

English 1260W.01  
Vanderbilt University, Fall 2021  
MWF 12:40PM – 1:30PM  
Classroom: Commons West 107

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## LITERATURE AND THE ENVIRONMENT

In the last two hundred years, our planet has changed at an unprecedented rate: humans have extinguished other species, toxic chemicals have poisoned ecosystems, and greenhouse gases have altered our very atmosphere. In this writing-intensive general-education seminar, we will study Anglo American, Asian American, Black, Latinx, and Native authors who have engaged with these transformations. On the one hand, we will ask a range of literary questions: How have novels, essays, poems, and other forms depicted more-than-human worlds? How have images, symbols, settings, and other devices portrayed (un)natural places? On the other hand, we will pursue a series of historical inquiries: How have literary texts reinforced the ideologies that allow us to (ab)use our environments? Conversely, how have literary texts critiqued destructive policies, illuminated ecological crises, and inspired environmental movements? Throughout, we will pay close attention to the relationships between social conflict and ecological change, and indeed, the indivisibility of these processes; how, we will ask, have gender, race, and class shaped the ways we write and think about environments? Authors include William Wordsworth, Henry David Thoreau, Solomon Northup, Willa Cather, Aldo Leopold, Rachel Carson, Gloria Anzaldúa, Ana Castillo, Octavia Butler, Helena María Viramontes, Tommy Pico, Amitav Ghosh, Lauren Redniss, and Aimee Nezhukumatathil, supplemented by readings in ecocriticism and the environmental humanities.

**Course Objectives:** As we explore our literary environments, you will cultivate a variety of skills:

- A. *Writing:* Through individual assignments and in-class exercises, you will learn how to design, draft, research, and revise academic essays. As you join scholarly conversations about our inequitable yet interdependent planet, you will master the four pillars of a strong argument: identifying a *problem*, making a *claim*, analyzing *evidence*, and articulating a *motive*.
- B. *Reading:* By wrestling with a variety of challenging texts, you will learn how to analyze and appreciate their style, structure, and meaning. While we will focus on environmental issues, you will be able to apply these close-reading skills to any academic or professional field.
- C. *Speaking:* In our collective and collaborative discussions, you will practice posing complex questions, articulating original ideas, and experimenting with alternative perspectives.
- D. *Historical Reasoning:* As we learn how literary texts have responded to and participated in social-ecological struggles, you will gain insight into our planet's past, present, and future.
- E. *Intercultural Understanding:* By comparing the ways in which human authors have represented and related to their more-than-human worlds, you will experience both the similarities that unite peoples and the differences that define them.

**Course Structure:** After a one-week introduction, we will move through four units:

- I. *What is Nature?:* We will enter scholarly conversations about literature and the environment, and we explore the ways in which poems and essays define, defend, and/or distort Nature.
- II. *Producing and Consuming Nonhumans:* We will read three novels that describe how different races, genders, and classes work in, on, and with their environments.
- III. *Constructing and Contesting Environments:* We will examine narratives, essays, poems, and songs that draw on and contribute to struggles over lands, waters, plants, and animals.
- IV. *The Literature of Climate Change:* We will discuss different responses to climate change, and we will consider whether a Cli-Fi novel opens up and/or closes down political possibilities.

**READING AND ASSIGNMENT SCHEDULE**

**Week 1 Introductions**

- Wed, Aug 25 • Woody Guthrie, “Grand Coulee Dam” (1941) (in class)  
 • Sherman Alexie, “The Powwow at the End of the World” (1996) (in class)
- Fri, Aug 27 • William Cronon, “Introduction: In Search of Nature” from *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature* (1996)

**Unit One: What is Nature?**

**Week 2 The Elements of Environmental Writing**

- Mon, Aug 30 • William Wordsworth, “Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey” (1798)
- Wed, Sep 1 • Henry David Thoreau, “Economy” from *Walden; or, Life in the Woods* (1854)  
 • Paper #1 Assigned
- Fri, Sep 3 • Henry David Thoreau, “Where I Lived, and What I Lived For,” “Reading,” “Sounds,” “Solitude,” and “The Bean Field” from *Walden; or, Life in the Woods* (1854)

**Week 3 The Possibilities and Problems of Environmental Subjectivity**

- Mon, Sep 6 • Henry David Thoreau, “The Ponds,” “Higher Laws,” and “Brute Neighbors” from *Walden; or, Life in the Woods* (1854)
- Wed, Sep 8 • Henry David Thoreau, “The Pond in Winter,” “Spring,” and “Conclusion” from *Walden; or, Life in the Woods* (1854)  
 • DUE BY 11:59PM: Submit P1V1. Sign up for professor conferences.
- Fri, Sep 10 • William Cronon, “The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature” from *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature* (1996)

**Week 4 Other Natures**

- Mon, Sep 13 • Gloria Anzaldúa, “The Homeland, Aztlán/El otro México” from *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987) and “Flights of the Imagination” from *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality* (2015)
- Wed, Sep 15 • Tommy Pico, *Nature Poem* (2017), 1 – 36  
 • DUE BY 11:59PM: P1V2
- Fri, Sep 17 • Tommy Pico, *Nature Poem* (2017), 37 – 74

**Unit Two: Producing and Consuming Nonhumans**

**Week 5 Working Bodies**

- Mon, Sep 20 • Helena María Viramontes, *Under the Feet of Jesus* (1995), Parts I and II
- Wed, Sep 22 • Helena María Viramontes, *Under the Feet of Jesus* (1995), Part III

- Stacy Alaimo, “Introduction” to *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self* (2010)
- Paper #2 Assigned. *Make an appointment at the Writing Studio for the 29, 30, or 1.*

Fri, Sep 24 • Helena María Viramontes, *Under the Feet of Jesus* (1995), Parts IV and V

**Week 6 Agrarian Dreams**

Mon, Sep 27 • Willa Cather, *O Pioneers!* (1913), Part I  
• 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)

Wed, Sep 29 • Willa Cather, *O Pioneers!* (1913), Parts II and III  
• *DUE BY 11:59PM: Submit P2V1. Share with the Writing Studio on the 29, 30, or 1.*

Fri, Oct 1 • Willa Cather, *O Pioneers!* (1913), Parts IV and V

**Week 7 Plantation Nightmares**

Mon, Oct 4 • Solomon Northup, *Twelve Years A Slave* (1853) (1–78)

Wed, Oct 6 • Solomon Northup, *Twelve Years A Slave* (1853) (79–157)  
• *DUE BY 11:59PM: P2V2*

Fri, Oct 8 • Solomon Northup, *Twelve Years A Slave* (1853) (157–183)  
• Joshua Bennett, “Horse” and parts of “Shark” from *Being Property Once Myself: Blackness and the End of Man* (2020)

**Unit Three: Constructing and Contesting Environments**

**Week 8 Ecology and Environmentalism**

Mon, Oct 11 • Paper #3 Assigned during a Research Workshop at the Central Library  
• Wayne Booth, Ch. 3 (“From Topics to Questions”), Ch. 4 (“From Questions to a Problem”), and Ch. 5 (“From Problems to Sources”) from *The Craft of Research* (2016)

Wed, Oct 13 • Aldo Leopold, “Thinking Like a Mountain,” “The Community Concept,” “The Ecological Conscience,” “Substitutes for a Land Ethic,” and “The Outlook” from *A Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There* (1949)  
• Rachel Carson, “A Fable for Tomorrow” and “And No Birds Sing” from *Silent Spring* (1962)

Fri, Oct 15 No Class: Fall Break

**Week 9 Environmental Justice I: Catastrophe**

Mon, Oct 18 • Research Workshop at Special Collections  
• *DUE BY 11:59PM: Submit P3 Preliminary Proposal. Sign up for professor conferences.*

Wed, Oct 20 • “Principles of Environmental Justice” (1991)  
• Spike Lee (dir.), *When the Levees Broke* (2006), Acts 1 and 2

Fri, Oct 22 • Spike Lee (dir.), *When the Levees Broke* (2006), Acts 3 and 4

**Week 10 Environmental Justice II: Community**

Mon, Oct 25 • Ana Castillo, *So Far From God* (1993), 19 – 119  
• DUE BY 11:59PM: P3 Revised Proposal and Annotated Bibliography

Wed, Oct 27 • Ana Castillo, *So Far From God* (1993), 120 – 189

Fri, Oct 29 • Ana Castillo, *So Far From God* (1993), 190 – 252

**Week 11 Companion Species**

Mon, Nov 1 • Elizabeth Kolbert, selections from *The Sixth Extinction* (2014), along with “The Big Kill: New Zealand’s Crusade to Rid Itself of Mammals” (2014)

Wed, Nov 3 • Aimee Nezhukumatathil, selections from *World of Wonders: In Praise of Fireflies, Whale Sharks, and Other Astonishments* (2020)

Fri, Nov 5 • Robin Wall Kimmerer, selections from *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* (2013)  
• DUE BY 11:59PM: P3V1

**Week 12 Exploring New Environments**

Mon, Nov 8 • In-Class Writing Workshop

Wed, Nov 10 • In-Class Writing Workshop

Fri, Nov 12 • In-Class Writing Workshop

**Unit Four: The Literature of Climate Change**

**Week 13 Writing in the Anthropocene**

Mon, Nov 15 • Dipesh Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History: Four Theses” (2009)

Wed, Nov 17 • Amitav Ghosh, “Stories” from *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2016)

Fri, Nov 19 • Lauren Redniss, selections from *Thunder & Lightning: Weather Past, Present, and Future* (2015)

Sun, Nov 21 • DUE BY 11:59PM: P3V2

**Week 14 No Class: Thanksgiving Break**

**Week 15 Cli-Fi?**

Mon, Nov 29 • Octavia Butler, *Parable of the Sower* (1993), 1–99  
• Paper #4 Assigned

Wed, Dec 1 • Octavia Butler, *Parable of the Sower* (1993), 100–195

Fri, Dec 3 • Octavia Butler, *Parable of the Sower* (1993), 196–293

**Week 16 Conclusions**

Mon, Dec 6 • Octavia Butler, *Parable of the Sower* (1993), 294–329  
• Shelley Streeby, “Climate Refugees in the Greenhouse World: Archiving Global Warming with Octavia E. Butler” from *Imagining the Future of Climate Change* (2018)

Wed, Dec 8 No Class: Official Reading Day

Fri, Dec 10 • Informal Presentations on Paper #4

Sun, Dec 12 • *DUE BY 11:59PM: P4*

### COURSE REQUIREMENTS

In Fall 2021, “Literature and the Environment” is coinciding with a global pandemic of COVID-19, a national fight for racial justice, and other unprecedented situations. Because we experience these situations 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—even and especially if you do not feel comfortable discussing these challenges directly. However, 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. Therefore, 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. If you agree or disagree with another comment, describe your own position. Most importantly, treat one another with respect. We are all coming to this course from different contexts, so we need to value our unique experiences, identities, and ideas. Similarly, we are engaging with some intense and perhaps irresolvable problems, so we need to create a culture of mutual understanding. In short: I welcome disagreements, but I do not tolerate disrespectful comments against other students.

To participate in our community, you must be present, but in the context of COVID-19, this may not always be possible. If you end up missing three or more of our regularly scheduled sessions, we will think together about ways that you can make up for the lost time.

While we convene on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, we can always continue our conversations during other parts of the week. If you would like to review readings, think through assignments, or simply chat, please get in touch to set up a meeting. This is an earnest invitation, and I hope that you will take me up on it at several points. To normalize this practice, I will schedule two one-on-one conversations over the course of the semester.

**Reading:** To become a good writer, you must first be an active reader. With that in mind, read and reread with gusto; underline passages, write in the margins, and take notes. Set aside enough time to read carefully, think deeply, and develop ideas for our discussions. Starting in Week 2, you will need to bring your readings to each session. Fortunately, most of the readings will be available on our Brightspace site, and you only need to purchase seven physical items for less than \$80:

- Henry David Thoreau, *Walden; or, Life in the Woods* (Yale, 2006). ISBN 9780300110081. \$8.50.  
 Tommy Pico, *Nature Poem* (Tin House, 2017). ISBN 9781941040638. \$12.50.  
 Helena María Viramontes, *Under the Feet of Jesus* (Plume, 1996). ISBN 9780452273870. \$12.00.  
 Willa Cather, *O Pioneers!* (Vintage, 1992). ISBN 9780679743620. \$9.00.  
 Solomon Northup, *Twelve Years A Slave* (Norton, 2016). ISBN 978039326424. \$14.00.  
 Ana Castillo, *So Far From God* (Norton, 1993). ISBN 9780393326932. \$10.00.  
 Octavia E. Butler, *Parable of the Sower* (Grand Central, 2019). ISBN 9781538732182. \$11.50.

**Writing:** In-class, we will hold writing exercises, peer-review workshops, and other activities.

Independently, you will draft and revise four papers (“P1V1” = Paper 1, version 1):

P1V1	Wednesday, September 8 at 11:59PM
P1V2	Wednesday, September 15 at 11:59PM
P2V1	Wednesday, September 29 at 11:59PM
P2V2	Wednesday, October 6 11:59PM
P3 Preliminary Proposal	Monday, October 18 at 11:59PM
P3 Revised Proposal and Annotated Bibliography	Monday, October 25 at 11:59PM
P3V1	Friday, November 5 at 11:59PM
P3V2	Sunday, November 21 at 11:59PM
P4	Sunday, December 12 at 11:59PM

**Grading:** All grades are non-negotiable. They will be calculated as follows:

Participation, including discussions, informal writing assignments, and workshops	20%
Paper 1 (3 – 4 pages, close analysis)	10%
Paper 2 (4 – 5 pages, analysis using a theoretical lens)	20%
Paper 3 (8 – 10 pages, research-based analysis)	30%
Paper 4 (4 – 5 pages, personal or policy-related argument)	20%

## COURSE POLICIES

**Formatting:** All papers should be double-spaced, with one-inch margins, in a nice-looking twelve-point font (a few good choices: **Georgia**, **Cambria**, or **Times New Roman**; some bad ones: *Mistral*, *HERCULANUM*, *DESDEMONA*). The first page should have a header in the upper left-hand corner that includes your full name, my full name, the course title, and the date. Each subsequent page should have a header in the upper right-hand corner with your last name and the page number. The file should be titled as follows: “Name\_Assignment\_Date,” i.e. “Nugent\_Short Paper\_090817.” The rest of the paper should be formatted in Chicago Style as defined in the most recent edition of *The Chicago Manual of Style* (<https://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org>).

**Submissions:** All papers should be uploaded to our Brightspace site. The first versions should be compelling, complete, and on time; if they are late, they may not benefit from the feedback of the professor (in the case of P1V1), the Writing Studio (in the case of P2V1), or the professor and your peers (in the case of P3V1, which will be at the center Week 12’s In-Class Writing Workshop). One of the final versions is eligible for a forty-eight-hour extension, no questions asked. Except in cases of emergency, all other assignments that are late will be marked down one third of a grade per day (from an ‘A’ to an ‘A-,’ from an ‘A-’ to a ‘B+,’ and so on).

**Academic Integrity:** Among other things, this course will teach you how to engage 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.