

English 8351
Vanderbilt University, Spring 2023
Thursday, 2:45PM – 5:45PM
Classroom: Buttrick 308

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EXPLORING THE ENVIRONMENTAL HUMANITIES

Climate scientists have come to a consensus that the planet has passed into the Anthropocene—a geological epoch in which human societies have a dominant and even determining influence on their nonhuman environments. As these scientists have analyzed the Anthropocene’s material traces (from radionucleotides trapped in tree-rings to chemicals frozen in ice cores), other academics and activists have examined the epoch’s cultural causes and consequences. Aware that our precarious condition necessitates new forms of cognition, these thinkers have begun breaking boundaries that have long separated fields such as anthropology, history, and literary studies. Through their new approaches to the humanities, they have started redefining humanity, linking decade- and century-long conflicts over gender, race, and class to the thousand- and million-year cycles of biology, geology, and chemistry.

Joining these thinkers in the *environmental humanities*, we will spend the semester experimenting with methods from different academic disciplines—and, in the process, elucidating some of the struggles that have shaped our planet. While we will range back to the Neolithic Agricultural Revolution, we will focus on the fallout of 1492, when Europeans began both a genocide against Native North and South Americans and a trade in enslaved Africans, which together fueled the rise of carbon-intensive capitalism. Engaging these events primarily through scholarship but also through literature, visual art, and other media, we will try to understand why some humans have become so destructive—and how others have remained so resilient. With any luck, such conversations about our past will cast new light on our present—on the problems and possibilities that make us so (in)human.

We will begin our time together by tracing the environmental humanities to two points: the critique of “nature” that crested in the 1990s and 2000s, and the arguments about the Anthropocene that have animated the 2010s and 2020s. After analyzing these interdisciplinary debates, we will move into and out of five disciplinary milieu, exploring how the environmental humanities have shaped and been shaped by literary studies, history, anthropology, geography, and capital-T Theory. In this context, we will be able to cultivate what William Cronon might call the “uncommon ground” among these and other fields, so in the second half of the semester, we will discuss how the environmental humanities have redefined five keywords, “Colonialism,” “Extraction,” “Infrastructure,” “Media,” and “Justice.”

Because the environmental humanities bring together so many academic, artistic, activist, and other endeavors, we will do two types of work. On the one hand, we will wrestle with common readings: over the course of each week, we will create 500-700-word responses, and at the start of each session, we will articulate key concerns in 1-2-minute presentations. On the other hand, we will pursue independent projects, which could involve writing a 25-30-page seminar paper, revising an existing paper for publication, crafting a comprehensive exam list (or, if you are not at that stage, a summer reading list), or any number of other things; depending on enrollment, the last 45-60 minutes of each meeting will be devoted to helping one or two people with their projects.

Through these two types of work, we will come to appreciate the theoretical, methodological, and historiographical advances that have characterized the environmental humanities. More broadly, we will hone the reading, writing, speaking, and thinking skills that are essential to all academic fields. Most importantly, we will gain insight into the ways our all-too-human societies have reimagined and reshaped our more-than-human planet—sometimes for better, but often for worse.

READING AND ASSIGNMENT SCHEDULE

Part One: Introductions

January 12 – What are the Environmental Humanities?

- United Farm Workers, Various Posters and Pamphlets (1962–1970) (circulated in class)
- Short Statements from *Environmental Humanities, Resilience: A Journal of the Environmental Humanities*, the Yale Program in Environmental Humanities, and the Penn Program in Environmental Humanities (circulated in class)
- Jennifer Mae Hamilton and Astrida Neimanis, “Composting Feminisms and Environmental Humanities” (2018) (read before or after class)
- Etienne Benson, “Introduction: What Was an Environment?” from *Surroundings: A History of Environments and Environmentalisms* (2020) (read before or after class)

January 19 – The Emergence of the Environmental Humanities I: The Critique of Nature

- Raymond Williams, “Ideas of Nature” (1980)
- Donna Haraway, “Teddy Bear Patriarchy: Taxidermy in the Garden of Eden, New York City, 1908–1936” (1985)
- William Cronon, “Introduction” and “The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature” from *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature* (1996)
- Wendy Red Star (Apsáalooke), “Four Seasons” (2006)
- Stacy Alaimo, “Introduction” to *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self* (2010)
- *By 11:59PM on Sunday, January 22, submit a rough proposal for your independent project.*

January 26 – The Emergence of the Environmental Humanities II: The Anthropocene?

- Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer, “The Anthropocene” (2000)
- Dipesh Chakrabarty, “Climate and Capital: On Conjoined Histories” (2014)
- Donna Haraway, “Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin” (2015)
- Simon Lewis and Mark Maslin, “Defining the Anthropocene” (2015)
- Heather Davis and Zoe Todd (Métis), “On the Importance of a Date, or Decolonizing the Anthropocene” (2017)
- Wendy Wolford, “The Plantationocene: A Lusotropical Contribution to the Theory” (2021)
- “Introduction to *Feral Atlas*,” “How to Read *Feral Atlas*,” and any “Field Report” from *Feral Atlas: The More-than-Human Anthropocene* (2020)
- *By 11:59PM on Sunday, January 29, submit a revised proposal for your independent project.*

Part Two: Approaching the Environmental Humanities

February 2 – Theorizing (Non)humanity

- Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (1991) (trans. Catherine Porter, 1993)
- Jane Bennett, “Preface” and “The Force of Things” from *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (2010)
- Richard Grusin, “Introduction” to *The Nonhuman Turn* (2015)
- Joshua Bennett, “Horse” and “Shark” from *Being Property Once Myself: Blackness and the End of Man* (2020) (in addition, you may wish to read Robert Hayden’s “Middle Passage,” from 1962)

February 9 – “First-Wave” and “Second-Wave” Ecocriticism

- Henry David Thoreau, “Walking” (1851–62)
- Lawrence Buell, “Introduction” and “Pastoral Ideology” from *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (1995)
- Ursula K. Heise, “Introduction: Sense of Place and Sense of Planet” and “Toxic Bodies, Corporate Poisons: Local Risks and Global Systems” from *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global* (2008)
- Rob Nixon, “Introduction” and “Unimagined Communities: Megadams, Monumental Modernity, and Developmental Refugees” from *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011)
- Lawrence Buell, Ursula K. Heise, and Karen Thornber, “Literature and Environment” (2011)

February 16 – Working Through Environmental History

- Willa Cather, *O Pioneers!* (1913)
- William Cronon, “Preface,” “Prologue,” and “Pricing the Future: Grain” from *Nature’s Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (1991)
- Richard White, “Are You an Environmentalist, or Do You Work for a Living?: Work and Nature” from *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature* (1996)

February 23 – Creating and Contesting Space

- Lorna Dee Cervantes, “Poema para los Californios Muertos,” “Beneath the Shadow of the Freeway,” and “Freeway 280” from *Emplumada* (1981)
- Neil Smith, “Introduction,” “The Production of Nature,” and “The Production of Space” from *Uneven Development: Nature, Capital, and the Production of Space* (1984)
- David Harvey, “The ‘New’ Imperialism: Accumulation by Dispossession” (2016)
- Genevieve Carpio, “Introduction” and “From Mexican Settlers to Mexican Birds of Passage: Relational Racial Formation, Citrus Labor, and Immigration Policy, 1914–1930” from *Collisions at the Crossroads: How Place and Mobility Make Race* (2019)

March 2 – Ethnography Beneath and Beyond Humanity

- Eduardo Kohn, “Introduction: Runa Puma” and “The Open Whole” from *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human* (2013)
- Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (2015)
- By 11:59PM on Sunday, March 5, submit work in progress for your independent project.

March 9 – Since we will miss our regular Thursday meeting (Carlos will be at UC Santa Cruz’s Indigenous Borderlands Symposium), we will hold makeup one-on-one meetings

March 16 – Spring Break

Keywords for the Environmental Humanities**March 23 – Colonialism**

- Alfred Crosby, “Prologue” and “Conclusion” from *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900–1900* (1986)

- Tracy Brynne Voyles, *The Settler Sea: California's Salton Sea and the Consequences of Colonialism* (2021)
- Selected Media from the “Bombay Beach Biennale” (2016–2023)

March 30 – Extraction

- Naomi Klein, “Beyond Extractivism: Confronting the Climate Denier Within” from *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. The Climate* (2014)
- Macarena Gómez-Barris, “Introduction: Submerged Perspectives” and “The Intangibility of the Yasuni” from *The Extractive Zone: Social Ecologies and Decolonial Perspectives* (2017)
- Elizabeth Carolyn Miller, “Introduction” and “Drill, Baby, Drill: Extraction Ecologies, Futurity, and the Provincial Realist Novel” from *Extraction Ecologies and the Literature of the Long Exhaustion* (2021)
- Simon Ortiz (Acoma Pueblo), Selections from *Fight Back: For the Sake of the People, for the Sake of the Land* (1980)

April 6 – Infrastructure

- Woody Guthrie, “Grand Coulee Dam” (1941)
- Sherman Alexie (Spokane/Coeur d’Alene), “The Powwow at the End of the World” (1996)
- Ashley Carse, “Nature as Infrastructure: Making and Managing the Panama Canal Watershed” (2012)
- Corey Byrnes, “Orientation,” “Passage I: Departure,” and “Part I: A Landscape of Traces” from *Fixing Landscape: A Techno-Poetic History of China's Three Gorges* (2019)
- Jessica Hurley, “Introduction: End Times” and “Nuclear Waste, Native America, Narrative Form” from *Infrastructures of Apocalypse: American Literature and the Nuclear Complex* (2020)

April 13 – Media

- John Durham Peters, “Introduction: In Medias Res,” “Understanding Media,” and “Of Cetaceans and Ships; or, the Moorings of Our Being” from *The Marvelous Clouds: Toward a Philosophy of Elemental Media* (2016)
- Hester Blum, “Introduction: Polar Ecomedia” from *The News at the Ends of the Earth: The Print Culture of Polar Exploration* (2019)
- Cajetan Iheka, “Introduction” to *African Ecomedia: Network Forms, Planetary Politics* (2021)
- *Show-and-Tell: Bring in an object that exemplifies one of these scholars' approaches to (eco)media.*

April 20 – Justice

- First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit, “Principles of Environmental Justice” (1991)
- Helena María Viramontes, *Under the Feet of Jesus* (1995),
- Julie Sze, *Environmental Justice in a Moment of Danger* (2020)
- *By 11:59PM on Sunday, April 30, please submit the final version of your independent project.*

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

In Spring 2023, “Exploring the Environmental Humanities” is coinciding with many extrinsic challenges, from the ongoing spread of COVID-19 to increasingly intense climate change. Because we cope with these challenges in different ways—and crucially, because we arrive at them with disparate

resources—we will need to be flexible with each other. As professor, I look forward to helping you with any challenges that may arise during our time together, but as a starting point, I ask that you try your best to meet the following course requirements:

Attendance, Participation, and Communication: This course is a seminar; it should be collective, collaborative, and convivial. Please come to each of our sessions prepared to talk and listen: if a text is interesting (or not), explain why; if an idea is confusing (which is totally fine), ask a question; and if you agree or disagree with another comment, describe your own position. Throughout, treat one another with respect: since we are coming to this course from different contexts, we will need to value our unique identities, and since we are engaging with some intense and perhaps irresolvable problems, we will need to maintain a culture of mutual understanding. In short: over the semester, we will disagree on many points, but we will not make disrespectful comments against one another.

To participate in our community, you must be present, so unless you have a medical problem, a family emergency, or an immovable professional obligation, you should participate in all sessions; indeed, if you miss two, I will likely suggest that you withdraw. Rather than punitive, this policy is meant to be positive: most concretely, your individual work will determine our seminar's success, but more broadly, it will nourish your intellectual, professional, and personal growth.

While we will convene Thursdays, we can continue our conversations during other parts of the week. If you would like to review readings, think through assignments, chat about research, or discuss what is creepily called “professionalization,” please email to set up a meeting. To normalize this practice, I will schedule mandatory one-on-one conversations during the semester.

During these meetings, or other points, I am available to talk about anything that may be interfering with your ability to participate in our community.

Reading: To explore how and why the environmental humanities have emerged—and crucially, how and why they might continue to evolve—we will read widely across the sciences, the social sciences, the humanities, and the arts. In this context, you will need to make and maintain a weekly schedule that allows you to engage with everything on our syllabus; in some cases, such engagement may be little more than skimming, but ideally, it will involve reading, rereading, and thinking.

While most of our readings will be available as PDFs or links on Brightspace, you will need to buy, check out, or otherwise access copies of the following:

- Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (1991) (trans. Catherine Porter, 1993)
- Willa Cather, *O Pioneers!* (1913)
- Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (2015)
- Tracy Brynne Voyles, *The Settler Sea: California's Salton Sea and the Consequences of Colonialism* (2021)
- Helena María Viramontes, *Under the Feet of Jesus* (1995)
- Julie Sze, *Environmental Justice in a Moment of Danger* (2020)

Responses and Presentations: As you wrestle with each week's common readings, you will need to complete two tasks. First, you will need to write a 500-700-word response; instead of striving for scintillating sentences or perfect paragraphs, use the readings to experiment with interesting ideas, articulate questions without easy answers, or analyze primary sources from your wider research. Next, you will need to adapt your response into a 1-2-minute mini-presentation; again, the idea is not to share polished products, but rather to initiate open-ended inquiries.

Responses should be posted under the “Discussions” section of Brightspace by 11:59PM each Wednesday, while presentations will take place at the start of class each Thursday.

Independent Projects: Since the environmental humanities have experimented with multiple types of scholarly work—and since each of you is at a different point in your scholarly career—our course will culminate in a customizable independent project. For many, it will make sense to do a standard, 25-30-page seminar paper. For others, it may be better to revise an existing essay for publication, to craft a comprehensive exam list, to write a couple of book reviews, or to complete some other task. Intellectually, the only requirement will be that independent projects engage in some way with the environmental humanities. Practically, the requirements will be a rough proposal on January 22, a revised proposal on January 29, some work in progress on March 5, and a final outcome by April 30. On and after February 2, we will spend 45-60 minutes of each meeting helping one or two people with their independent projects; we will solidify the schedule for such workshops in late January.

Grading: To pursue a Ph.D.—to read, write, and talk about the problems you find most pressing—is to seek something far beyond the bounds of As, Bs, Cs, and so on. However, while I will issue what I see as my most meaningful feedback informally during in-class discussions and formally via comments on independent projects, I will calculate the Vanderbilt-required grades as follows:

Attendance and Participation	25%
Reading Responses	25%
Independent Project, both in Process and as Product	50%

Academic Integrity: Among other things, this course will help you practice engaging productively with scholarly research. In this context, appropriating another scholar's words or ideas without proper documentation is incredibly disrespectful, both to them and to yourself. Therefore, any instance of academic dishonesty (especially plagiarism, but also unauthorized collaboration) will be grounds for failing the assignment and, in all likelihood, the course. If you have any questions about citing sources, attributing ideas, or avoiding plagiarism, please get in touch. In addition, please see Vanderbilt's guides at (<https://www.vanderbilt.edu/studentaccountability/academic-integrity>) and (<https://researchguides.library.vanderbilt.edu/plagiarism>).

Resources: In the context COVID-19, we must all look out for one another, and during our time together, I stand ready to support you in whatever ways I can. In addition, I encourage you to take advantage of Vanderbilt's many other resources. The Equal Opportunity and Access Department (<https://www.vanderbilt.edu/EOA/>) helps students secure the academic accommodations that they need in the context of one or more disabilities, so reach out to them early in the quarter if you could use their assistance. The Student Health Center (<https://www.vumc.org/student-health/>) employs a range of physical and mental health practitioners, and even if you are away from campus, you can access their resources on sexual violence, alcohol and drug use, adjusting to college culture, and many other areas. On an academic level, the Writing Studio (<https://www.vanderbilt.edu/writing/>) offers individual writing consultations and other programs, while the Jean and Alexander Heard Libraries (<https://www.library.vanderbilt.edu>) have many ways of helping you with your work.