will meet in a hybrid format this semester, it is crucial that you participate in this way prior to our class time. After the due date, all entries will be visible. Meaningful commentary on your classmates' entries is a significant form of participation.

Sept 1/3 Week 2: Getting Outside, Walking and Writing

Before class, read:

Thoreau, "Walking" (1851)

Spirn, *Language of Landscape* (1998)

Meinig, *The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes* (1979)

Wessels, *Forest Forensics* (2010)—an optional guide

First, read by Henri David **Thoreau's** classic piece of nature writing: "[Walking](#)" (c. 1851). Pay careful attention to the way he describes features of the landscape that he observes while walking. How does he celebrate aspects of it that are usually ignored or condemned? What distinctions does he draw between nature and society? Why is walking so important to him? Read the **Spirn** and **Meinig** pieces on blackboard. Make note of how they offer other ways of seeing landscape. **Then, take a walk for at least 45 minutes** and take notes about your experience, using these texts as your guide. If you are on campus, I want you to take a long walk nearby chosen from these opportunities:

<https://www.smithfieldri.com/seven-scenic-walks/>

- If you are not on campus, try to find a place near you that you can explore, using the readings as above
- Slow down and look carefully. Stop, reflect, write notes, draw or take pictures. What do you notice that you would have overlooked?
- Your journal reflection this week (minimum 500 words) should synthesize the information that you collect on your walk with the readings.
- Specific questions that will help to guide you will be posted on the journal assignment.
- You may upload images from your walk with your journal (use the media icon in the toolbar, not "attach")
- You may download the [inaturalist](#) app on your phone if you want to identify plants and include images with your journal entry.

Sept 8/10 Week 3: Plants: Columbian Exchange, Collecting and Classifying Life

Begin work on Herbarium padlet project. Details TBA.

Moore and Patel: "Cheap Nature" Chapter 1, *7 Cheap Things*, pp. 44-63.

Pollan, "[Against Nativism](#)" (1994)

Kincaid, "Alien Soil" (1993)

Ritvo "Invasion / Invasive" (2017)

Mastnak et al, "Botanical Decolonization: Rethinking native plants" (2014) [read for critique of Pollan]

Visual reference materials for Herbarium project:

Emily Dickinson's [Herbarium](#). Anna Atkins.

Khan Academy, [Valades' Rhetorica Christiana](#), [Albert Eckhout](#) in Brazil, Inventing "America" for Europe: [Theodore de Bry](#);

Dürer, [the Large Piece of Turf](#).

Goddard [Big Botany](#) - *Conversations with the Plant World* (2018) pp122-177.

Sept 15 / 17 Week 4: Natural History, Darwin's "Entangled Bank" and Biodiversity

Hejnal, "Ladders, Trees, Complexity, and Other Metaphors in Evolutionary Thinking" (2017)
Sax, "[What is it like to be an Octopus?](#)" (2017)
Kolbert, "[The Lost World](#)" (2013)
Lucy, [Reading the Animal](#) in Degas's *Young Spartans* (2003)
Stott, *Darwin and the Barnacle*. (2003)

Sept 22/ 24 Week 5 : Settler-Colonial Frontiers, Natural Resources, Wildness and Wildness

Moore and Patel: Ch 7 "Cheap Lives"
Fausto-Sterling "Nature" (2014)
Proulx, "[Rough Deeds](#)" (a short story)
Atwood, "[Lusus Naturae](#)" (2014) (a short story)
[Cronon, "The Trouble With Wilderness" \(1995\)](#)
Khan Academy: Cole, The [Oxbow](#). Leutze, [Envisioning Manifest Destiny...](#) Church, [Niagara and Heart of the Andes](#);
Hetch Hetchy, [Yosemite, and the battle for National Parks](#)

Saturday class 26 Sept (required for Tuesday, optional for Thursday section)

Film: We will be watching and discussing either [At the Fork](#) Or [Botany of Desire](#). Details TBA.



Illustration from a medieval French falconry text

Sept 29/ Oct 1 Week 6: Animals and Agriculture

Moore and Patel: Chapter 5 "Cheap Food"
Berger, "Why Look at Animals" (1980)
Ritvo, "[Calling the Wild](#)" (2012)
Deming, from *Zoologies: On Animals and the Human Spirit* (2014)
Klein, "[Be Fruitful and Multiply](#)" (2020)
Land Institute "[Transforming human life](#) on our home planet, perennially" (2018)

Optional resource: **EBOOK** Vinciane Despret and Brett Buchanan, [What Would Animals Say ...](#)

Oct 6/ 8 Week 7: Gender and Intersections/Other to Nature

Moore and Patel, ch. 4 "Cheap Care"
E. White "Black Women and the Wilderness" (1999)
Sibley "Images of Difference" (1995)
Heartney, "[Ecological Art Practices](#)" (2020)

Oct 13/ 15 Week 8: Indigenous Cultures and Decolonizing Nature

Moore and Patel: ch 3: "Cheap Work"

Luther Standing Bear "Nature" (1933)

Winona LaDuke "Traditional Ecological Knowledge and Environmental Futures" (1994)

Kimmerer "[Speaking of Nature](#)" (2017)

Berlo "Native Cosmospaces" (2011)

Khan Academy: [Cotton, oil, and the economics of history](#)

Optional: "Cheap Money" chapter in *7 Cheap things*

Sat. 17 October (required for Thursday section, optional for Tues section)

Film: The [Pollinators \(2019\)](#) [and special zoom visit with the filmmakers]



Joris Hoefnagel, *Animalia*... c. 1575-1580

Oct 20/22 Week 9: The Blue Humanities and Plastic Oceans

Carson "Under Sea" and "[The Marginal World](#)" (1955)

Decker, [Gyre: The Plastic Ocean \(2014\)](#)

Davis, "[Life & Death in the Anthropocene: A Short History of Plastic](#)" (2015)

Chris Jordan: [Midway](#) (2009+)

Jeffery, "[Pam Longobardi: The Ocean Gleaner](#)" (2016)

Optional: [Susik, "Convergence Zone: The Aesthetics and Politics of the Ocean in Contemporary Art and Photography"](#) (2020)

Oct 27 / 29 Week 10: Slow Violence

Nixon, *Slow Violence* (2011)

Merola, [We All Live Downwind](#) (2017)

[The Story of Plastic: How Plastic Production Pollutes Small Towns](#) (2018)

Mirzoeff, [Black Lives Matter and Revolutionary Time](#) (2017)

Burton "[People of Color Experience Climate Grief More Deeply Than White People](#)" (2020)

Sengupta "[Here's What Extreme Heat Looks Like: Profoundly Unequal](#)" (2020)

Image: Claire Pentecost, [Soil-erg](#)

Nov 3/5 Week 11: The Anthropocene

Kolbert, intro *Sixth Extinction* (2014)
Lewis and Maslin, "[Defining the Anthropocene](#)" (2015)
Lin, [What is Missing?](#) (ongoing)
Morton, "The [Hurricane in My Backyard](#)" 2018.
Ballengé, [Collapse](#) (2010-12)
Rea, "[Olafur Eliasson...](#)" (2018)

Possible film: Burtysky/ Baichwal [Anthropocene](#). (2019)

SPECIAL WORKSHOP WITH ARTISTS [KAHN & SELESNICK](#) details TBA.

Nov 10/12 Week 12: Ecological Gift economies / Ecoventions / New Stories

Moore and Patel: Conclusion
Atwood, selection from *Oryx and Crake* (and [link](#) to eco-critique) (2003)
Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass* (2013)
Hyde, excerpt from *The Gift* (1988)
[Craig Santos Perez](#), Love Poems in the Time of Climate Change (2017)
Boettger "[Good Works: The Impetus of Ethics](#)" (2013)
Solnit "[Don't despair: the climate fight is only over if you think it is](#)" (2018)

What images can we make and what stories can we tell to deal with environmental crisis? How can visual culture and literature move beyond merely representing ecological relationships to actively create meanings, bring together communities and effect positive change? We will workshop our final projects in the last two weeks. For example, there will be creative projects, writing and blogging projects and also opportunities for students of environmental science to pursue interfaces of environmental art and science.

Final Exam period: Final essays and projects due [conferences via zoom]



Kahn & Selesnick, *King of Birds*, 2012