

Literature & the Environment
Fall 2011
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Welles 219-B
Office Hours: MWF 2:30-3:30,
F 1:00-2:30, ABA

MANIFESTO

Ecocriticism takes as its starting point the connections between human culture and the physical world—although many such relationships are invisible to us, if not willfully effaced. Hopefully, our time together will enable you to become a more perceptive critic and writer along this convoluted interface. In addition to surveying literary depictions of the American environment since the colonial period, this course aims to address how such representations continue to shape our subjective “impressions” and “experiences.” Following the example of Henry David Thoreau, we will utilize informal, autobiographical writing as a resource for the development of more scholarly endeavors.



COURSE PREREQUISITES

“Heaven is under our feet as well as over our heads”—H.D. Thoreau

“the war that matters is the war against the imagination / all other wars are subsumed in it”—D. Di Prima

READINGS

Rowlandson, *The Sovereignty and Goodness of God: With Related Documents* (Bedford)

Pollan, *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals*

Thoreau, *Walden* (Dover)

Jewett, *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (Dover)

Dos Passos, *The 42nd Parallel*

Vollmann, *The Atlas*

Silko, *Gardens in the Dunes*

Selected readings on myCourses

ASSIGNMENTS & GRADING

You will be evaluated upon the following criteria, all of which must be completed to pass the course:

—A shorter (4-5 pp.) essay	15%
—A longer (10-12 pp.) piece of writing	35%
—A writing journal	15%
—Class participation	15%
—A comprehensive final exam	20%

A NOTE ON YOUR JOURNAL

Ten or twenty years from now, you might look back upon this component of the course as being the most rewarding—which is why I don't intend to screw things up by assigning letter grades to your writing journal. My assumption is that you'll make a good-faith effort to employ informal writing as the means to better understand the physical environment you inhabit. While you may use your journal as a space for responding to the course readings, you'll probably learn even more by going outside your dorm room or the library and using it as a field notebook, à la Thoreau; formal analysis & rhetoric are less important here than generating ideas.

SYLLABUS

I. Hungers

8/29	Course introduction
8/31	Smith, “The Starving Time”; Thoreau, “On Keeping a Journal”
9/2	Rowlandson, <i>Narrative of the Captivity</i> (1-81, 115-118)
9/5	Labor Day
9/7	Rowlandson, <i>Narrative of the Captivity</i> (81-112)
9/9	Pollan, <i>The Omnivore's Dilemma</i> (1-11)

- 9/12 Pollan, *The Omnivore's Dilemma* (12-120)
 9/14 Pollan, *The Omnivore's Dilemma* (121-273)
 9/16 Pollan, *The Omnivore's Dilemma* (274-411)

Journals

II. Home

- 9/19 Thoreau, *Walden* (1-47)
 9/21 Thoreau, *Walden* (47-64)
 9/23 Thoreau, *Walden* (64-100)

 9/26 Thoreau, *Walden* (100-136)
 9/28 Thoreau, *Walden* (136-174)
 9/30 Thoreau, *Walden* (175-216)

III. Vistas

- 10/3 Cole, "Essay on American Scenery"
 10/5 Muir, "Snow-Storm on Mount Shasta"
 10/7 Sontag, from *On Photography*

 10/10 Fall Break
 10/12 Jewett, *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (1-36)
 10/14 Jewett, *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (36-55)

 10/17 Jewett, *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (55-88)
 10/19 Lewis, "Axioms for Reading the Landscape"
 10/21 Workshop

Paper #1

IV. The City

- 10/24 Mumford, "What is a City?"
 10/26 Simmel, "The Metropolis and Mental Life"
 10/28 Dos Passos, *The 42nd Parallel* (1-73)

 10/31 Dos Passos, *The 42nd Parallel* (73-193)
 11/2 Dos Passos, *The 42nd Parallel* (193-273)
 11/4 Dos Passos, *The 42nd Parallel* (274-323)

Journals

V. Global Subjects

- 11/7 Kaplan, "Transporting the Subject"
 11/9 Vollmann, *The Atlas* (1-111)
 11/11 Vollmann, *The Atlas* (112-196)

 11/16 Vollmann, *The Atlas* (197-355)
 11/18 Vollmann, *The Atlas* (356-455)

 11/21 The Poetics of Climate Change
 11/23 Thanksgiving Break
 11/25 Thanksgiving Break

Paper #2

VI. Gardens

11/28	Shiva, from <i>Stolen Harvest</i>
11/30	Silko, <i>Gardens in the Dunes</i> (1-114)
12/2	Silko, <i>Gardens in the Dunes</i> (115-197)
12/5	Silko, <i>Gardens in the Dunes</i> (198-330)
12/7	Silko, <i>Gardens in the Dunes</i> (331-427)
12/9	Silko, <i>Gardens in the Dunes</i> (428-477)
12/12	Stanton, <i>Wall-E</i>
12/14	Final exam 12:00-3:00

Journals

ESSAY #1: AGRI/CULTURE

Having read Michael Pollan, you will be familiar with his argument that “the way we eat represents our most profound engagement with the natural world,” and that in contrast to the willful ignorance of industrial food consumption, “To eat with a fuller consciousness of all that is at stake might sound like a burden, but in practice few things in life can afford quite as much satisfaction” (10-11). For this assignment, you will be contributing original website content for the [Geneseo Food Project](#). Your goal here is to develop thought-provoking connections between food consumed and/or grown in the Genesee Valley and “a fuller consciousness of all that is at stake.” A list of potential subjects will be discussed in class; you also may develop a different topic with prior consultation. A few guidelines:

- The essay should be vibrantly written, information-rich, and approximately four double-spaced pages in length; a list of works cited should appear at the end.
- There also should be a list of approximately 4-5 sources for further reading, at least half of them linkable websites. Try to be both specific & imaginative: how will they change your reader’s outlook upon this particular subject?
- Try mightily to locate 2-3 images, locally sourced, that will make your page visually appealing.
- Important: your final task includes posting this essay to the GFP wiki site, appropriately formatted and with illustrations. Guidelines & a style manual are located at the class myCourses page.

This should be an interesting opportunity to write for an audience wider than your professor and classmates; try not to let the format requirements subsume your own voice & purposes. This essay is due **October 3**.

ESSAY #2: THINK GLOBALLY, WRITE LOCALLY

Although the distinction is somewhat artificial, it may help to think of your second project, which is due on **November 21**, in terms of *environments* and *discourses*. Environments can be natural, constructed, even imagined; you pass through and inhabit a variety of them every day. How would you describe them to a reader? Although you aren’t living at Walden Pond, Thoreau’s close attention to detail, ecology, and subjective experience might be a good model for your own descriptions. The term “discourses” is a more concrete way of thinking about our cultural values: they are ways of writing & thinking about some given topic, defined by boundaries of what is admissible to say (or is excluded). For example, the history of “madness” and “mental illness” has a very complex discursive history—and it illustrates how the struggle to represent some subject in a particular way involves power and cultural institutions. The concept of discourses also suggests that a wide range of texts carry meaning: literature, visual arts, music, policy studies, rituals, commercial proposals, and many more—particularly with a subject like the American environment, keep an open mind as to what kinds of texts might be helpful. The basic parameters of this assignment are as follow:

- Your essay should be approximately 10-12 pages in length;
- It should utilize at least *five* texts that address your particular subject;
- It should utilize in-depth writing about a local environment;
- First-person writing is acceptable and perhaps in some instances even necessary.

The best essays will find ways to synthesize “global” discourse about a topic and “local” (first-person) observation. In order to do so, you’ll have to get past your I’m-just-a-college-student inhibitions—potentially, you have just as much to say about American cultural values as anybody else. I welcome the opportunity to discuss provisional ideas or works-in-progress.